

# Natural Family Planning Activities in English and French Speaking North America

## A Brief History

The history of Natural Family Planning (NFP)<sup>1</sup> education in English and French speaking North America is rich and complex. Bound by the common desire to help married couples live God's gifts of human sexuality, conjugal love, and responsible parenthood, this history reveals the vision, talent, and dedication of mostly Catholic lay men and women, married and single, religious, and clergy. These people answered the call to help married couples understand and live with their fertility according to the divine plan. The following is a summary of key contributions.

### CANADA

The Sympto-Thermal Method (STM) appeared in Canada in the late 1950s.<sup>2</sup> The Billings Ovulation Method™ (BOM™)<sup>3</sup> arrived in the 1970s.

### SERENA<sup>4</sup>

SERENA is a national organization that specializes in STM education. SERENA's roots reach back to 1955 when Rita and Gilles Breault from Lachine Quebec learned the STM for their own needs. They quickly realized the importance of sharing this information with others. The

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<sup>1</sup>. "Natural Family Planning" or "NFP" is a common term used in Canada and the United States. "Fertility Awareness Based Methods" or "FABMs" is another term in current use. These terms indicate those natural methods that use periodic sexual abstinence as the means to avoid pregnancy. No devices or chemicals are used in NFP. The following text discusses only the history of the NFP providers. It does not cover Fertility Awareness Method (FAM) activities which more properly ought to be called "Combined Method" since FAM teachers include the use of barriers in their methodology.

<sup>2</sup>. Canadian NFP pioneer, Claude Lanctôt, MD, tells the story that soon after he graduated from medical school in 1957, he was introduced to the "budding couple-to-couple NFP movement in Montreal." Claude Lanctôt, "NFP PIONEERS: Introduction to the International Federation for Family Life Promotion," *NFP—Diocesan Activity Report 5* (Winter 1994): 8.

<sup>3</sup>. Long-time Billings teacher, Sue Fryer points to June and Peter McCabe as the first couple to teach the BOM™ in Canada and Isobel Graham as a significant Billings leader. Graham would receive a papal award for her work in promoting the BOM™ in Canada. These pioneers would eventually help to form WOOMB Canada. E-mail communication from Sue Fryer to Theresa Notare, 25 Sept. 2017.

<sup>4</sup>. The following text with edits is taken from the Serena website at <http://serena.ca/en/canada/index.php?lang=en>.

Breaults were joined by like-minded couples and medical experts, including Claude Lanctôt, MD and Suzanne Parenteau-Carreau, MD; the latter became the medical force behind SERENA.<sup>5</sup>

In 1962, these leaders created SERENA (from: Service de REGulation des NAissances or Service for Birth Regulation).<sup>6</sup> SERENA had about thirty teams just in Quebec province in 1962. They saw expansion to the nine additional provinces in 1972 and reached 500 teaching couples by 1983.<sup>7</sup> SERENA flourished due to: its mission—to build healthy marriages based on respect and trust; its educational approach—couple to couple; and its structure—teacher training at the local level, certification and accreditation at the national level.

### **The Billings Ovulation Method™ in Canada**

“The NFP Association (Toronto)”<sup>8</sup>

Rev. J. J. Buckley (Ontario) pioneered the Billings Ovulation Method™ (BOM™) education in Canada. He sent Francis Asselin, RN to New Orleans (USA) to learn the BOM™. On her return, Asselin began to offer instruction in September 1972 and supervised teacher training. Distinguishing herself, she was soon appointed to the Board of Directors of the World Organization of the Billings Ovulation Method™ (WOOMB).<sup>9</sup> During this same period, an introduction to the BOM™ was offered at St. Michael’s Cathedral Marriage Preparation, and teachers were trained in 1974.

The Council of Catholic Charities provided a grant to develop BOM™ services, and the teaching group incorporated as The Natural Family Planning Association in June 1978. The Association seeded other Billings Associations such as NFP Association-Ontario. They are affiliated with WOOMB International. Billings teachers can now be found throughout Canada.

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<sup>5</sup>. See <http://bc.serena.ca/who-we-are/our-team>.

<sup>6</sup>. See Claude A. Lanctôt, Mary Catherine Martin, Mary Shivanandan, (eds.) *Natural Family Planning, Development of National Programs*, (Washington, DC: IFFLP/FIDAF, 1984), p. 59.

