

The First Weekends in the Caribbean and in Guyana, South America

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(Excerpted from 1980 January/February *Worldwide Family Spirit* magazine)

In 1976, Fr. Chuck Gallagher wrote to Fr. Michael Coutts, SJ and invited him to make a Worldwide Marriage Encounter Weekend. Fr. Mike thought the request was a bit strange since he was 3,000 miles from New York living in Georgetown, Guyana. What was even stranger was that he didn't even know Fr. Chuck! In the end, Fr. Mike went on his weekend in Nassau, NY. After that, his dream was to bring the weekend to Guyana.

According to Fr. Mike, bringing Worldwide Marriage Encounter to Guyana would be like bringing it to strife-torn Nicaragua at its worst. Even the accommodations would be difficult. Guyana only has 3 decent motels and they cost about \$90 a day. This is in a country where the average worker makes \$50 a week. According to Fr. Mike, most of the other Guyana hotels remind one Salvation Army or the YMCA it would be like running a weekend in a dormitory.

Another problem in Guyana is that so many people are emigrating to Canada, the United States, and England. Of the six couples that Fr. Mike listed to recruit on his weekend, five left the country and the sixth died suddenly. But as he says, "Recruiting is like hepatitis. Once you get it, you're hooked for life."

While Fr. Mike was working to organize the first Guyana weekend, a couple single-handedly put together the first Weekend in Trinidad. (It was the first Weekend ever given in the Caribbean and was presented November 17-19, 1978). The very moment those couples were hearing "Marriage in God's Plan" on Saturday afternoon, in Guyana, Jim Jones' henchmen were gunning down Senator Leo Ryan and the ghastly story of Jonestown began to unfold. While the couples on the Trinidad weekend were having dinner, 914 people in Jonestown died.

Two days later, Fr. Mike flew to *Trinidad* to get some tips on setting up his Guyana Weekend. That visit made the Guyana Weekend possible and Worldwide Marriage Encounter was born in *Guyana*.

In January, 1979, Guyana scheduled two Weekends. Fr. Mike helped out on both. One was held at Pox Guest House which has rooms for 17 couples or priests. As was usual, 19 couples were confirmed to make the Weekend with the assumption that there would be four no-shows so the team could be housed. Instead, 17 couples turned up. A very accepting team decided to all sleep together in the conference room. Then two more couples showed up. Fr. Mike had been trying to recruit them so they decided to make the Weekend without having signed up. With God's help two extra rooms were found (each had only one single bed. No questions were asked about how the two couples handled the sleeping arrangement). With this minor crisis just past, two priests walked in to join the Weekend. One introduced himself as Tony. Tony is the Archbishop of *Trinidad*. He

even brought along a priest to dialogue with. The team barely greeted these two new additions when two nuns walked in to join too. One of them happened to be the niece of the President of Trinidad and she was already working on recruiting him for a Weekend! To make a long, complicated story shorter, by a large miracle, rooms were found for all and one of the most unique weekends ever, began in Guyana.

So far, four priests have made the Weekend in Guyana and all are working to spread the encounter throughout the country. But it isn't easy, Guyana is torn with strife. Recently a Jesuit priest was stabbed to death. Killings have become common place. The Church in *Guyana* is struggling but it has a new ally in Worldwide Marriage Encounter.