
INVESTING IN PREMARITAL WORK BY THE REV. CHARLES QUALLS

The camera flashed. Rachel smiled while Devon kept his arm around her, his hand at the small of her back. In the midst of the formalities of their wedding reception, they felt an awakening that was so comfortable – gentle even – that its impact was almost seismic.

During that evening, easy smiles had replaced staged ones. Devon surprised the crowd, and Rachel, by singing to her in front of several hundred guests. Ignoring the lavishly catered meal, they glided from table to table visiting with family and friends. Both would relay later that they had a moment where satisfaction replaced anxiety. They were married and at ease with that reality. This comfort is striking in light of the inkling they had as to the hard work still ahead for them. In this couple, a healthy partnership was already being nurtured because of participation in pre-marital counseling.

This couple's story makes a strong case for the value of ministers investing in structured, multisession pre-marital counseling. Too often these days, ministers have forgone the time they once spent with couples in this ministry in favor of what they believe to be more pressing matters. Can those who marry couples rediscover the yearning to invest? And is it an investment that makes a difference?

What's the problem?

According to recent census information, 95 percent of weddings were still performed in churches. This places clergy squarely at the point of need. Yet, many church leaders express an unwillingness to do pre-marital counseling. Among the reasons cited for this decreased effort are:

- lack of confidence that the couples are taking marriage seriously enough to care
- lack of confidence in their own skills and background to offer substance in premarital work
- a perceived need to spend office time tending to

church matters of “more lasting importance”

- ignorance of support resources that can help to structure the pre-marital counseling sessions so that substantive, lasting help is provided.

The net result has been costly. Too few couples arrive at the altar with even a vaguely developed sense of what their married life ahead might involve. They try to live in the moment. Left to their own values, many couples prefer to plan for the “perfect” wedding day. They run up massive debt and spend emotional and personal energy chasing after some re-creation of the fantasy television or movie-style ceremony of their dreams. Yet, minister and couple alike watch the tension mount as the wedding day approaches.

One couples' story

Devon and Rachel met online. He has risen from an impoverished upbringing to life in a wildly successful entrepreneurial setting. She is a researcher working with chronic and infectious diseases. Both came from unstable home environments and bring fears along with their expectations about marriage. Their online relationship matured beyond its virtual roots, and a yearlong courtship (face-to-face) led to their engagement.

As they arrived for their first premarital session with the minister, they had only a vague idea of what lay ahead. They sensed they were not very well prepared to deal with the mysteries of life together. Rachel expressed a reticence about participating in anything that might resemble “self-help.” Both reported the sting of failed relationships in the past and a dormant fear that resulted from living with their own parents' marital woes. Still, they were confident that marriage was what they wanted above all else. So, how were their hopes for a fulfilling partnership to be reconciled with their trepidation and the mysteries about actually living together for a lifetime?

Premarital counseling with engaged couples offers

tremendous possibilities. Although a willing couple brings more to the sessions with which to work, even those required to participate can be enriched and learn new skills during the counseling. A structured, multisession approach gives counselor and couple a chance to progress through evaluation, skills and issues. These sessions provide objective, third-party help, and foster the building of trust among all parties as the wedding day approaches. Learning how to share insights, hopes and fears in this structure is a vital skill in the partnership negotiations that will continue throughout their life together.

Direction for pastors

How best can a pastor make good use of time with couples in pre-marital counseling? Story, perspective and skill are good goals for these sessions. These outcomes will be intermingled as each session progresses. Lead couples to tell the story of their love and help them find vocabulary for processing the needs and desires of their partnership. Guide them to discover some perspective about the homes they grew up in and their lives thus far. And, there is skill to effective communication and problem-solving, decision-making and conflict resolution. For example:

- How can they differ without damaging?
- What is a way to ask for what you need without demanding?
- What are the trade-offs of avoidance versus engaging the trickier issues of partnership?
- How can they understand the aspects of their upbringing that they will bring with them versus the patterns and biases they wish to leave behind?

A study shows that 10 percent of couples that go through an intentional marriage preparation process will either break their engagement or will seek professional counseling. This is not bad news.

Resources for premarital work

There are a variety of resources available to help ministers or leaders of premarital counseling. This is territory one does not have to enter unprepared. Here are a few suggestions:

- Draw from your own experiences.
- Take advantage of existing and proven resources.
- Engage in training or a certification process to use some of the relationship products designed to help couples.

For instance, the Prepare/Enrich analysis instrument from Life Innovations Inc. gives a solid set of data and interpretive material to back up the facilitator. The instrument itself generates a customized report for each couple in response to a questionnaire they fill out.

- Network with peer groups of ministers and counselors who work with couples; they can provide a rich exchange of insight and ideas.
- Become acquainted with mentor networks of experienced married couples, which can provide a multidimensional resource as they are paired with new couples.
- Consider marriage enrichment events, which provide space and insight for couples as well as for ministers or leaders.

Devon and Rachel

Devon and Rachel know enough now to understand some of what they don't understand. They realize that they don't have all the answers or skills they will need. They know they haven't come close to discovering all of their shortcomings. Yet they say these are the things they are most grateful to have learned in their pre-marriage work. They benefited from the insights gained. Even more, they were able to ward off some of the disillusionment that leads to many broken relationships. They know that their marriage won't be perfect. They know that the "fixer-upper" list they both had been keeping on the other isn't the most constructive item to bring to the altar.

Proof in the pudding? They've encouraged three other engaged couples to invest in the same pre-marital counseling process, and with the same minister, that they did. They've been enthusiastic about continuing to work at their marriage with a mentor couple. They're talking on deeper levels and empowering each other to grow into the people God created each to be. They are only one couple, but they are off on their journey together with a fair chance. That's time well spent.

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