<sup>7</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>. The following narrative with edits is taken from an e-mail from Rose Heron, Program Director, Billings Ovulation Method™, NFP Association, Canada to Theresa Notare, Assistant Director, NFP Program, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2 October 2017.

<sup>9</sup>. WOOMB was incorporated in California (USA) on January 23, 1978. American, Rev. Robert E. Deegan of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, played a role in WOOMB’s institutionalization. It changed in 2005 to form a new company called WOOMB International Ltd. It registered in Victoria, Australia on February 23, 2006. See [www.woombinternational.org/index.php/about-us/history-of-woombinternational-inc](http://www.woombinternational.org/index.php/about-us/history-of-woombinternational-inc).

## THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Like the Canadians, a diverse tapestry of NFP services developed in the United States. Here, key national efforts are discussed.

### The Catholic Bishops in the U.S.A.

Prior to 1968, the U.S. Catholic bishops were engaged on a national level in strengthening diocesan marriage ministry. They were also opposing the work of Planned Parenthood and government funding of contraception. This experience may account for the historic symposium co-sponsored by one of their offices of the National Catholic Welfare Conference (“NCWC”).<sup>10</sup> The International Symposium on Rhythm was convened in Washington, DC on October 20-22, 1964. It was co-sponsored by the NCWC’s Family Life Bureau and the National Federation of Catholic Physicians’ Guilds.<sup>11</sup>

In 1968, Pope Paul VI released *Humanae vitae* and the Catholic bishops of the United States acted decisively in support of it. In 1969, through the work of Cardinal John Wright (Pittsburgh), Cardinal Patrick O’Boyle (Washington, DC) and Bishop Gregory Grutka (Gary, Indiana), “the bishops voted to create [and fund] the Human Life Foundation (see below).”<sup>12</sup> This strategic decision fostered NFP scientific research.

In the wake of the Catholic Church’s 1980 Synod on the Family, the American bishops shifted their focus to the development of diocesan NFP ministry.<sup>13</sup> That work continues today, since the bishops understand NFP services as a ministry.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Now United States Conference of Catholic Bishops or “USCCB.”

<sup>11</sup> Now Catholic Medical Association.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Kay Williams, “Commentary on Kenneth D. Whitehead’s ‘Why the Church has had to fight the Contraception Mandate,’” *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 2013): 41.

<sup>13</sup> See also the article in this dictionary by Theresa Notare, “USA Catholic Diocesan NFP Ministry, A Brief History.”

<sup>14</sup> Administrative Committee, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Standards for Diocesan NFP Ministry*, (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1990; third edition, 2010), p. 1.

## National and International NFP Organizations

### “Human Life and NFP Foundation”<sup>15</sup>

Although the original Human Life Foundation (Foundation) was created by the U.S. Catholic Bishops in 1969, its scientific and educational roots lay in a meeting held five years earlier.<sup>16</sup> Among the participants was a young priest, Msgr. James T. McHugh (later “Bishop”), who would become a support to the Foundation. As staff to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB),<sup>17</sup> he also became the leading Catholic cleric in the diocesan NFP movement.

While director of the NCCB Family Life Bureau, McHugh encouraged the formation of the National Commission on Human Life, Reproduction, and Rhythm (1967). It was out of this Commission, and that of the Catholic Physicians Guild, that the Foundation was to draw its medical-scientific leadership.<sup>18</sup> Cardinal O’Boyle assisted in raising over a million dollars from the dioceses for the Foundation.

The Foundation’s mission was to answer *Humanae vitae*’s request for NFP scientific research. At the time, there was little interest from leaders in the government (the department of Health Education and Welfare or HEW) or staff of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). This would change due to the work of board member, Paul B. Cornely, MD.<sup>19</sup>

In 1972, the first international NFP symposium was held, at which Dr. Corfman coined the term “NFP” as official government terminology and the BOM™ was presented by Drs. John

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<sup>15</sup>. The following narrative with edits is by Larry Kane, “NFP PIONEERS: Human Life and NFP Foundation,” *NFP—Diocesan Activity Report* Vol. 5, No. 4 (Fall 1994): 6, 7. The Human Life Foundation eventually merged with Msgr. Seli’s group, the NFP Foundation to become the “Human Life and NFP Foundation.” Due to space constraints, that history is not discussed here.

