

Ministry focuses on building dads

As one who receives a number of emails every day, it's often hard to keep up. But then, there are some that catch my attention, purely on the facts presented.



Byron Dobson

Associate Editor

That was the case earlier this week when I read over an email from Pastor Gary Montgomery, founder of Living Stones International ministry who moved here in 2008. His letter contained some surprising statistics from a study by the 2009 Florida Vital Statistics Annual Report:

- 47 percent of all births in Leon County were to unwed mothers.

- 93 percent of that 47 percent were to girls 15 to 19 years old.

- In Gadsden County, unwed births to teenage girls reached 69 percent.

- In Jefferson County, unwed births to teenage girls reached 56 percent.

He noted that studies show that, in the United States, 24 million children live apart from their biological fathers — and 70 percent of black children are being raised in homes without fathers, compared with 30 percent of white

children. I thought about how lucky my brother and I were to have both parents around to help us develop.

In these pages, we've written editorials on the plight of broken families and the impact that has on our community, from young people battling issues ranging from self-esteem to joblessness, to the financial drain on social service agencies. In the Big Bend alone, studies show, it costs millions of dollars to provide for families without fathers.

I talked to Pastor Montgomery, and it's clear that addressing this issue is one of his passions. Montgomery and his wife, Josephine, are using what they've learned in their 39 years of marriage to counsel others about parenting skills and successful relationships.

In fact, Josephine Montgomery moved to Tallahassee from their base in Pensacola to become executive director of the Florida Commission on Marriage and Family, a Department of Children and Families program that later fell victim to budget cuts. Gary Montgomery retired in 2006 from a successful business career as president of Bitco USA Inc., a nationwide technology security company, and the two started Living Stones



SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

Josephine Montgomery, center, and her husband, Gary, behind her, stand with graduates of the Inside Out Dad Class at Wakulla Correctional Institution.

International. The ministry is based at 604 Eugene St., in a house donated by Wells Fargo Bank near Florida A&M University.

Since that time, Montgomery has been involved in counseling men at the Wakulla Correctional Institution and at other state prisons in life skills, parenting skills and what they need to know for a successful re-entry into society. More than 300 inmates have graduated from the family relationship courses.

But a major focus of Montgomery's time is now their Big Bend Fatherhood Initiative. The Montgomerys are now involved in the One Voice Initiative

created by Leon County Commissioner Nick Madrox and local attorney Chuck Hobbs to match black men with services in the community.

What Montgomery discovered is that several programs are available to help teenage mothers or those expecting with pre- and post-natal care and other opportunities, but few options are available to teach teenage boys and young adult men what they need to know about being a father. They're often lost, largely because many lived without a father in their own households.

"We teach them life is not over, but you do have to prepare for 18 years

of child support," Pastor Montgomery said. The teens learn about completing their education or getting a GED, how to apply for jobs, child support responsibilities, domestic violence and anger-management counseling and communicating with the mother of their child.

"We are the only program that offers a Teen Dad program for fathers," Montgomery said.

Linda Eason, a 16-year employee at the Department of Juvenile Justice, is assistant chief probation officer for the second circuit. She refers teenage boys to Montgomery's 10-week program. She's also come to know Mont-

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gomery and his wife, as all three are involved in the One Voice Initiative.

"He is the kind of man our kids need in their lives," Eason said. She recently referred a 17-year-old boy who is being held in the Leon County Jail. "I've called him many times. When we identify a teen dad, we send the name to him so he can make contact. He teaches them to 'man up.' I've been very impressed with him."

I know that writing on such issues as this often triggers a negative response from those who feel that people who have made bad choices in life are now financial burdens impacting our society. At the same time, introducing those in our community who are helping to stem the tide, one example at a time, helps in the education process.

— Contact Associate Editor Byron Dobson at bdobson@tallahassee.com or call him at (850) 599-2258. You also can post your comments about this column under the Opinion section on Tallahassee.com.