

Margaret Howard: Creighton Pioneer

By Sylvia Dorham

Patterns

Charts are full of them, and FertilityCare Practitioners (FCPs) are consumed with their identification.

On closer inspection, a pattern of character traits emerges in the pioneers of the Creighton Model System. There is a recognizable set of virtues exhibited by those who have made this version of natural family planning their life's purpose.

Strength. Determination. Humility. Passion. Joy. Tenacity. Flexibility.

Margaret Howard's life highlights another virtue. Generous response to God's call.

Called

Born at Fort Belvoir, an Army base in Virginia, Margaret grew up in Illinois. While pursuing her BA in theater from Illinois State University in Normal, she fell away from her faith, eloped with Chuck, and eventually settled in Duluth, Minnesota.

Before their family grew to include a son, James, Margaret used the Pill for birth control.

"I didn't like it," Margaret recalls. "I remember sitting in the doctor's office looking at a brochure for natural family planning. NFP in those days was calendar-rhythm, but I was intrigued by the information. Still, the doctor said the Pill, and that's what I did."

"After James, we were hoping for a girl. When he was fourteen-months-old, a friend suggested we try this Creighton Method because we'd be able to plan for a girl.

"So, we went to an Intro Session and started doing follow-ups. Six or eight months after we started charting, my Practitioner called me to say there was a grant available to send someone to Omaha to study to be a Practitioner.

"I said 'yes,' because I liked to travel. I had no idea what I was getting into!"

Margaret went to Omaha in 1981. Little did she know, her life was about to take a dramatic turn.

"The first day of the Practitioner program was the first time I heard Dr. Hilgers speak, and after that, there was no turning back," Margaret remembers. "I didn't know I was being called to something!"

But there was more to the change in Margaret's life than a call to teach the Creighton Model System.

"I was Catholic, but I fell away in college. It wasn't until I went to the Immersion Course in Omaha that my life changed — in every one of the SPICE components. It renewed my faith."

Back in Duluth, the newly-minted FCP sat down with her husband to figure out a plan to combat the liberalism and prevailing attitudes of the culture toward family and pregnancy. They wanted it to be something they could do together, so they decided to develop an NFP business.

Flexibility Training

The Howards welcomed their baby girl, Meghan, in July of 1982. After Margaret passed the Final Exam that November, they sold their house in Duluth and moved in with Margaret's parents in Illinois.

A businessman at heart, Chuck wanted efficiency in their new NFP business. Group follow-ups, he decided, were the way to achieve it. Margaret refused, citing the unlikelihood that couples would ask questions in a group setting. To resolve the conflict, the couple delved into additional study and research. Before long, they had attended the classes and teacher training for both the Couple to Couple League's Sympto-Thermal Method and the Billings Ovulation Method.

After a close look at all three methods, Chuck decided the solution for truly changing the culture was the Creighton Model. Together, the Howards sent inquiries to Catholic hospitals all over the northern United States about setting up an NFP program. "Any place it was pretty, and in the North, because we didn't want to live in the South," Margaret chuckled. "We had some interviews, but no leads."

About ten months after coming to live with Margaret's parents, the Howards received an offer from an organization in Houston, Texas.

"I don't want to," Margaret grumbled, unhappy at the prospect of living in the South, "but there are no other options." She agreed to go to Houston, but for no more than two years. They were there for seventeen. The organization they worked for was an umbrella group for all the major methods of natural family planning.

"Our training [in many NFP systems] was a huge benefit," Margaret said, "to work with all these different methodologies, to understand where the teachers were coming from and all the while teach the Creighton Model according to its standards. It felt like all seventeen years were training."

One of the first things the Board of Directors asked Margaret when she arrived in Houston was to train more Practitioners.

"I can't do that," she protested. "It doesn't work like that! I'm not an Educator, I'm a Practitioner!" Nevertheless, the Howards went door-to-door to several churches in Houston and within one week had raised \$10,000 in donations to fund her training as an Educator. On her way, she took five others to be trained as Practitioners. One of them was her husband, Chuck. It was 1983.

Moving Forward

Joseph, the Howard's third child, joined the family in 1988. Then, following the pattern of God's action in her life, Margaret Howard's next career move was precipitated by a phone call.

In 1998, a Sister in Lubbock, Texas, contacted Margaret. A doctor in the Medical Consultant program wanted to start a FertilityCare Center in a local hospital. Would they come? Ever eager to travel, and fifteen years beyond her intended stay in Houston, Margaret jumped at the chance.

In Lubbock, Margaret earned her MA in Organizational Management from Wayland Baptist University. The job in Lubbock lasted three years, and, Margaret notes, "I still get calls from the brochures we developed while we were there. I guess they're still found in churches."

Opposition

Throughout Margaret's story runs another theme, that of physical, spiritual, and technological opposition to the advancement of the Creighton Model System. The original grant which provided tuition for Margaret's FCP training was nothing short of a miracle.

"This grant that sent me from Duluth was a State grant. My Practitioner and her Director had gotten the form to fill out just prior to its due date. It had to be postmarked by the following Saturday at 4:00 PM. They had never written a grant [proposal] before, and neither of them knew how to type, but they had a friend who could do both."

