

Diocesan NFP Ministry: Failures and Successes – Lessons Learned

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SUMMARY: In the past, leaders of diocesan Natural Family Planning (NFP) ministry in the United States thought that the methodology of NFP ought to be emphasized above Church teaching. They reasoned that the faithful would welcome safe, natural, and effective methods of family planning that were also moral. Over the years however, this approach proved to be inadequate. This article summarizes the lessons learned and articulates a way forward that reveals the importance of beginning NFP education with Christian anthropology and the teachings of the Church.

Diocesan Natural Family Planning (NFP) ministry in the United States of America has been developing since the early 1970s¹. In the beginning, and for many years, the majority of diocesan NFP leaders thought that the science and methodology of NFP ought to be emphasized above Church teaching. They reasoned that the faithful would welcome safe, natural, and effective methods of family planning that were also

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1 In some parts of the United States, even earlier, in the 1960s.

moral. Over the years however, this approach proved to be inadequate. This article summarizes the lessons learned and articulates a way forward that reveals the importance of beginning NFP education with Christian anthropology and the nature of marriage. The article will first provide a brief description of the national picture of diocesan NFP ministry. Next, a discussion will follow of the early approach with emphasis on its negative outcomes. Finally, the new approach will be presented along with its positive outcomes. This article maintains that when the faithful are provided with an opportunity to learn and reflect on God's gifts of human sexuality, the nature of marriage, conjugal love and responsible parenthood, as well as the gift of human fertility and the value of children and family life, then the methods of NFP can be seen in a balanced light as a "skill set" which can help them remain faithful to their marital vows, be open to life, and live God's plan for married love and life.

1. DIOCESAN NFP MINISTRY – A NATIONAL VIEW

In the United States, diocesan NFP services are understood as a ministry since they are part of the Church's total pastoral care of married couples². Diocesan NFP ministry provides education and evangelization on the Church's teachings on human sexuality, marriage, conjugal love and responsible parenthood. These diocesan ministries also provide education on the science and methods of NFP. They typically present NFP methods as the skills by which married couples can healthfully and morally live God's design for married love and life. Often, they include chastity and fertility education to youth and young adults.

The history of diocesan NFP ministry in the United States is complex. It includes the work of the laity (married and single), clergy, and religious. Most of the early work of NFP ministry began in the 1970s with small, often "unofficial" groups of diverse leaders who organized themselves to help married couples. Some of these efforts grew into

2 See ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE, UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Standards for Diocesan NFP Ministry*, USCCB, Washington, DC 1990; third edition, 2010, 1. "Natural Family Planning" or "NFP" has been a common term used in the United States. "Fertility Awareness Based Methods" or "FABMs" is another term in use today.

national organizations, others became regional associations, and still others became official diocesan programs.

An important development for the dioceses occurred after the 1980 Ordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family called by St. John Paul II. The Archbishop of New York, Cardinal Terence Cooke (Chairman of the then-titled National Conference of Catholic Bishops³ Committee on Pro-Life Activities), became convinced that priority must be given to the family apostolate⁴. Acting upon his inspiration, Cardinal Cooke invited a priest who was well-versed in NFP science and methods to devise and direct a national pastoral plan for NFP ministry. The priest was Msgr. James T. McHugh (later, Bishop of Rockville Centre, New York), the former director of the bishops' Family Life Bureau and the first executive director of their Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. Msgr. McHugh wrote the NFP pastoral plan for the dioceses in collaboration with some NFP leaders⁵. This plan continues to direct the national NFP efforts of the NFP Program of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

The national NFP pastoral plan describes the primary mission of diocesan NFP ministry as providing NFP education within the context of Church teaching to Catholic engaged and married couples. A secondary but complementary focus of diocesan NFP ministry is to provide appropriate outreach education on relevant Church teaching and the science and methods of NFP to the faithful. A key project which assists the diocesan bishops with the development of their NFP ministry is the *Standards for Diocesan NFP Ministry* (hereafter, *Standards*)⁶.