<sup>16</sup>. The meeting was the International Symposium on Rhythm held in Washington, DC on October 20-22, 1964.

<sup>17</sup>. From 1919 to the 1960s, the U.S. Catholic bishops’ organization was called the “National Catholic Welfare Conference.” In 1966, the name changed to the “National Conference of Catholic Bishops.” In 2001 the name changed once more to the “United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.”

<sup>18</sup>. Of note is that among the founding board members was the Canadian, Claude A. Lanctôt, MD.

<sup>19</sup>. Dr. Cornely, son of an African American physician who broke Washington’s medical color bias a generation earlier, was head of the national organization of Black Physicians.

and Evelyn Billings.<sup>20</sup> Additional international efforts were taken up over the years. An important outgrowth of the Foundation's 1973 international meeting was the founding of the International Federation for Family Life Promotion (see below).

In the late 1970s, with the addition of U.S. federal funding and Mary Catherine Martin, PhD, RN, to the staff, the Foundation developed systematic teaching resources for both clients and NFP teachers. In addition, Foundation leaders produced many publications such as Rudolf F. Vollman's work, *The Menstrual Cycle* (1977), as well as popular books by Mary Shivanandan<sup>21</sup> and Nona Aguilar.<sup>22</sup> During this time, the Foundation was also brought into a consultancy role with the WHO. Dr. Mary Martin's curriculum provided the base for the development of NFP materials for international use published by WHO and the British Medical Association.

One of the final acts of the Foundation was to prepare recommendations for the Catholic bishops for the organization of a Church-related network of diocesan NFP delivery services. With their work completed, Foundation directors dissolved the corporation in May 1982.

“International Federation for Family Life Promotion (IFFLP)”<sup>23</sup>

As noted above, one of the fruits of the Foundation's 1973 international NFP meeting was the creation of the IFFLP under the leadership of Claude Lanctôt, MD. IFFLP held its first meeting in 1974. Representatives from thirteen countries attended. After three regional recruitment meetings (1976), a formal General Assembly of forty-two voting IFFLP members was held in Colombia in 1977.

IFFLP became a pluri-confessional non-governmental and non-profit membership association—pro-life and dedicated to the promotion of worldwide NFP services. It was organized into zones of neighboring nations. In the years before the internet, IFFLP was the primary means by which international NFP leaders could support each other. IFFLP was responsible for encouraging NFP research and program development. Unfortunately, due to a lack of funding, IFFLP legally dissolved in 1997 but some of the zones continue to thrive.

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<sup>20</sup> Convened at Airlie House, Warrenton, Virginia on January 23-26, 1972, the proceedings were published and distributed globally. See William A. Uricchio, (ed.) *Proceedings of a Research Conference on Natural Family Planning*, (Washington, DC: The Human Life Foundation, 1973).

<sup>21</sup> Mary Shivanandan, *Natural Sex* (New York: Rawson, Wade Publishers, Inc., 1979).

<sup>22</sup> Nona Aguilar, *The New, No-Pill, No-Risk Birth Control* (New York: Rawson Associates, 1986).

<sup>23</sup> Also called *Federación Internacional de Acción Familiar or FIDAF*. The following narrative with edits is taken from Claude Lanctôt, “NFP PIONEERS: Introduction to the International Federation for Family Life Promotion,” *NFP—Diocesan Activity Report* Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter 1994): 8, 9.

## National NFP Providers

As the work of the Human Life and NFP Foundation was gaining ground, in the 1970s many local leaders discovered NFP. When examining their stories, common themes emerge: usually one person or a married couple became concerned that other married couples needed to learn NFP to live God’s design for married love; they met and collaborated with NFP knowledgeable physicians and/or priests; and they provided both client and teacher education in a specific NFP method. Below is a brief sketch of their work.<sup>24</sup>

### “The Billings Ovulation Method™ Association-USA”<sup>25</sup>

The work of Drs. John and Evelyn Billings first became known in the U.S. in the 1960’s through the efforts of Msgr. Robert E. Deegan (Archdiocese of Los Angeles) who sponsored the American publication of their book *The Ovulation Method* in the late 1960s. It wasn’t until the early 1970s, however, that the BOM™ was taught to clients and teachers, first by Mercedes Wilson (see below) and then Hanna Klaus, MD (St. Louis University). The Billings teachers quickly organized themselves and incorporated as WOOMB-USA, affiliating with the Billings’ organization in Australia.

