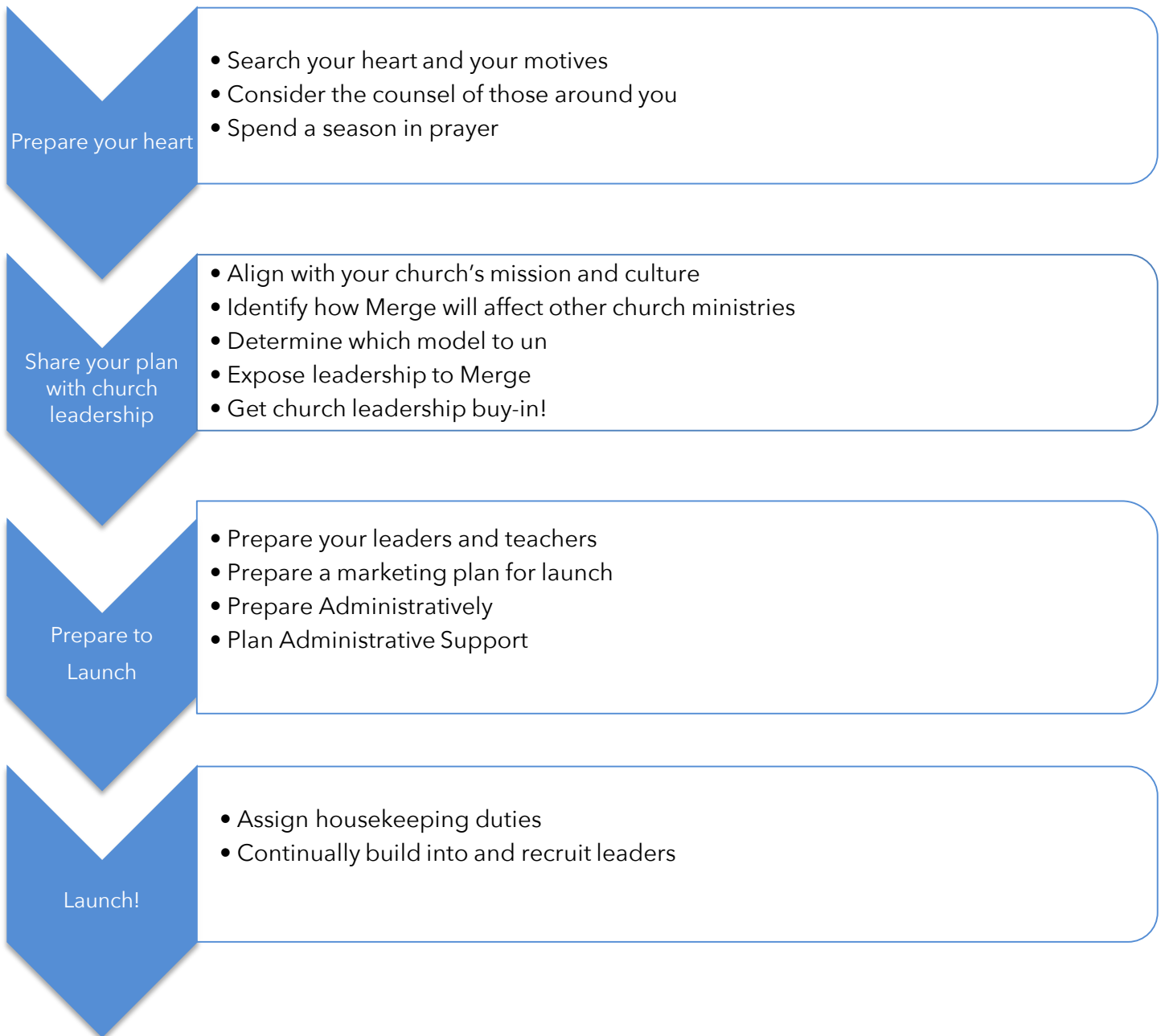


**Purpose of this document:** to provide church leaders with a framework for planning their Merge implementation and to help discern how to best launch Merge in their local church.

