



Missionaries of the
Holy Spirit
in the Family

Chapter Start-Up Guide

Learn about MHSF and bring it to your community

Table of Contents

1. Letter of Introduction
2. Mission and Vision of MHSF
3. MHSF Chapters and Couple Formation
4. MHSF and Your Community
5. Timeline & Action Steps
6. 'Starting a Chapter' Checklist
7. Other Resources

A Letter of Introduction

The Missionaries of the Holy Spirit in the Family is a *de facto* association of the Christian faithful based in the Diocese of Lincoln Nebraska that has received the praise and commendation of Bishop James Conley. We operate in accordance with the teachings of the Catholic Church to help form and equip couples to faithfully and effectively live out the vocation of Marriage.

In August 2017 we presented the apostolate to our Bishop, Bishop James Conley, and received his praise for our work. In 2018 The Missionaries of the Holy Spirit in the Family (MHSF) became (and remains) a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. As of 2024, we have had over 300 individuals participate in our apostolate's mission, and that number is growing.

This apostolate began out of a desire to sanctify ordinary family life. After getting married, we learned quickly that simply knowing about the teachings of the Church was not enough to build and sustain holiness in marriage. A pedagogy for how holiness might look in the tangible, daily realities of family life was necessary—and this perspective was soon realized to be a common experience among other couples.

The Missionaries of the Holy Spirit in the Family is really a response to Pope St. John Paul II's statement in *Familiaris Consortio*: "Family, become what you are."

Would you consider joining us on this mission?

Chance & Lora Unger, Co-founders
Missionaries of the Holy Spirit in the Family

Our Mission & Vision

The vision of MHSF is in our name: to create and build up **missionaries** in and for **the family** through the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. MHSF began as a spirit-filled response to these words:

"To the injustice originating from sin-which has profoundly penetrated the structures of today's world-and often hindering the family's full realization of itself and of its fundamental rights, we must all set ourselves in opposition through a conversion of mind and heart, following Christ Crucified by denying our own selfishness: such a conversion cannot fail to have a beneficial and renewing influence even on the structures of society.

What is needed is a continuous, permanent conversion which, while requiring an interior detachment from every evil and an adherence to good in its fullness, is brought about concretely in steps which lead us ever forward. Thus a dynamic process develops, one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of His definitive and absolute love in the entire personal and social life of man.

Therefore an educational growth process is necessary, in order that individual believers, families and peoples, even civilization itself, by beginning from what they have already received of the mystery of Christ, may patiently be led forward, arriving at a richer understanding and a fuller integration of this mystery in their lives."

(Familiaris Consortio, 9)

MHSF seeks to facilitate a conversion of mind and heart for married individuals by illuminating marriages with the Truth of the Church's revelation, in order to help their family reach "full realization of itself."

Couples who commit to our two year formation period begin "from what they have already received of the mystery of Christ" in the sacrament of marriage, and are led, through ongoing education and the forming of intimate friendships, to "a richer understanding and a fuller integration of this mystery in their lives."

The purpose of MHSF is to aid in sanctifying the Church, the culture, and the world from the inside out, starting at home. We want to help married couples live out their unique path of holiness, and for the fruits of that to spread throughout the domestic church and the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

Individuals entering the priesthood or religious life receive years of formation to help them understand the calling of their specific vocation and to prepare them to live that vocation faithfully. Before entering marriage, couples receive a small fraction of that preparation, although understanding and faithfully living the call of marriage is foundational to the health of the Church, as it is from the vocation of marriage that all other vocations flow. As the family goes, says Pope St.

John Paul II, “so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world in which we live.” (*Homily*, 30 November 1986)

We can think of MHSF as a seminary for those in the marriage vocation. The Latin word ‘seminary’ means greenhouse. A greenhouse provides a place of protection for a seedling. Within the walls of the greenhouse, through proper nourishment, nurturing, and light, it grows deep roots and begins to become what it truly is. As it becomes strong, it can be transplanted outside and will be able to withstand the storms of life.