In 1990, BOM™ teachers created a national organization that provided regular access to continuing education and resource materials called the Billings Ovulation Method Association—USA (BOMA—USA). Today BOMA—USA continues to provide client and teacher education.

### “Couple to Couple League International”<sup>26</sup>

When John and Shelia Kippley began to build their family in the 1960s, John’s work as a catechist in a local Catholic parish would direct their joint mission in NFP education. John wanted to help his adult students who struggled to understand the Church’s teaching on the moral prohibition of contraception. Around the same time, Sheila began to research the benefits of breastfeeding. Sheila and John learned the STM from an article by Dr. Konald A. Prem, a professor at the University of Minnesota.

When the Kippleys moved to Minnesota, they met Dr. Prem. Soon they joined together to organize The Couple to Couple League. The curriculum included not only the STM but also

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<sup>24</sup> See their websites which include detailed information about their current services in “Sources” at the end of this article.

<sup>25</sup> This narrative with edits is taken from Hanna Klaus, “History of the Billings Ovulation Method in the United States,” *Natural Family Planning—Diocesan Activity Report*, 3 (Summer 1992): p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Except where noted, this narrative is taken from John F. Kippley, “NFP PIONEERS: CCL Formed in the Aftermath of *Humanae Vitae*,” *Natural Family Planning—Diocesan Activity Report* 4 (Spring 1993): 8, 9.

ecological breastfeeding.<sup>27</sup> The first CCL class was offered in fall 1971 at John and Sheila's home parish. From these modest beginnings, CCL saw rapid growth in the 1970s, including international expansion. In the 1980s, clergy and physician outreach programming was added. They also produced catechetical resources.

Two advancements occurred in 1997 with the launching of CCL's website and the development of Spanish language education materials. In 2008 there were significant revisions to both the client and teacher curricula. Although mostly positive, the revision had some unexpected consequences. The Kippleys did not agree with the changes and founded a new organization called *NFP and More* (see <http://nfpandmore.org>).

Today, CCL continues its two-fold mission of providing catechesis to married couples on Catholic teachings and education in the STM. CCL teachers can be found throughout the country.

#### “Family of the Americas Foundation”<sup>28</sup>

The Family of the Americas Foundation has an international spirit inherited from its founder Mercedes Wilson. Wilson first discovered NFP when she visited the BOM™ center in Australia. By the 1970s, she worked with the Billings and their staff to promote the BOM™.

Early in her work, Wilson wanted to simplify the teaching technique so that it could be easily understood by people of different cultures. She designed a simple client record-keeping system that departed from the standard Billings' approach while retaining essential information. In 1977, Wilson founded the Family of the Americas Foundation with a special interest in serving the global community.

Wilson developed FAF into an international organization, establishing offices in the U.S. and Guatemala. FAF offers both client and teacher education. FAF teachers can be found in over 100 countries, and their materials are published in several languages.

#### “The Marquette University College of Nursing - Institute for Natural Family Planning”<sup>29</sup>

The Marquette University College of Nursing–Institute for Natural Family Planning (INFP) was established in 1998 by professor Richard Fehring, PhD, RN. The purpose of the INFP is to provide professional education, research, and service in NFP and fertility health. The

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<sup>27</sup>. Ecological breastfeeding is “breastfeeding on demand.” Its nine principles are discussed in Sheila Kippley's *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing* (publisher unknown): 1974.

<sup>28</sup>. The following text is adapted from Theresa Notare, “NFP PIONEERS: The Story of the Family of The Americas,” *Natural Family Planning—Diocesan Activity Report 3* (Spring 1992): 1, 2.

<sup>29</sup>. The following narrative is based on an unpublished paper by Richard Fehring, PhD, RN, entitled “Short History of the Marquette University Institute of Natural Family Planning.”

INFP has three goals: to provide NFP teacher training to healthcare professionals; to conduct research in NFP; and to develop and offer innovative NFP services.