3 Now called United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

4 T. COOKE, *NFP: Some Pastoral Observations, Address at The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC*, (July 18, 1983), Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning, Washington, DC 1983.

5 *Diocesan Plan for Natural Family Planning Program Development*, Diocesan Development Program for NFP, Washington, DC 1981; available online at www.usccb.org/nfp/diocesan-ministry/upload/Diocesan-Plan.pdf.

6 *Standards for Diocesan NFP Ministry*, see: <http://www.usccb.org/nfp/diocesan-ministry/standards-full-text.cfm>. The *Standards* are divided into four sections: I. Diocesan NFP Ministry; II. Diocesan NFP Teachers; III. Diocesan NFP couple/Client Education; and IV. NFP Teacher Training Programs. Each section describes the basic components for the role (job description) of the NFP coordinator and NFP teacher as well as the specific tasks of the program itself. It creates a system of accountability of the teacher to the diocesan coordinator; the diocesan coordinator to the teacher; and both to the bishop. An implementation process of review and compliance accompa-

First published in 1990 by the USCCB’s Administrative Committee of bishops, the *Standards* describe the basic structure and components of diocesan NFP ministry. Most dioceses informally use this document to develop their NFP programs⁷. Consequently, the majority of the individual diocesan NFP programs are “integrated into the structure of the diocese with an NFP coordinator appointed by the bishop, as well as NFP teachers who are accountable to and work in cooperation with the NFP coordinator”⁸. The teachers are typically volunteers representing a variety of methods⁹.

Despite the basic components that the Standards describe, diocesan NFP ministry in the United States comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. This is mostly due to the vision of the local bishop, but it can also be due to the unique local history of each diocese. Typically, diocesan NFP ministry is housed in the office of marriage and family life where it has a presence in programs of marriage preparation¹⁰. On-site and on-line NFP classes are offered throughout the diocese and many programs provide distance learning through a national non-diocesan NFP provider. Outreach education is commonly offered to various groups in the local Church (e.g., married couples, physicians, clergy, seminarians, etc.). Parishes typically do not offer NFP services apart from the program of the diocese.

Currently the United States has 197 dioceses. More than half have an official NFP ministry where the bishop has designated one person to be the NFP coordinator. In those dioceses that do not have a formal NFP ministry, there are designated “NFP contacts” who diocesan staff refer couples to for NFP education.

nies this document. The implementation process includes a mentoring process where a Board of Review member shepherds the diocesan NFP coordinator through the process in steps.

7 Note, in this article the word “program” is used interchangeably with “ministry”.

8 *Standards for Diocesan NFP Ministry*, 3.

9 The NFP methods in the dioceses of the United States are grouped as follows: Cervical mucus based methods: Billings Ovulation Method—USA, Creighton Model *FertilityCare*™, Fertility Education Medical Management (FEMM), Family of the Americas, Two-Day Method. Sympto-Thermal: Couple to Couple League International, Sensi-Plan, Sympto-Pro of Northwest Family Services. Sympto-Hormonal: Marquette Model.

10 Other diocesan departments where NFP ministry can be found include: *evangelization and catechesis; Pro-Life Activities; and Catholic hospitals.*

Diocesan NFP ministry is challenging due to many obstacles that include: few resources (including people willing to be trained as NFP teachers, funding, etc.); changing ecclesial administrations where reorganizations often mean that one person is responsible for many ministries¹¹; the negative influences of a technologically-focused, fast paced, and sexually promiscuous culture; lack of NFP understanding in the medical community; and generally weak catechetical formation among most Catholics. That said, the people who are called by God to work in NFP ministry are dedicated, competent, and resourceful. They are a blessing to the Catholic Church in the United States, and indeed, globally.