Through human, spiritual, intellectual, and apostolic formation, spouses receive the wisdom and beauty that God has revealed about marriage. Through meaningful relationships with other couples, they realize it is normal to receive God’s plan for marriage and family and so be fully alive. As St. John Paul II was fond of saying, “Family, become what you are.” (*Familiaris Consortio*)

MHSF Chapters and Couple Formation

The primary goal of MHSF is to provide a formation model, an environment, and a community that fosters growth and a depth of vulnerability in married life through the Holy Spirit. This is done by imitating the 'apostolic way', and strengthening small groups of husbands & wives to "cast into the deep", and live as true witnesses to the power of a life lived in the Holy Spirit. The template for this model is taken directly from Scripture & the Church.

Every MHSF chapter includes:

- **One facilitating couple**, to whom we are able to communicate and filter information through over the two-year formation.
- **At least one priest** who is able to offer Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and the Sacrament of Confession monthly. His involvement can expand beyond that based on availability. Preferably this priest will be able to be with the couples over the full two years.
- **Between 6 and 12 married couples**. Typically any more than this, and we will look to create a second chapter (with a second facilitating couple) to help foster intimacy, vulnerability, and friendship within the chapters. Prior to joining an MHSF Chapter, couples will be guided to discern if God is currently calling them to commit to MHSF's two-year formation.
- **A "teacher" of the content**. This could be the priest, someone local who can speak to the content, or, at a minimum, our video series that we created to facilitate teaching in the absence of an in-person teacher. The priest or facilitating couple are responsible for designating an in-person teacher or choosing to use the video series for each meeting.

MHSF chapters gather monthly for a period of two years answering two basic questions:

1. **Objectively, we ask the question: "What are we?"**- Couples will be steeped in the Church's teaching on the family, and the family according to what God has revealed.
2. **Subjectively, we seek: "How do we become that?"** - This is our response to Truth. Once we know what the family is, each family can begin to live as they are uniquely called.

The monthly gatherings include:

- A communal meal
- Spiritual formation
- Small group discussion and discussion between spouses
- Time with our Lord in adoration and confession

MHSF chapters follow a curriculum that guides every individual through one's relationship with God, one's true identity (found through that relationship), and living out one's vocation (mission) in marriage.

Couples are given the gift of time through our formation, and will spend approximately two years learning and integrating the truths of our faith into their marriages and lives.

Year One of formation sets a strong foundation for human, intellectual, and spiritual formation. It emphasizes group meetings, small group time, and spousal discussion, along with prayer, adoration, and confession.

Year Two takes a more dynamic approach. A greater emphasis is placed on apostolic formation and living out one's vocation in a more intentional manner. Group meetings and discussion will continue in year two, but with more opportunities to put the formation into practice.

Several topics of formation include:

- Personal and spousal prayer
- Incorporating Holy Scripture and the sacraments into the domestic church
- Liturgical living
- Interior healing
- Surrender and detachment
- Charism discernment
- Developing a family mission & rule of life
- Church teaching and documents including Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *Familiaris Consortio*, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, and the *Theology of the Body*
- A Consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

MHSF and Your Community

It is estimated that of all churches in the United States, 3 out of 4 lack notable marriage ministry or have any kind of ministry for newly married couples. Upwards of 94% of mainline churches put zero dollars towards specific marriage ministry. (*Barna Group Survey, 2019*)

Addressing marriage formation in your parish or community is a heavy lift and engages with a very diverse group of people. But by doing so, you are helping to establish, develop, and strengthen intentional disciples, and provide a highly sought-after resource for many. Couples who have joined MHSF in the past have time and again expressed a desire for two essential things:

1. Continued, meaningful formation in marriage, and
2. Solidarity with other couples striving for the same values.

Married couples in your parish are likely desiring these same two things, but currently have no means of realizing them. So, is it worth the time and resources to invest in marriage ministry for the couples in your parish?