At a high level it is typically a 4-step process to launch Merge at your church:



Additional detail is provided on the pages following.



## Step 1:

### **PREPARE YOUR HEART**

1. Search your heart and your motives
  - Ensure this is the direction God intends for your church
  - Read Psalm 127:1, Proverbs 14:15
2. Consider the counsel of those around you
  - Assemble a small team of advisors who are willing to review your direction and provide you honest feedback
  - Ensure the collective counsel of this team supports this direction
  - Read Proverbs 12:15
3. Spend a season in prayer
  - Ask God to reveal anything about you and your own marriage that may hinder the mission
  - Read Psalm 139:23-24

## Step 2:

### **SHARE YOUR PLAN WITH CHURCH LEADERSHIP**

1. Align with your church's mission and culture
  - Share the ways in which Merge will support the mission
    - For example, if your church is focused on making disciples, highlight the discipleship aspect of Merge.
  - Assess your church culture and evaluate Merge's fit; churches where Merge is thriving share one or more of these characteristics:
    - Preparing and developing strong marriages is a foundational belief of the church and is passionately supported by senior leadership.
    - Leadership affirms the uniqueness of the marriage relationship and the significance of playing good offense in helping start marriages right.
    - Values like authenticity, integrity, openness, and sincerity define the culture.
    - There is a commitment to being intentionally involved with others in accountable, encouraging relationships, believing that life-change happens best in the context of relationships.



## 2. Identify how Merge will affect other church ministries

- Churches already doing premarried counseling often farm out couples to counselors or assign to staff only; Merge provides a way for staff to equip lay leaders for the job
- Counseling teams might see fewer couples as relationships are prepared in Merge
- Share the likely source of Merge leaders
- Decide who is in charge of Merge from a staff perspective (where Merge reports is less important than the passion of the person supporting it)
- Identify someone on staff who can help with administrative aspects of the ministry
- Think through all the other staff and ministries who could potentially be affected, and communicate, communicate, communicate the impact

## 3. Determine which model to run

- The Merge material can be used in several models:
  - **Mentoring:** A couple meets with a mentor couple or individual (i.e. officiating pastor) for up to 8 sessions to work through the material together. The mentor helps guide the couple through the curriculum. Typically, the couple will listen to each session's audio on their own, do the homework together as a couple and then meet with the mentor to discuss the content and the homework.
  - **Small Group:** One mentor couple leads a group of 3-6 couples through the materials. The mentor couple can either 'teach' through the content for up to 8 sessions together, or the engaged couples can listen to the audio on their own, complete the homework and then come together as a small group to discuss the content and homework and process their relationship.
  - **Weekend Class:** The weekend class is designed for couples where one or both of the individuals live out of town, or in churches who have a critical mass (greater than 6-8 couples) but may not have the margin or space to do an 8-week class. You can find the suggested schedule and resources needed to do the weekend class on the Merge resource page.
  - **8-week Class:** The material is best designed for this model. It includes a combination of large group teaching, small group discussion facilitated by a mentor couple and homework. Each session is two hours and includes both teaching and discussion. We suggest this model if you have more than 6-8 couples going through Merge at the same time.



- Estimate the number of couples that could be served by Merge
  - Class size will be the largest variable that will dictate which model you choose.
  - The variables below might also have an impact the model you choose, especially if you will use one of the Class models.
- Set the frequency that Merge will be offered
  - For the Mentoring and Small Group models, frequency is likely dictated by the availability of mentor couples
  - For the Class models, try to offer classes at times when there is likely high demand for premarital counseling.
  - A mix of models might be a good option.
    - At Watermark we offer five 8-week classes which captures the majority of couples, and three weekend classes for couples that travel or have odd work schedules.
    - Some churches might only have the resources to offer the class once or twice a year. In this case, consider supplementing with the Mentoring model to serve couples that show up between classes.
    - Offering fewer large classes is better than many smaller ones because larger classes have more energy and excitement, and provides more couples an opportunity to connect.
- Select a day of the week
  - Where might Merge fit in your normal church rhythm?
  - Are there days when childcare is already available?
  - If you are limited to less than 90 minutes of class time (e.g. Sunday morning) you will not have time to teach the material AND have time for small group discussion, so have the couples to listen to the audio on their own and then use your time together to discuss homework and the teaching.
- Childcare Needs
  - This is a need for many Merge leaders and some participant couples.
  - If provided, will you charge leaders who need childcare? Participants?
  - This also may limit your options. For instance, if Sunday morning is the only time you have a place for children, then you may be restricted to a Sunday morning time slot.
- Facility needs
  - If using the Class models, identify a Large Group room.
  - Find an additional room for nights when you will split up into men and women.