2. DIOCESAN NFP MINISTRY – LESSONS LEARNED

a. *The Early Years*

In looking back at how NFP education was offered in the past (1970s – 1990s), the dioceses of La Crosse and Phoenix provide typical examples. Alice Heinzen, the Marriage and Family Life Director for the Diocese of La Crosse, notes that the volunteer NFP teachers focused on the science of the natural methods. This translated into a strong emphasis on method effectiveness for pregnancy prevention. It also included accentuating the health benefits to the couple – especially for the woman regarding no harmful side effects. This approach included discussion about the couple-communications-building elements of the NFP lifestyle.

Unfortunately, reports Cindy Leonard, the NFP coordinator for the Diocese of Phoenix, a great part of promotional work, and even NFP classroom discussion overemphasized how NFP methods were “*just as good as* contraceptives” for pregnancy prevention. And, equally unfortunate, this mentality was fueled by a belief that most couples attended NFP classes to *exclusively* learn how to avoid pregnancy rather than how to learn about the gift of fertility in order to cooperate with God’s plan for their marriages. Sadly, notes Cindy, this approach was *reactive* rather

11 This is the most common problem cited as why many diocesan NFP coordinators have not formally implemented the *Standards*. The majority of diocesan NFP coordinators are responsible for multiple ministries.

than *proactive*. It speaks of a defensive attitude which struggled to show the strength of NFP methodology by using the language of contraception. The old approach sacrificed the true nature of the natural methods and neglected the rationale for using them.

The tendency of many NFP teachers was to provide NFP education in a secular format. Consequently, NFP classes had a medical, or “healthcare” tone. There was real anxiety among the NFP teachers to prove that these methods were good for all people, not just for Catholics. Alice explains that there was a fear that if the NFP teachers were to lead with God’s plan, it might discourage couples from using NFP. At best, any discussion of Church teaching was timid. This fear is understandable since most NFP teachers were not trained in Catholic moral theology and there was no theological language of the body that could be used in a popular classroom¹². In the United States, the Theology of the Body (TOB) although launched in the 1980s, did not become part of pastoral Catholic catechesis until after 2000.

b. *Lessons Learned*

In retrospect, the above approach was woefully ineffective. Alice reports that the rules and facts of NFP were typically placed above the reality of God’s creation. Both Alice and Cindy note that the beauty of NFP was lacking because there was nothing discussed about the beauty of God’s gifts to men and women. This fostered misconception about NFP on the part of the couples. Many couples dismissed NFP as just another method of birth control. This was a harsh lesson to learn!

A regrettable tendency among many NFP teachers was also to use fear tactics to solicit NFP couple commitment. Many teachers would urge couples to avoid the negative side effects of contraception and use the natural methods which had no side effects. This strategy along with a strong discussion of sin and punishment, yielded a judgmental tone

12 Regarding the NFP teacher’s education, it should be mentioned that the NFP providers offered excellent teacher training programs. Although their teacher curricula covered Church teaching, it was not typical for the details of Church teaching to be explicitly included in the NFP client’s education. General principles were integrated in some of these client curricula.

among NFP teachers. Understandably, this approach failed to recruit more couples to learn NFP. Regrettably, many NFP teachers developed a reputation for being harsh and with little compassion. Both laity and clergy sought to avoid them. This was especially problematic in the minds of the clergy who wanted to lead people to Christ and His Church rather than drive them away.

Regarding the clergy, Cindy reports that due to the healthcare emphasis in NFP teaching, many priests did not trust the methods because they looked like birth control. And, due to poor clergy outreach education at the time, many priests did not understand the science behind the natural methods. Cindy said that clergy in the Diocese of Phoenix doubted that a man could sexually abstain in marriage, while others doubted a woman's ability to daily and accurately observe the varying signs of fertility.

Finally, both Alice and Cindy saw shocking behavior among some of their long-term NFP couples. Once the couple achieved their family size, they often resorted to sterilization. It was discovered that the couples had no idea that sterilization was immoral. Cindy realized this lesson after conducting a simple continuation survey. The results showed sterilization was a significant trend among the people taught. This indicated that something was very wrong with the way the NFP education course was designed. A different approach had to be identified.

