

## The next generation tries church's arranged marriage

Edward Abendroth  
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*Edward Abendroth of Bowie and Aika Becker of Charlestown, W.Va., members of the Unification Church, celebrated their marriage vows March 23 during a mass marriage blessing in a stadium near Seoul, South Korea. They plan to get a marriage license and host a local wedding with friends and family, which will make them legally married in Maryland.*

Like many first-generation members of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, Bob and Diane Abendroth of Bowie didn't know each other when they were matched for an arranged marriage in the early 1980s.

They said they trusted Moon's judgment and shared a desire for long-term commitment based on similar values, rather than Hollywood-style romanticism.

Thirty years later, their son, Edward Abendroth, 23, of Bowie, had a similar desire. But he followed a different path, relying on the judgment of his parents in committing to Julia Aika Becker, 24, of Charles Town, W.Va.

The two were engaged in January, 2011, and returned from a mass marriage late last month in South Korea where Moon officiated. There were 3,600 other couples, including 2,500 couples marrying for the first time and 1,100 couples rededicating their marriages.

The young Bowie couple's path toward marriage reflects the evolution in practices within the 5 million-member church, which includes about 900 members in suburban Maryland and 25,000 nationwide.

"I would not call it an arranged marriage," said Edward Abendroth. "It was initiated by me, and I said to my parents, why don't we go in that direction."

Originally only Moon could match couples, but in 2001 he sanctioned parents to make the pairings.

"The whole emphasis is on family harmony and that especially parents be involved in the process because of their greater experience and good judgment and wisdom in the area of romance," said church member Robert Selle of Bowie.

Aika Becker's parents, Joachim and Umeno Becker of Charles Town, W.Va., also didn't know each other when they were matched by Moon and in 1982 blessed by him along with 2,075 other couples at New York's Madison Square Garden, Moon's first mass wedding in the U.S.

About three quarters of those couples are still married today, said the Rev. Phillip Schanker, director of the church's Blessed Life Department in New York, in an email.

That compares to nearly a 50 percent divorce rate for first marriages in the United States overall, said Robert Epstein, an adjunct professor at the Chicago School of Professional Psychologists, who studies arranged marriages.

Epstein said based on his own work and eight studies over 10 years of couples in countries such as India, Israel and Japan, where arranged marriages are more common than in the United States, "most arranged marriages do better."

However, Epstein acknowledged that in some cultures, there is more pressure to stay married than in the United States, where divorces are easier to obtain.

Epstein also said that "some [arranged marriages] are abusive and coercive, just as you find in love marriages."

Marriages within the Unification Church can also dissolve if one spouse decides to leave the church, said Rick Ross, executive director of the Rick A. Ross Institute in Trenton, N.J., which studies movements and cults.

Ross said he's received complaints from former Unification Church members who found it impossible to sustain their marriages. "People are just arbitrarily put together on the basis of church ideas and the leadership's ideas as opposed to a normal relationship," he said.

Edward Abendroth said when he approached his parents about helping him find a wife, he didn't initially think of Aika Becker. They had met through the church and become friends.

He knew he admired some of her qualities and concluded he would regret it if he didn't make his intentions known before she left for college in Hawaii.

So the Abendroths talked to the Beckers, who talked to their daughter, who in the meantime had developed feelings for Edward Abendroth.

"It's been a whole transition, and we've slowly fallen in love with each other," she said about going from being a friend to being a wife over the course of four years.

"I think it's a great way to do it," she said about involving parents. "You feel a lot more prepared than if you just fell into any kind of relationship."

Edward's mother, Diane Abendroth, said there is value in the couple and both sets of parents reaching a consensus about a marriage.

"If all six can say this is a good thing, then it's probably pretty reasonable," she said.