

Walk to Emmaus

Couples Guideline

Interpreting the Equal Commitment Rule

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The Reason for the Rule

The Letter of Agreement* states that "husbands and wives should make an equal commitment to participate." How are communities and sponsors to interpret this? In the first place, the rule does not imply that Emmaus is primarily intended for married persons. Single persons are as welcome to participate in Emmaus as married couples. The rule does however; reflect a concern and a hope about the effect of Emmaus on marriages and families.

First, the equal participation rule guards against the Emmaus experience becoming a separating influence in a marriage. The rule is part of our heritage from Cursillo and is based on years of experience with the potential effects of these short courses in Christianity on marriages, positively and negatively. Emmaus can be the occasion for commitments to new life directions which one's spouse may not understand or appreciate at the time. Disregard for the rule will certainly not result in marital tensions in every case. But the Emmaus Movement should do all it can to strengthen marriages and to avoid practices which we know have the potential to affect a marriage adversely.

Second, when the rule is followed, Emmaus can indirectly strengthen the spiritual bond in a marriage and family. So sponsorship of married persons involves approaching both husband and wife together and encouraging them to make an equal commitment to participate. This is not only so they can grow together as a Christian family, but also because a strong Emmaus Movement and the church need our participation as families, not only as individuals.

Third, the equal commitment rule results in increased participation of many grateful husbands and wives (usually husbands) that probably would not have attended an Emmaus Weekend otherwise, but did so in order to make it possible for their spouse to participate. While their initial motivation for going on a Walk may not have been personal, they came to realize in the course of the Walk that the weekend was meant for them.

What the Rule Does Not Mean

The equal commitment rule does NOT mean a wife can never go to Emmaus unless her husband has gone first**. While it is always best to schedule husbands and wives to participate during the same set of Emmaus Weekends so they can share their experience and support one another, circumstances may arise when it is necessary and reasonable for husbands or wives to take their Walks at different times or places. In these cases, the order of their participation is secondary and is a practical matter.

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* The Western New York Board of Directors signs an annual Letter of Agreement (with The Upper Room Emmaus), which includes our commitment to abide by the Upper Room's Walk To Emmaus model.

** Conversely, the rule does not mean that a husband can never attend a Walk unless his wife also goes on the same set of Weekends.

Why Men's Weekends Precede Women's Weekends

It is important to point out that men's weekends are not scheduled before women's Walks for theological reasons. For instance, this scheduling pattern is not based on a belief that men are the spiritual head of the household and that wives should follow their lead. Rather the reasons for this scheduling pattern are historical and practical. Cursillo was originally an experience aimed at reclaiming men for Christ as committed members of Christ's Church; women's weekends were developed later.

The pattern of scheduling sets of weekend short courses, with the men's weekends proceeding the women's weekends, was also intended to cause more men to participate than might otherwise, and to break the machismo inclination to leave the business of religion and church to the women. Early on, Cursillo leaders observed that in the traditional family, husbands were sometimes less likely to go on a religious weekend than their wives and in some cases less likely to participate if their wives had gone first. They also observed that husbands were sometimes more likely to go on a weekend if it was necessary for their wives to participate. Women in the traditional family, on the other hand, seemed to be just as likely to participate after the husband's weekend as before. These generalizations are certainly not true of all husbands and wives today. But in families where these generalizations are true, the likelihood of that husband participating is increased.

The Rule is Wisdom, Not Law

It is important that the wisdom of the rule be honored in Emmaus Communities. The equal commitment rule represents a practical ideal to which Emmaus Communities should be committed and toward which sponsors should work in all cases. It is important to remember however, that the equal commitment rule represents wisdom, not law. There is a place for reasonable exceptions. Exceptions can be made by Boards of Directors when there is no possibility of the participation of both spouses and there is reason for assurance that the marriage will not be adversely affected by participation of only one spouse.

In some cases, spouses have never shared their religious lives and have learned to deal with this as a reality of their marriage. Clergy and their spouses have often dealt with a disparity in theological education and participation in spiritual growth events. Furthermore, the importance of involving Clergy in Emmaus will often warrant exceptions. Other cases may involve persons who want to go to Emmaus very badly, but whose spouse is unbending in refusing to participate time after time. Each Community must prayerfully decide how to handle these cases in grace and when to make exceptions in view of a person's and family's spiritual welfare.