- ❑ Worship time or not
  - Watermark has chosen not to include worship in Merge, but some churches do include a worship set at the beginning of Merge and it works great.

## 4. Expose leadership to Merge

- ❑ Hold reference calls with other Merge churches (names and contact information available upon request)
- ❑ Take a site visit to a Merge church
- ❑ Commit to attending a Marriage Ministry Training Conference

## 5. Get church leadership buy-in!

- ❑ Formally request their blessing
- ❑ Apply to become a Merge church by emailing [merge@watermark.org](mailto:merge@watermark.org)
  - Sign and return the Watermark Resources Use Agreement (please note: churches unable to sign due to doctrinal differences will not be able to move forward with Merge)
  - Texas and Arkansas churches must provide a copy of their Sales Tax Exemption form



## Step 3:

### Prepare to Launch

[Note: not all steps below apply to all models; take what you need!]

#### 1. Prepare your leaders and teachers

- Rehearse Large Group teaching time, which includes establishing a feedback loop to improve speakers. Feedback is gold, especially if you can get a combination of positive and critical feedback.
  - A full set of outlines in Word format are available on the Merge resource page. Teachers should listen to the audio with the outline in front of them and modify to best fit their teaching style with their own personal stories/illustrations.
- Set a date for new leader training
  - All new leaders should be trained in how to lead in Merge. Training should include:
    - The WHY for why you are offering Merge
    - Expectations of leaders and what to expect from couples
    - How to handle the tough issues (i.e. breakups, cohabitation, premarital sex, marriage/divorce/remarriage)
    - The Merge resource page has resources that will be helpful as you train leaders, including a template for a handout, leader training audio from Watermark, and slides that can be used in training
- Set the Leader Meeting and class meeting times then refine as needed
  - The biggest request from leaders is that they need more small group time so try to build your schedule to allow at least 90 minutes of class time. At Watermark each session is two hours, which allows for an hour of teaching and an hour of small group discussion.
  - It is important that Leader Meetings are held, but find a time that works well for you. While the most consistent leader attendance occurs when you hold the meeting on the same night as Merge, other options might work for you. Some churches hold a Leader Meeting on a different night, usually because their leaders cannot arrive before class time due to their commutes. Others have opted to have a Leader Meeting every other week.
- Plan your Leader Meetings
  - The Leader Meeting is a **critical** time. Invest heavily in your leaders and really encourage them! The meeting can serve as a nice halftime between a busy work or parenting day and ministry leadership.



- Constantly reinforce with your leaders the need to have a scriptural basis for any instruction they provide to participants, otherwise the participants will develop an unhealthy dependence on your leaders rather than on God and His Word.
  - Leader Meetings usually bounce between a light teaching potentially related to the topic of the week and “table time” where the leaders discuss what is happening in their small groups and solicit ideas from their peers.
  - Depending on your meeting time, consider whether a meal should be served. It may serve your leaders well and lead to more consistent attendance! Some churches ask leaders for a nominal contribution to help offset the meal cost while others absorb it.
- Establish your group size
    - The optimal ratio is one mentor couple leading three or four participant couples.
    - A group with more than four participant couples will struggle to have adequate time for everyone to share.
    - A group with fewer than three participant couples runs the risk of being too small if anyone drops out. It is best to have a quorum present (3 couples) which can be a challenge in smaller groups during vacation periods or other heavy travel periods.
  - Miscellaneous Reminders
    - Establish a process for online signup for Merge couples. A sample of questions to ask during sign-up can be found on the Merge resource page. The answers to these questions will help you when it comes time to form small groups.
    - Prior to launch, ensure each leader has completed all the leader training either live at your church or on the Merge resource page in the training section.