Consider the positive impact on a parish in which even just a few couples have undergone formation and healing to understand and live out their vocations:

- *What are the effects on the children of those couples?*
- *On other ministries in the parish helped or attended by those families?*
- *On evangelization efforts in the broader community?*

Consider the long term and eternal impact of these couples and their families striving for holiness. Of course, oftentimes, the most drastic changes in a culture or environment happen over a long span of time. MHSF provides a model to help families learn and establish real, lasting habits of holiness starting at home, with ripple effects in the daily norms of their parish and community.

To help us better understand the effects of joining MHSF, we asked couples to answer questions about their time spent in the apostolate and its impact on their personal lives, their marriages, and their engagement in the parish and community. Some of the trends we found are listed below:

- Nearly all couples said they prioritize fasting, tithing, and serving the church.
- 75% of individuals say they know their charisms and feel confident using them in daily life.
- 100% of couples have made personal and spousal prayer a greater priority and said that they see their marriage as their “mission” in life.
- Many couples said that their greatest graces in MHSF came from the monthly opportunity for adoration and confession and the opportunity for an annual retreat, as well as intentional time spent together as spouses and in friendships formed with couples in their community.

Undoubtedly, accompanying an MHSF Chapter through two years of formation requires commitment and some amount of sacrifice on the part of the facilitating couple and priest. And yet, the impact and graces on families is monumental.

Those who have concluded formation with MHSF had this to say to those discerning the commitment:

“Two years seems like a big commitment but the time flies and it is totally worth it. Your marriage is worth investing in.”

“It is worth the commitment. It can feel like a lot to commit yourself to the readings, the monthly meetings, and getting a babysitter, but to think of it as a concentrated two years investing in the spiritual health of yourself, your marriage, and charting a way of life for your whole family for the years to come. What MHSF fosters when you commit yourself is indispensable for families and married couples.”

In addition, we hope the following letter to fellow priests by MHSF Co-Founder, Father Ben Holdren, as well as the additional testimonies by priests and couples of MHSF will help to reveal the benefits gained by bringing MHSF to your parish or community.

Fathers,

I am a priest for the Diocese of Lincoln in Nebraska. I am now stationed at St. Gregory the Great Seminary as the Director of the Propaedeutic Year. I have been a part of Missionaries of the Holy Spirit in the Family (MHSF) for the past six years. For the great majority of my time in MHSF, I was serving as the Pastor of St. Peter's Catholic Church and St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Bellwood, Nebraska and Chaplain of David City Aquinas Catholic School. I am writing to highly recommend MHSF to you. It requires a sacrifice of time, but in my experience, I have gained far more than I have given.

MHSF is an apostolate that desires to create an environment where spouses can vulnerably and safely grow in relationship with God, with each other, and with like-minded couples. St. John Paul II said in *Familiaris Consortio*, "Families, become what you are." MHSF is deeply grounded in *Familiaris Consortio* and imparts solid Catholic teaching in the formation of Catholic marriages. Couples discover their identity rooted in the love of God for them, and can then truly live out the vocation God has entrusted to them.

It has been a joy to meet with couples once a month on Friday evenings and pass along the formation. MHSF continues to work to make it easier and easier for a priest to impart the curriculum. Each month there are recommended Catholic teachings on the Sacrament of Marriage, spousal prayer, charisms, etc. from a variety of sources. Accompanying these teachings each month is a video and a section of the workbook. If a priest is pressed for time in preparing, they can press play on the video and afterward go through the discussion questions in the workbook with minimal prep-time. A priest can also look at the information beforehand and use it to tailor a personalized talk on the topic and form their own discussion questions with the couples.

What I have enjoyed most is to see the couples form deep friendships with other like-minded couples, and to enter into deeper friendships with them myself. The couples receive a new awareness that they are not trying to be faithful Catholic spouses and parents on their own, but they are making this journey with many other couples who desire to do the same. It has given me tremendous life in my own priesthood as I am invited in deeper ways into the family life of many of these couples. It's fun just to share a meal with them once a month as we have lighthearted discussions, and then to be able to be a spiritual father to them through the offering of Adoration and Confession.

I would welcome any questions you have if it would be helpful to reach out to a fellow priest and discuss these things further. Get a hold of me anytime.

