

'Flashlight of hope'

Pastoral counselor helps individuals work through pain, grief of divorce

BY BRENDA R. KOCHER
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It's not unusual for someone to approach Dr. James Stillwell in a restaurant or store and proclaim, "You saved my life!"

Those grateful souls aren't talking about medical miracles. They're referring to a time when Stillwell gave them tools to navigate their way out of one of the most trying periods of their life.

Stillwell led his first divorce recovery workshop in 1993, a year after joining the staff of Immanuel Baptist Church in Lexington as its single adults' minister.

Forty people went through that first workshop, and the numbers grew from there. By 2012, approximately 3,100 people had gone through the program.

"My mother died the same month we launched our first divorce recovery workshop,"

recalled Stillwell, himself a child of divorce. "I wasn't even conscious of it at the time, but I'm sure the grief I was feeling helped fuel the passion I had for that room of grieving people whose marriages had died."

Stillwell developed an early love of theology. After studies at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, the Tennessee native and his bride Vivian served Southern Baptist churches in Michigan, Georgia and Texas before settling at Immanuel in Lexington.

In 2002, Stillwell began devoting his day off from Immanuel each week to provide premarital and divorce recovery counseling at the Interfaith Counseling Center in Lexington.

Ten years and much education and supervised training later, he left Immanuel to focus on pastoral counseling.



He specializes in single adult issues, marriage enrichment, premarital preparation and, of course, divorce recovery.

A pastoral counselor is trained in theology and spirituality as well as psychology and counseling.

"If a client wants to talk about their faith, I will understand it," Stillwell explained. "But I'm not going to simply pray over clients and tell

them what the Bible says about their problems. Giving them a 'Bible band-aid' is not a substitute for the difficult psychological work they need to do."

A self-described encourager and hope monger, Stillwell believes his clients benefit from his optimistic nature.

"I told a couple today that it's my job and it's my personality to hold a flashlight of

hope for you, to let you know that I see a lot of possibility here. I see a path forward."

Stillwell, 57, counsels clients in Lexington and Frankfort each week and in Louisville two days each month.

For the past two years his Wednesday evenings and Sundays have been devoted to Calvary Baptist Church in Irvine, Ky. As interim pastor there, he not only preached

but also used his counseling skills to help the congregation prepare for their new pastor.

Despite his dizzying schedule, Stillwell manages to be a nurturing father of four and grandfather of two. He and Vivian work at making their times together at the beginning and end of each day special and stay connected throughout the day with sweet text messages.

He will soon lead another divorce recovery workshop, this time in a new setting, Forks of Elkhorn Baptist Church in Midway, Ky.

"Helping people work through the pain and grief of divorce is one of my greatest passions," he said. "It really is very fulfilling work."

And the feedback is certainly affirming every time Stillwell meets individuals he has counseled who thank him for making such a positive difference in their life. ■

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Maintaining a healthy marriage

Dr. James Stillwell knows a thing or two about transitions.

He made a monumental transition himself at age 54, when he left the familiarity and security of his ministerial position at Immanuel Baptist Church in Lexington to focus on pastoral counseling.

Stillwell sees clients in the midst of a variety of transitions. He offered the following advice to baby-boomer couples who are in the empty-nest, impending-retirement phase of their lives:

■ Give attention to your primary relationship.

If your marriage has been child-centered, realize ahead of time that there's going to be crisis period when the last child leaves home. Get help. See a relationship counselor, read marriage-enrichment books and go to marriage retreats.

■ **Get your financial house in order.** Consult a financial planner to ensure that you will have the means to live

out your goals and dreams for retirement.

■ **Work on what your legacy will be.** Look at your retirement as your next career and determine what you want to leave behind, for whom you are setting an example and how you can best spend the rest of your life. Do you want to mentor others, volunteer, write or give your money to favorite causes?

■ **Attend to your physical health.** Go to your doctor and do whatever it is they say to do so you can fulfill what John Wesley said, which is to "do as much good as you can for as long as you can."