## 2. Prepare a marketing plan for launch

- Determine if you will be doing a soft launch or a hard launch.
  - A hard launch would involve broadly publicizing Merge using the techniques below.
  - If you have concerns about not having enough leaders to handle all the participants that might respond to a hard launch marketing blitz, a soft launch may be preferable where you spread the word organically.
- Start feeding stories to the church through available outlets (pulpit, bulletin, web, staff meeting) to generate buzz
- Partner with church leadership to find the optimum way to announce Merge. For example, have a sermon series on marriage leading up to the launch, partnering with your singles/young adult ministry



- Build assets such as print pieces and video

### 3. Prepare administratively

- Print out all materials you will need in advance of Night One

### 4. Plan administrative support

- Determine what fee (if any) you will charge participants
  - The cost of the workbooks is usually passed to the participants.
  - There are several options for handling childcare cost. One option is to charge a flat fee for every couple regardless of whether they use childcare or not. This makes bookkeeping easier and may bless some young struggling couples. You can also charge only childcare users for the service, or you can decide to absorb the cost, or even pass the plate.
  - Fees are collected at the time the couple signs up for Merge.
  - If possible, do an online sign-up so that couples are financially invested before Merge even starts and so that you do not have to handle cash or checks the night Merge starts.
  - Depending on how much you charge, the fees may not typically cover the *entire* cost of Merge so you must decide how much your church will underwrite. For example, churches typically do not charge Merge leaders for childcare.
- Forecast the number of potential attendees and order workbooks three weeks prior to launch date. You will need one book for each participant and each leader (Note: Leaders should not share one book).
- Build a process for assembling groups
  - Start by deciding the factors you will use to group couples together.
    - At Watermark, we simply list our leader couples oldest to youngest and assign 3-4 participant couples based on age. The older leaders get the older participants and younger leaders get the younger participants.
    - We also take into consideration any grouping requests made by participants and leaders (for example, two participant couples may know each other and may request to be in the same group)
    - We also try not to give any one leader couple more than two cohabiting couples.
    - Assign each group a number. The leader couple and the participants at their table will have the same number. At Watermark, we print the group number on their nametags so the couple knows which table they are assigned to.





## Step 4:

### **LAUNCH!**

#### 1. Assign housekeeping duties

- Print out participant and leader nametags in advance of your Merge meeting time.
- Assign greeters to direct couples to the large group room, warmly welcome them upon arrival and ask them to take their name tag
- Place signs at strategic locations to direct folks to Merge
- Provide snacks to participants as they enter the room
- Provide info cards for each couple to fill out so that the leader has their contact information; the info card template can be found on the Merge resource page
- Let the leaders own stuff!

#### 2. Continually build into and recruit leaders

- The long-term success of Merge rises and falls on leadership so constantly be looking for good leaders
  - Many of your best leaders will come from couples who went through Merge themselves, although it is not a requirement for leaders to have gone through themselves.
  - Ask your current leaders to be on the lookout for couples in their group that might be future leaders. If a leader couple must miss a meeting, have that potential future leader take ownership of that meeting.
- If you identify a couple who you are not 100% confident is ready to lead a small group alone (e.g. they just completed Merge themselves), consider assigning them as co-leaders with an experienced couple
- Begin identifying leaders of leaders
  - For the leaders that have taken a true ownership mentality with Merge, establish them as coaches for a group of leaders.
  - Coaches and their leaders can sit together at Leader Meetings.
- While you certainly want Merge leaders to return and lead again, encourage them to take some time off and recharge to avoid burn-out.