Sincerely in Christ,
Fr. Ben Holdren

Testimonies from Priests of MHSF

“MHSF gives a pastor the space to engage a small group of intentional disciples to build up the families of his parish and initiate them in the ministerial life of the Church. Spending just one night a month, you will give the couples in your parish an excellent way to grow in their faith in God and openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. And you will receive so much more in return: new friendships with families in your parish, new disciples for Church ministries, and a bonus dinner and holy hour at the monthly gathering as well! This ministry has given me an amazing opportunity to encounter young families and grow within an intimate group of disciples, and I pray it will give the same opportunity to your parishes.”

—Fr. Joseph Wahlmeier

“MHSF has been a massive gift not only for individual couples, but even in my own vocation. It's been exciting and life-giving to see faith grow in my couples and how MHSF has brought spouses even closer to each other, but more importantly desiring more of God. It has restored hope for humanity in my heart and helped me enter deeper into my spousal relationship with my Bride, the Church. Seeing my couples pray with each other, pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament more and desiring to pray with and over each other fills my heart with the pride and joy that a father has of his children. With the MHSF formation already planned out, it's not taxing on the priest's schedule. It's prepped and wrapped up as a gift, but is up to the priest to open and unleash it for himself and his parish!”

—Fr. Allan Phan

“I'm happy to see Missionaries of the Holy Spirit in the Family thriving. It gives me comfort knowing that a bunch of young married couples are being formed, and are forming each other, for their lay apostolate. I like that they are learning about baptism in the Holy Spirit and are recognizing this as foundational to new life in Christ. And I like that they are establishing community with one another.”

—Fr. Christopher Goodwin

“Participation in MHSF is an incredible opportunity for husbands and wives to grow in their experience of the gift of marriage. We know the sacrament works; the grace is present. But an experience of the power of that grace at work in the everyday life of married couples is a game-changer for family life. The MHSF evenings provide an opportunity for a greater experience of the power of God's grace at work through the Church's teaching on marriage and family, through friendship and a shared experience of assimilating that teaching, and time spent together, as friends and as spouses, in prayer before our Eucharistic Lord. These moments make possible a new openness to, and cooperation with, the powerful grace of God. And, as priests we know, an openness to, and cooperation with, the grace of God has the power to set the world on fire - first in the human heart, then in the home, then in the parish, and then in the world!”

—Fr. Jay Buhman

Testimonies from Individuals in MHSF

“My spouse and I are closer and more in tune with one another than ever before. We’ve both become better at listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit rather than the voice of wounds or lies, and so barriers come down quickly and real communication and real unity can happen. We made a family chapel in our house, and we established a routine of morning and evening prayer times as a family that might not have seemed realistic or possible without all the encouragement from formation readings and real-life examples of families in our chapter. Because of MHSF, grace is flowing freely in our day-to-day life as a family.”

“Before MHSF, our faith as a couple had been lacking at best. We would go to mass, but wouldn’t talk about our faith. Our conversations and prayer life has greatly improved since being involved in MHSF. Also the friendships we have made in MHSF are helping us to be better people, Catholics, and parents.”

“It has been a blessing for our family. It was an answered prayer after completing a novena. I had no idea what I was agreeing to sit in on, but I’m so thankful that the Holy Spirit pushed us in the right direction. We have improved all areas of our marriage. We had no idea how to pray together and now that’s our go to when we are struggling, not struggling – you name it. Our kids’ lives have been positively impacted by our growth and we have also noticed that the growth we are experiencing is spreading to our extended family. The knowledge we are receiving is beautiful and has continued to bless us.”

“Our participation in MHSF reminded me of how important marriage is to my own sanctification and salvation as well as my spouse’s and family’s. Before MHSF I viewed marriage a little bit like a “second option” behind being a priest or religious, but going through the formation opened my eyes to marriage and family as a true vocation that can have a profound impact on the world around me. Being able to spend time with Jesus during adoration after each meeting was really helpful because I felt like I could process through what we learned or what I was struggling with with His help. MHSF allowed me to see my marriage and my family and my relationship with God as the most important responsibility which helped me understand and clarify my purpose in a deeper way.”