Dr. Fehring became interested in NFP in the 1980s. His work led to the development of a Sympto-Hormonal method he named the Marquette Method (MM). It integrates the use of an electronic hormonal fertility monitoring device (the Clearblue Easy Fertility Monitor – Unipath Diagnostics) along with traditional bio-markers of fertility (primarily that of cervical mucus; the basal body temperature can be added as well).

Fehring designed the MM to be used by any couple. The teacher training program, however, was designed only for healthcare professionals. By 2000, an online NFP teacher training program with two three-credit courses was offered through the College of Nursing at Marquette University. It is the only program of its kind in the U.S.

The MM was validated as a method of NFP in 2007 with the publication of its first efficacy study. This commitment to evidenced-based research has continued with multiple published studies.<sup>30</sup> In 2008, the INFP website was launched (<http://nfp.marquette.edu>). It features MM instruction for users with supportive resources and online support from nurses and physicians. The INFP works with more than 1,200 new women worldwide each year, answering fertility health related questions.

#### “Northwest Family Services”<sup>31</sup>

The beginning of Northwest Family Services can be traced to a study group in Oregon in the 1970s. This initial gathering brought together three people who would become co-founders: Mike and Rose Fuller and Rev. Richard Huneger.

The Fullers developed NFP education in their parish and created a parish team dedicated to NFP research and Church teaching. Fr. Huneger, who had studied with Dr. Joseph Roetzer, became a collaborator. In 1983, Northwest Natural Family Planning Services incorporated and became an affiliate of Portland’s Providence Hospital. It provided both client and teacher training in the STM and later expanded its services to include teen fertility education and formation in chastity. With further outreach to adolescents, young adults, and families in need, Northwest changed its name in 1990 to Northwest Family Services.

In the 2000s, Northwest continued to strengthen its NFP education with online courses for both clients and NFP teachers. Their staff also assisted people in need by adding such services as parenting workshops, job search assistance, and counseling resources.

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<sup>30</sup> Some of which can be viewed at [https://works.bepress.com/richard\\_fehring](https://works.bepress.com/richard_fehring).

<sup>31</sup> The following narrative is taken from Beth Wells, “NFP PIONEERS: The Story of Northwest Family Services,” *NFP—Diocesan Activity Report* 4 (Fall 1993): 3, 4.

“The Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction”<sup>32</sup>

In 1968, the challenging words of *Humanae vitae* to “men of science” (no. 24) struck a deep cord in Thomas Hilgers, MD, Dip. ABOG, ABLs, SRS, a Catholic gynecologist. Hilgers studied the BOM™ at the School of Medicine in St. Louis University. By 1976, he formed a research team, and in 1977, he joined the faculty at Creighton University. There he developed the Creighton Model (CrM). Perhaps Hilgers’ greatest contribution is the correlation of the woman’s reproductive hormones with her menstrual charts, which led to the development of NaProTECHNOLOGY™.

In 1985, Dr. Hilgers founded the Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction in Omaha. He began to offer a variety of programs including: a post-graduate reproductive medicine fellowship for obstetrician/gynecologists; a National Center for the Treatment of Reproductive Disorders; CrM NFP Education Programs; and a medical student study program. Ongoing research continues to be the foundation for all Institute programs.

Dr. Hilgers also saw the need to design a system of professional certification for CrM teachers and accreditation for CrM education centers. To this end, Dr. Hilgers established the American Academy of NFP Professionals (now American Academy of FertilityCare™ Professionals).

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### Conclusion

The above narrative covers key activities of major NFP efforts in both Canada and the United States. Due to the constraints of space, this story does not include discussion of the many individuals, small non-profit organizations, state and regional associations, or model diocesan NFP programs that also played a role. These silent witnesses and the above NFP pioneers ought to be memorialized for their generosity, dedication, and expertise, often given at great cost. They are the giants on which contemporary NFP services and ministry stand. They deserve our deepest gratitude.

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<sup>32</sup> This narrative is taken from the article by Judy Pittack, MS, CNFPE, Creighton Model NFP Education Program Coordinator, “NFP PIONEERS: The Story of the Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction,” *NFP—Diocesan Activity Report* 3 (Winter 1992): 2, 3.

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