3. A WAY FORWARD

With the sobering knowledge that the secular approach to NFP education was not only ineffective but wrong, both the La Crosse and Phoenix diocesan ministry staff sought to find a new strategy¹³. Both diocesan NFP programs begin with a catechesis on Christian anthropology, the nature of married love and the moral transmission of life. They present Catholic theology about: personhood – being made in God's image; the

13 Cindy noted that she and her NFP teachers asked their bishop to add a full theology course to the NFP introduction which was required for the engaged. This requirement, a one-hour class in Church teaching followed by a one-hour NFP methodology course along with a couple witness, was established 25 years ago in the diocese of Phoenix for all engaged couples, and was strengthened in 2010. The Diocese of La Crosse implemented a similar format in 2016.

nature of human sexuality; the nature of marriage; conjugal love and responsible parenthood; and the gift of children and family. They have found that this is the most effective approach to motivate couples to use a natural method. And more importantly, it fosters growth in their faith as individuals and as a couple.

In this context, NFP becomes the ethical skill-set to live God's plan. Alice and Cindy have found that when people learn the *why* of NFP before the *what*, they open their hearts and minds to what God intends for them and their marriages. Regarding the programmatic change, although these dioceses continue to offer NFP methodology, they now place this information as secondary to the theology and philosophy supporting its use in marriage. By teaching NFP as a skill-set that allows couples to be faithful to their conjugal vows regarding the couple's one-flesh communion of persons and their stewardship over the power of life, they have found that many fruits are gained. By using informal continuation studies, they now see that their couples are not only committed to the NFP lifestyle but also express a desire to become more intentional about their faith. Similarly, other dioceses and marriage preparation programs in the nation utilized these realizations in communicating the fullness of these teachings more effectively as well.

a. *Accompany Couples in their Reality*

Alice reports that their diocesan marriage preparation programs accompany the couples in the reality of their relationships. For example, in an eight-hour engaged retreat, they provide a two-hour presentation on God's plan for love and life that moves the learners from what they know to what is unknown. This is done through simple questions and discussion to which the couples respond with what they know. Afterwards, the content of the program strives to move the couples toward the beauty and truth that God offers. The program proposes the good gifts that God desires for their marriages.

In the Diocese of Phoenix, couples finally learn about the *why* behind NFP use. As noted above, Phoenix had a two-hour NFP Introduction requirement for engaged couples. The couples however, did not understand the why behind the requirement. When the marriage

preparation requirement of the full course of NFP for the engaged was established in 2010 and included a day-long Theology of the Body seminar, couples reported their excitement that they understood why NFP would be a benefit to their lives. They expressed their wonder regarding God’s design of marriage and their bodies. The couples report that they understood the potential benefit to their lives rather than just another ecclesiastical “hoop they have to jump through”. This information was then passed to family and friends.

Like Phoenix, Alice notes that in the Diocese of La Crosse, their couples have a deeper understanding of Church teaching. La Crosse includes a couple reflection exercise aimed at assisting the couple in communication about faith and sexuality. The couple receives the exercise (which is designed by the diocesan marriage staff) at the end of each NFP class. The couple is asked to read a text on a theological topic together (or separately) and then to discuss it as a couple. Afterward they are to write a simple couple’s reflection that is submitted to the NFP instructor. These reflections help the instructor to assess the couple’s appropriation of the theology of human sexuality, marriage, and family life. It also helps the NFP teacher minister to the couple in a deeper way.