Starting a Chapter: What's Next?

If you've come this far in the guide, you might be interested in bringing MHSF to your community. That's great! We hope to be a helpful resource for you from this point forward.

MHSF chapters meet for two years. To firmly establish solidarity and community in the mission, every MHSF chapter begins in January of the calendar year. Most meetings will take place at a local parish in order for adoration & confession to be offered.

Prior to starting a new chapter, you'll need:

- 1) A **Facilitating Couple** (possibly two depending on amount of interest)
- 2) A **Priest** (possibly two or more)
- 3) **Families** in your area who may want to join the mission

A general timeline will look a lot like this:

First, the facilitating couple(s) and priest(s) will need to communicate with one another to confirm interest in and availability to initiate an MHSF Chapter and commit to monthly gatherings for two years.

Next, facilitating couple(s) and priest(s) must register for and participate in **MHSF Chapter Training**, a 1-day online immersive taking place in summer. The training will include:

- The need for modern post-marriage formation
- Current involvement and impact of MHSF
- Curriculum and content (the MHSF workbook, video and audio series, and other resources)
- Details of the two-year timeline and experiences in MHSF
- The "How To" details of beginning and maintaining an MHSF chapter (needs and requirements of participating couples, priests, hosting a discernment event for families, and the logistics of each month along the journey)

Please Note: MHSF Chapter Training is required for all couples and priests to initiate an MHSF Chapter. Details, including dates of upcoming training, will be communicated upon our receiving your MHSF Interest Form (attached to this document).

Finally, invite couples in your parish into prayer and discernment about joining the upcoming MHSF Chapter.

Starting an MHSF Chapter: A Step-by-Step Checklist

Use the checklist below to help guide you in the process of starting an MHSF Chapter in your community or parish. Begin your preparation *at least* 6 months before your chapter begins in January, allowing for training and implementation of MHSF.

Each step below is considered required, but is brought to light with the annual training that couples will undergo to start a chapter. This truly helps us ensure the best possible outcome for you!

Thank you for prayerfully considering joining us in this mission of creating and establishing a “new normal” in marriage & family.

Starting an MHSF Chapter:

- ☐ 1. Familiarize yourself with this handout
- ☐ 2. Fill out the “MHSF Interest” Form (attached to this packet) and email it to us at: mhsfonline@gmail.com. You may also request the form (electronically) via email.

After we get the needed information from you, expect a follow-up from us about the details of MHSF Chapter Training and best steps moving forward.

- ☐ 3. Complete MHSF Chapter Training
- ☐ 4. Host your own MHSF Discernment Event (details covered during training)
- ☐ 5. Begin your MHSF Chapter (January)
- ☐ 6. Continue quarterly check-ins throughout formation with MHSF Founders

MHSF Interest Form

Thank you for your continued discussion, prayers, and interest in building up and strengthening family life through this apostolate. Please fill out the form below to help us keep track of those who are hoping to stay connected for the possibility of starting or joining an MHSF chapter + the best ways we can help support you in the meantime.

Be assured of our prayers for you! Please pray for us.

Email: _____

Name: _____

Your Location (City, State, Country): _____

Your Parish/Church: _____

I am:

- ☐ Married
- ☐ Priest

I am interested in the following about MHSF (select all that apply):

- ☐ Starting an MHSF Chapter as a facilitating couple and/or priest
- ☐ MHSF New Chapter Training
- ☐ How to join an MHSF Chapter
- ☐ Building a strong community in our parish
- ☐ Access to resources that could be used in my community

Questions I have moving forward:

Prayer requests:

Other Resources

For general information:

- Visit our website at www.mhsfonline.org
- Sign up for our monthly newsletter on our website by selecting “Newsletter Sign Up”

For individuals with further questions:

- Contact us either by email at mhsfonline@gmail.com or our website: www.mhsfonline.org/contact

For priests with further questions:

- Contact us either by email at mhsfonline@gmail.com or our website: www.mhsfonline.org/contact
- (In the subject add ATTN: Fr. Holdren if you would like to talk with our chaplain, Fr. Ben Holdren.)



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