Premarital Counseling by Clergy:
a Key Link Between Church and Family

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There are strong historical links between church and family. One of the most frequent manifestations of this link today is premarital counseling by clergy—the source of this experience for the majority of couples in the U.S. Clergy are the most frequently used source for all personal and family counseling in this country, and premarital counseling constitutes a major portion of the total counseling done by clergy. Limited research has been done concerning the role of clergy as premarital counselors. However, there is evidence that clergy tend to be relatively poorly prepared for their role as premarital counselors, either through their formal educational background or through other means. Recommendations are made for family life educators, clergy counselors trained in other disciplines, and researchers to contribute to ameliorating the present deficiencies in practice and in the literature, and a model is proposed of improving effectiveness of clergy as premarital counselors.

There are strong historical ties between the institutions of church and family. The Greek work oikos, which often is translated as home, actually encompassed not only the people of the family but also its land (an important symbol of lineage), work (production), and altar (representing religious rituals and values). It has been only in more recent times that the fragmentation of oikos has led to the separate institutions of family and church as we know them today (Everett & Everett, 1985).

For most people, there still are links between church and family. These may come in relatively indirect forms such as the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition on the values that are conveyed through the socialization process. They may come in much more concrete and direct forms, such as family participation in worship services. Rituals related to significant life events represent a church-family link for most members of our society, even those who do not have systematic contact with the church on an ongoing basis. One of the most nearly universal contacts is through the ritual of marriage, typically viewed as the beginning point of a family. In fact, Albrecht, Bahr, and Goodman (1983) reported that in 1977, almost 80% of first marriages and over 60% of remarriages were performed in religious ceremonies. Increasing attention is being given to the role of clergy, not just as officiators at the wedding, but as counselors in preparing the couple for the family it establishes. In 1983, Olson estimated that clergy were performing some type of premarital intervention with about two-thirds of couples who marry.

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The increasing attention to premarital counseling is consistent with the growing popularity of counseling in general as a preventative technique, designed to reduce the stresses that can build to a crisis situation. Spurred by concern about the high divorce rates in our society today, both religious and secular groups have applied this preventative perspective to marriage. This is evident from the marriage enrichment movement as well as the growing interest in premarital counseling. Indeed, most people, both laypersons and professionals, support the idea of premarital counseling for the engaged couple (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1987). However, little research has been done on the extent or effectiveness of premarital counseling programs.

A HISTORICAL LOOK AT PREMARITAL COUNSELING

In the past (as well as today), premarital counseling services were rendered by either physicians, clergy, or other mental health professionals. However, a shift in emphasis seems to have occurred around the middle of this century.

The early literature on premarital counseling was focused on the medical profession, with particular attention to the premarital physical examination (Matheson, cited in Stahmann & Hiebert, 1987). Because psychology was born out of the field of medicine and reflected its pathological perspective, premarital counseling by mental health professionals during the first half of this century was not based on a preventive model and thus was very different from what it is today. The primary contact with premarital couples came from clergy following the church's establishment of marriage as a sacrament in 1164. However, this contact tended to be in the form of other initiatory rites, emphasizing "the Christian nature of marriage, the place of religion in the home, and the rehearsal of the wedding rite" (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1987, p. 8).

After World War II, there was a shift in the field of psychology from individual and intrapsychic problems to interpersonal interactions, and the field of marriage and family therapy was born. Theoretical orientations began to shift, and attention was given to marital relationships per se. Seeing relationships as purposeful rather than accidental led to recognition that a bonding occurred prior to marriage and that this premarital relationship was important in setting the stage for the patterns of the marriage (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1987). Even so, premarital counseling remained an uncommon practice among mental health professionals through the 1960s. For example, in 1964, the professional members of the American Association for Marriage and Family Counselors reported performing very little formal premarital counseling (Rutledge, 1966).

The field of theology also experienced the impact of the developments that occurred within psychology, and some pioneering clergy initiated the movement of what is recognized today as pastoral counseling. With this expansion of the pastoral role, there seemed to be a shift away from an educational orientation toward a pathological stance (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1987). This created an entirely new dimension for the clergy. The role of the clergy as a screening agent became more pronounced, and the search for pathology became a primary focus in counseling. In premarital counseling, the task went beyond education concerning the Christian nature of marriage and the wedding rehearsal to include a thorough examination of the maturity and readiness of the couple for marriage (Stewart, 1970).
PREMARITAL COUNSELING TODAY

The various approaches to premarital counseling currently being used reflect the origins of this practice with diverse professional groups. Formats include both individual (a single couple with a therapist) and group counseling. Conceptual perspectives also are varied, although in general, researchers have found that the premarital counseling programs they studied were atheoretical (Bagarozzi & Bagarozzi, 1982; Bagarozzi & Rauer, 1981). With those that do appear to approach premarital counseling from a theoretical framework, there has been no systematic evidence of effectiveness. In fact, very few attempts have been reported to evaluate the effectiveness either of specific programs or premarital counseling in general.

