Marriage – How to Build It to Last

Lab report | Facilitator: Rachelle Neal

Rachelle Neal's Lab explored how couples can build lasting marriages and how churches can support them through changing seasons. Combining biblical teaching, personal examples, group discussion, and reflection, the session emphasised marriage as a sacred covenant between husband, wife, and God, sustained through intentional choices and everyday habits.

Understanding and modelling covenant

Participants described a contract as an exchange of conditions and obligations, while covenant rests on trust, relationship, and sacrificial love. The discussion recognised that experiences of broken marriages can make the biblical picture of covenant difficult to understand. Teaching therefore needs to be accompanied by visible examples of respect, commitment, and partnership.

Preparing couples for marriage emerged as a priority. One participant described young people who understood marriage preparation mainly as choosing wedding clothes and music. Churches were encouraged to help couples prepare for the relationship itself. Those already married can also develop a covenant foundation, even if they did not begin with that understanding.

Four practical rhythms

Rachelle presented four connected practices, stressing that the starting point is examining our own hearts before God:

- **Make the choice:** Find your identity in Christ and ask God to help you see your spouse through His eyes. Choose humility, grace, forgiveness, and gratitude, responding to small invitations for connection.
- **Make the time:** Protect regular opportunities to reconnect. Meaningful time need not involve an expensive date; a shared meal or daily conversation can help couples remain curious about each other's joys, struggles, and prayers.
- **Make space for each other:** Include your spouse in your life and ministry, recognising how your gifts complement one another. Also support each other's individual friendships, service, growth, and rest.
- **Adjust through the seasons:** Revisit rhythms and responsibilities as children grow, work changes, or families move. Rachelle illustrated this through shifting connection time from evenings to shared lunches as family routines changed.

Recognising strain and caring for leaders' marriages

Four warning signs were highlighted: criticism that attacks the person, defensiveness that avoids responsibility, disrespect that devalues a spouse, and withdrawal from conversation or connection. Couples were encouraged to notice these patterns early and return to the foundational practices, beginning with their own posture before God.

Leaders were invited to reflect on whether ministry receives their best while their spouse receives what remains. Protecting time together, reassessing commitments during transitions, and having a trusted person for honest conversation were presented as important ways to care for their own marriages.

Discussion insights and next steps for churches

The closing discussion emphasised the value of relationships between experienced and younger couples. Both may need encouragement to connect, and experienced couples do not need a perfect marriage or a formal teaching role to offer support. Honest stories about challenges and growth can make mentoring approachable.

Hospitality emerged as a practical starting point: welcoming another couple into ordinary home life creates opportunities to observe, share, and learn. Participants also described a need for safe places to discuss marriage frustrations before they become crises.

Practical next steps included strengthening marriage preparation, encouraging informal mentoring, sharing useful resources, and creating spaces for honest conversation. Personally, participants were invited to choose one specific act of service, appreciation, or prayer for their spouse. The Lab closed with prayer for marriages to be strengthened and become a witness of God's love within their communities.