The women arranged to meet on Saturday morning to fill out the paperwork, but the friend never showed up. The two of them sat down and did it anyway. They finished at 3:30 PM, put it in an envelope, and rushed to the Post Office, only to find the window had already closed. Neither

woman had any cash to buy the 36-cent stamp from the postage machine, so the two of them poured out their purses to dig for change. They managed to scrounge 32 cents. Without further recourse, they inserted the 32 cents into the coin slot and were stunned when the machine spat out 36 cents-worth of postage.

"It was that grant which made it possible for me to become a Practitioner," Margaret smiled. "From day one, God was in this."

But uncertainty plagued the Howards every step of their journey. Three weeks after moving to Houston, Hurricane Alicia hit, knocking out electricity for a week and ruining their freezer-full of carefully stocked stores.

"We weren't sure we'd made the right decision [coming to Houston], but it has been that roller coaster all the way through."

When the call came inviting the Howards to Omaha, they made what should have been a two-day trek from Lubbock, with an RV so plagued with difficulties that five days had passed before the exhausted family pulled into the Institute's hometown at one o'clock in the morning.

"It was pure hell to get there," says Margaret about the trip from Lubbock to Omaha.

"I don't think we're supposed to be here," worried Chuck when they arrived.

"No," Margaret replied. "This is just where we're supposed to be."

"It feels like many of the problems we experience are spiritual attacks," she says.

Trouble often erupts before or when "we are doing something really good," states Margaret. "Before and during Education Programs there are obstacles we have to overcome. Computers, electronics. There were several programs where the night before every single program, my basement flooded as I was packing."

At one program in Kentucky, Margaret and her students were inundated with an unpredicted snowstorm. For three days and nights, she and her students huddled together under the force of the weather.

In Nigeria, where Margaret describes the students as "desperately wanting to become Practitioners," she has seen a five-minute trip across a bridge to her program turn into a four-hour traffic ordeal. Another time, the students and faculty had to endure three days without running water. Once, doctors and nurses were studying by flashlight and kerosene lanterns because there was no electricity.

Her solution?

"We have to call on the Holy Spirit and keep praying to St. Michael the Archangel for protection. Use the virtues God has given us."

At the Institute

It was 1991 when Margaret Howard joined the faculty of the Pope Paul VI Institute. When the family moved to Omaha in the summer of 2001, she began working part-time in the Institute's Education Office. By June of the following year, she was the full-time Education Program Coordinator.

But Margaret missed the student interaction she had enjoyed as an Educator, and so in 2006, armed with her love of travel and decades of experience, she set out to offer independent Educational Programs all over the world. To date, her travels have taken her to students in Canada, Texas, Chicago, Fresno, New Orleans, Atlanta, Sydney, Australia, and Lagos, Nigeria.

Nor does she rely solely on physical travel to spread the Creighton Model System.

"I go whenever I'm called. The same is true with my practice as a Practitioner. I work with Institute referrals when needed." But in fact, her clients are primarily long distance, including one in Saudi Arabia and several in Europe who she teaches by phone or by Skype.

"I feel each and every Program is God's program. I am only his servant. He places the people and the programs in front of me," Margaret declares.

"This is about to explode!"

The first independent Educational Program Margaret conducted was in Arlington, Texas. In September, she will return to Texas to teach her 25th Program. Doctors from Latin America made up the majority of her students in New Orleans this January.

"I have never seen such passion, the instant understanding, the acceptance of NaProTechnology, the commitment to go forward that I see with Latin American doctors. NaPro has already exploded in Ireland and Poland, but I feel the future is going to be huge in the Latin American countries, Australia, and in Africa."

"In both Costa Rica and Mexico, they are fighting against the pressure to bring in [In-Vitro Fertilization]. NaProTechnology and CrMS are absolutely alternatives in building healthy families. IVF and abortion don't build healthy families. IVF creates life by destroying life."

"I think women and couples everywhere are desperately looking for help. They've been lied to for so long."

The Road Goes On

In spite of the myriad of troubles which threaten to subdue the Culture of Life, Margaret remains hopeful. Our priorities, she insists, must be God, and then family. "We have a responsibility to be sensitive first to the needs of families and then to society.

"With this approaching HHS mandate, we have a huge battle ahead. No Catholic hospital or Catholic-practicing doctor will be unscathed. We have to defend life and universally stand together as people of faith, but I see CrMS and NaPro as future solutions to so many issues. It's a way of building healthy families and healthy women, all the way from puberty to menopause and helping infertile couples."

In 2008, God called Margaret's husband home. Chuck, an FCP in his own right, had taught "a large number of clients. Teaching the CrMS and fighting the Culture of Death was something we shared and felt deeply about." But there is no question of her retiring.

"We all do what we have to do, and for those of us who have been in this for so many years, it is in our DNA."

"It's been an amazing journey. I feel protected. I feel as though I'm doing [God's] will, but the one thing I've learned is that it's probably best we don't know his plan. Sometimes, the doors he closes are disappointing, but later we find out all he wanted to know was if we'd say yes."

Margaret Margaret's career has been one of answering God's call. Unexpected calls, long-awaited calls, difficult calls. Through it, she adds the virtue of 'generous response' to the list of strengths exhibited by Creighton Pioneers.

"God calls each and every one of us," she insists. "The decision we each have to make is how we are going to respond."