

## Daily Record

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### **Morris ministers affirm traditional marriage best**

*TEHANI SCHNEIDER DAILY RECORD*

PEQUANNOCK -- In a county-wide effort begun in Hanover last year, several religious leaders from Pequannock and Lincoln Park on Wednesday morning signed a document supporting traditional marriage in an effort to reduce the divorce rate at the local level.

The document, titled the "Lincoln Park/Pompton Plains/ Pequannock Marriage Builders Community Covenant," was the second to be signed in Morris County by church leaders of various denominations.

Wednesday's signing was the second covenant effort in Morris County organized by the Whippany-based New Jersey Family Policy Council, a conservative grassroots organization that aims to preserve the sanctity of traditional marriage. Pastors from seven area churches in Hanover signed the first covenant last year.

NJFPC worked with local clergy over the past year to create the document, which lists 10 steps to promoting lasting marriages that the pastors pledge to follow.

Jennifer Bolds, NJFPC's Marriage Builders administrator, said the group is currently coordinating efforts to hold future covenant signings with clergy in Randolph, Chatham, Morristown, Dover and Parsippany.

"We're looking for the majority of churches in a community," Bolds said. "We're in the beginning stages of connecting with pastors, but we're hoping to have covenant signings in Randolph and Chatham in the next six months or so."

Won Kyu "Q" Rim, NJFPC's head of community development, said about 75 percent of marriages are conducted by clergy so pastors have a responsibility to promote the institution of marriage.

"We want the pastors to say, 'We should really be doing a better job in providing marital services for couples,'" said Rim. "They should say, 'We should be a better voice for couples who are struggling and thinking of divorce. We want to be an obstacle to divorce.'"

The Rev. Philip LeBeau, pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Lincoln Park, said his parish enforces the "selfless idea" of successful marriage, in which couples are devoted to the welfare of each other.

"Divorce has become the new marriage counseling," LeBeau said. "Our goal is to have people get to the point in their marriages where no one or any one thing can break that marriage."

Pequannock's covenant was signed by leaders of seven area churches out of the 10 listed on the document.

Leaders of the three churches that did not attend -- the Gospel Outreach Christian Fellowship, Grace Bible Church and Our Lady of Good Counsel, all in Pompton Plains -- will also be asked to sign, said Rim.

But the pastors of those three area churches weren't the only notable no-shows at the event, held at the municipal building.

The NJFPC invited Pequannock Mayor Jay Vanderhoff and Lincoln Park Mayor David Runfeldt, but both did not attend. Pequannock Deputy Mayor Nick Kapotes attended in Vanderhoff's place.

Vanderhoff, who said his absence was work-related, received a flier advertising the event beforehand.

"It's my understanding they're trying to make people more aware of the importance of marriage and the seriousness of undertaking marriage," he said, of the covenant. "(The flier) briefly touched on it. I can't fully comment on it."

The use of the municipal building, he said, was strictly to allow the clergy a place to meet.

"I don't think there was any support at the township level, in terms of the actual covenant itself," Vanderhoff said. "The location was a courtesy supplied by the town, not supporting or disapproving what they're doing. It was basically neutral ground."

But Kapotes, who addressed the pastors on the dais following the public reading of the covenant, said he supports their outreach efforts for troubled couples and the community, in general.

"Just get the word out there, to find God and find church and do it the right way," he said. He suggested copies of the covenant be displayed in the churches represented on the document as a "visual reminder."

Runfeldt, who did not send a municipal representative from Lincoln Park, did not return a call seeking comment.

While the majority of the area churches approached by NJFPC agreed to participate in drafting the covenant, some did not, Rim said.

"No churches were adversarial. They were more polite, maybe not understanding the magnitude of a day like this," he said.

However, NJFPC is an organization that has been embroiled in controversy. The group was vocal in its opposition of the landmark State Supreme Court decision in *Lewis v. Harris* that essentially led to legislation of the state civil union law for same-sex couples.

Leslie Gabel-Brett, a spokeswoman for Lambda Legal, a national organization that advocates equality for gays and lesbians, said the covenant's statement to uphold traditional marriage excludes faith communities that support equality for same-sex couples and marriage for same-sex couples.

However, Gabel-Brett recognized the right of the pastors to express their beliefs through the separation of church and state.

"Clergy are free to maintain their own teachings and beliefs under civil law," she said. "There's nothing that would require clergy of religious faiths to change their doctrines on a religious level."

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