Regarding the diocesan NFP teachers, both Cindy and Alice provide them with theological training. Cindy says that their NFP teachers are now formed and empowered to highlight the Theology of the Body when teaching couples in their NFP methodology classes. She notes that the teachers can weave these principles into their classes and speak to couples in personal follow-up sessions in a way that calls the couple to an expansive understanding of married sexuality.

b. *Collaboration*

Both the Dioceses of La Crosse and Phoenix have expanded their catechesis regarding the Theology of the Body. They now reach out to audiences outside of marriage preparation programs. In La Crosse, the diocesan Curia offices of Education, Catechesis, Social Ministry, Youth, and Young Adult ministry collaborate with the NFP program staff to integrate foundational teachings on the person, sexuality, marriage, love and life in the formation for families, youth, Catholic schools, religious education,

young adults and medical professionals. Having a shared understanding of these beautiful teachings across a spectrum of apostolates and in catechesis for the laity has provided fertile soil in which to teach NFP. Similarly, in Phoenix, NFP outreach includes teen chastity education, fertility awareness seminars for mothers and daughters, retreats for medical professionals, infertility support and curriculum input for Catholic schools.

c. Appreciation and Generosity

Cindy has seen couples and clergy express a deep appreciation for the NFP ministry with the new approach. Among her NFP teachers, there is a fruitful collaboration as they work to accompany the couples who they teach. Alice agrees and adds that the diocesan NFP staff is now known for their generosity as they collaborate with others in spreading the news about how God created men, women, sexuality and marriage. Parish priests and their staff frequently contact their office to ask for assistance on related matters.

d. Evangelization

Alice and Cindy have found that providing NFP education after a careful formation in Christian anthropology and marriage is a strong tool for evangelization. While many of the couples who come to the Church for the Sacrament of Matrimony are not well formed in the faith, they are intrigued that the Church wants to provide them with useful education about their fertility. This helps them to lay aside their defenses and to trust. They often express their excitement about the theology and many are moved to become more involved in the life of the local Church. Trust becomes more and more evident among these couples – trust for themselves as wonderfully made, trust for each other as spouses, and trust that the Church reveals God's truths. In the Diocese of Phoenix, as they annually review over 1000+ class-surveys from the engaged couples they teach, they can identify an important catalyst for a change of heart and behavior. More couples express their desire to accept and respect God's gifts. They want to grow in their faith. They long to know and love God more deeply – especially as a couple.

In the Diocese of Phoenix, Cindy adds that since 2010 when the bishop implemented the requirements for Theology of the Body and NFP as part of marriage preparation, they too have seen many fruits. Couples are committed to NFP and becoming more involved in their parishes. Cindy points to other positive evidence. They survey the couples who go through their theology classes (but before the couples take the NFP classes). The surveys are anonymous, consequently, the responses are candid. The results below (see Table 1), show an openness to the Church and its teachings on human sexuality as confirmed by the desire to change behavior:

Table 1: God’s Plan evaluations 2010-2012; 3, 184 completed

<i>Living together?</i>	<i>Sexually active?</i>
Yes: 2006 = 63%	Yes: 2803 = 88%
No: 1083 = 34%	No: 321 = 10%
No answer: 91 = 3%	No answer: 60 = 2%
<i>Save Sex now for Marriage?</i>	<i>Plan-Contracept pre-course?</i>
Yes: 1338 = 42%	Yes: 1178 = 37%
No: 446 = 14%	No: 1242 = 39%
Not sure; 923 = 29%	Not sure: 605 = 19%
No answer: 477 = 15%	No answer: 159 = 5%
<i>Still Planning to Contracept?</i>	<i>Yes to NFP after Introduction</i>
Yes: 440 = 14%	Yes: 1719 = 53%
No: 935 = 29%	No: 222 = 8%
Not sure: 942 = 29%	Not sure: 1051 = 33%
No answer: 911 = 28%	No answer: 192 = 6%
<i>More Active in Faith?</i>	<i>Deeper Commitment to Christ?</i>
Yes: 2198 = 69%	Yes: 2512 = 79%
No: 335 = 11%	No: 541 = 17%
Not sure: 573 = 18%	Not sure:
No answer: 76 = 2%	No answer: 130 = 4%

The couples are surveyed a second time, after taking a complete NFP series (defined as 4–6 instructional meetings with a certified instructor, along with menstrual chart review). Even though couples are required to take a complete NFP class series, they are glad that they were given this information as the results of their plans at that time to use NFP versus contraceptives indicate (see Table 2). At this point in their marriage preparation it can be seen that: 70% of couples have decided to use NFP in their marriage; 19% are not yet decided; 5% have decided to be open to whatever happens; and only 6% have decided to use contraception in their marriage.

Table 2: After completion of an NFP series

Will use NFP: 70%

Undecided: 19%

Open to whatever happens: 5%

Will use Contraception: 6%

4. CONCLUSION

The NFP ministry discussed above represents how diocesan NFP programming had been designed, hard lessons that were learned and an effective way forward identified. Although the dioceses of La Crosse and Phoenix had long histories of episcopal support and talented NFP leaders, their original approach to NFP education was inadequate. The way forward that they describe provides a model for all Church-sponsored NFP programs. Leading with Church teaching and presenting NFP as a skill-set bears good fruit.

At the national level, we have learned important lessons from these and other diocesan NFP programs. These lessons can be summarized in four points.

- a. *Catechesis must form the foundation of NFP ministry with NFP methodology taking the supportive role as the skill-set.*

If the local Church is to provide NFP services, it must be done within the context of God's design of the human person, sexuality, and the nature of married love and life. Without this foundation, NFP becomes just another approach to fertility management.

- b. *When the local bishop supports NFP ministry, it will flourish.*

The bishop is the one who sets the vision and commitment of resources to the ministry. No ministry can develop without the bishop. Related to the bishop's role, is his selection of competent NFP experts who commit to diocesan NFP ministry. The NFP expert will be the person who should be able to build a structure that is part of the diocese's comprehensive ministry to the engaged and married.

- c. *Dedication of diocesan resources.*

In order for diocesan NFP ministry to operate with competence and effectiveness, there needs to be a corresponding dedication of diocesan resources. These resources take in a budget where staff are paid a salary, materials can be purchased, and programs funded. Resources can also mean the identification of a volunteer team of experts who can assist in the projects of the ministry.

- d. *An overall need for a shared diocesan vision and collaboration with other ministries (e.g., Clergy, Youth and Young Adult Ministry, Pro-Life Activities, RCIA, Catechesis, Evangelization, etc.).*

Diocesan NFP programming ought to be part of a shared diocesan ministerial vision. Collaboration with the appropriate ministries on various projects ought to be common practice if the depth and beauty of Church teaching—which represent God's gifts to His people—are to be received by the faithful.

Unfortunately, the above four points are not equally present among the diocesan NFP programs in the United States. Great variety exists. Some programs are very strong like the dioceses of Phoenix and La Crosse, while others are still developing. This is our challenge¹⁴.

The challenge of developing and promoting sound catechesis on Church teaching and the methods of Natural Family Planning is a worthy task within the dioceses. NFP ministry is part of the responsibility of Church leaders as they minister to married couples and their families. As Paul VI said to the bishops of the world in *Humanae vitae*, “great indeed is the work of education, of progress and of charity” which this ministry represents¹⁵. “This truly great work will bring blessings both on the world and on the Church”¹⁶. And why? Because men and women “cannot attain that true happiness” unless they keep “the laws which the Most High God has engraved” in human nature. “These laws must be wisely and lovingly observed”¹⁷.

14 To read further about the about diocesan NFP programs, see: NFP Program, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <http://www.usccb.org/nfp/index.cfm>; Diocese of La Crosse, <http://diolc.org/marriage/natural-family-planning>; Diocese of Phoenix, <http://www.phxnfp.org>; see also, <https://dphx.org/find-us-ready>.

15 See PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae vitae* (25.07.1968) n. 31.

16 *Idem.*

17 *Idem.*