Stahmann and Barclay-Cope (1977) reported that premarital counseling in contemporary U.S. society is provided by three main groups of professionals: physicians, clergy, and other mental health workers. Bagarozzi and Rauer (1981) found from their analysis of 13 premarital counseling programs that in addition to professionals from these three main groups, paraprofessionals (including trained graduate students and trained married couples) also provide counseling for premarital couples.

Little evidence is available about the source of premarital counseling for most couples. However, Schonick (1975) found that the majority of California couples who applied for marriage licenses had obtained premarital counseling from clergy. This is consistent with the reports of Albrecht et al. (1983) and Olson (1983), whose conclusions were based on less geographically limited populations.

Premarital Counseling by the Clergy

The methodologies used by clergy in premarital counseling often are influenced by the expectations of the particular denominations with which they are affiliated. Clergy who choose to follow the guardianship expectations of the church tend to be concerned primarily with whether or not the couple meets the expectations of the institution (church), thus placing the desires of the church above the desires of the couple. However, clergy who choose to follow the expectations of the pastoral counseling tradition tend to respect the desires of the couple and attempt to meet the couple where they are, both in terms of themselves as individuals and in terms of their relationship (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1987).

Premarital Counseling by Mental Health Professionals

In the past, the psychotherapeutic theoretical framework of mental health workers influenced the methodology of premarital counseling so that only individuals were seen. After the importance of relationships was acknowledged, the methodology was influenced more by an interactional and systemic theoretical perspective. This change in focus influenced counselors' motivation to practice premarital counseling and also motivated counselors to see premarital couples together (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1987).

Premarital Counseling by Physicians

Josimovich (1977) reported that couples go to physicians before marriage for two specific reasons: to receive birth control and to gain sexual information. Few physicians see the couple together, and they rarely are expected to become involved in interpsychic concerns of the couple.
CLERGY AS COUNSELORS

Clergy typically are viewed by the general public as the helping professionals most available to assist those experiencing personal or family stress. The majority of people perceive the clergy as a primary source of information and counseling during difficult and critical times (Orthner & Morley, 1986). One possible explanation is that the public see the clergy as being most easily accessible because of the traditional value of the strong supportive relationship between the church and family. Indeed, persons who receive counseling from the clergy have reported that they do not seek out the clergy for counseling because of their training but because they perceive the pastoral counselors genuinely care for people (Morris, 1965).

Gurin, Veroff, and Feld (1960) reported results of a 1957 cross-sectional survey of adult Americans to investigate how they dealt with personal problems. Only 14% of those surveyed reported having sought professional help. Of those people seeking help for a personal problem, 42% turned to clergy, 29% to nonpsychiatric physicians, 17% to psychiatrists and psychologists, and 10% to other mental health professionals. In 1976, the study was repeated by Veroff, Kulka, and Dorran (1981). The percentage of Americans seeking help with personal problems had increased to 26%. Of those people, 39% turned to clergy, 21% to nonpsychiatric physicians, 29% to psychiatrists and psychologists, and 20% to other mental health professionals.

The increase in use of mental health professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, and others) may reflect the establishment of a national network of community mental health centers with help available on an ability-to-pay basis. Even with the increased number of people seeking out mental health professionals, the clergy continue to be sought out by a considerably higher percentage of Americans than any other single helping profession. In fact, Veroff et al. (1976) reported that 1 out of 10 Americans said that they talked to clergy at one time or another about a personal problem.

Comparison Of Pastoral Counseling and General Counseling

A major commonality between pastoral counseling and other forms of counseling is the use of interactive and dynamic dialogue. In addition, there are several articles of faith that are assumed by practitioners of all forms of counseling. These are that each discipline/type of counseling (a) has faith in its own perspective, approach, and techniques; (b) has faith in the healing power of the counseling relationship; and (c) has faith that there is potential for growth and change and that this process is inherent in human nature (Hulme, 1981).

According to Hulme (1981), pastoral counseling is unique in that there is a specific faith, in addition to and that transcends the faiths common to other types of counseling. This faith is based on the relationship one has with God and how this relationship can affirm one's identity as a child of God. The pastoral counselor focuses, therefore, on the impact that God has on the process of living, helping the client to see relationships in a God-in-relation-to-persons framework. Jordon (1986) has described an approach called "listening perspectives" to understand how the client views the world, including how the person feels valued and who or what is the person's ultimate authority; the view of God is seen as the central issue, and distortions of God or self are uncovered and revised. Such an integration of psychology and theology requires the pastoral counselor to have not only a knowledge of general counseling but also knowledge of the basic literature of the religion. The pastoral counselor also is expected to have detailed knowledge concerning historical and contemporary information about the various forms of religious culture.
A related role that pastoral counselors play is one of enabling persons to face problems centered around ethical dilemmas, religious conflicts, value distortions, and the ultimate meaning of life and death. Pastoral counselors operate from the philosophy that a central objective in counseling and caring is spiritual growth (Clinebell, 1984). Because of their unique expertise in theology, pastoral counselors theoretically are able to meet this need in persons that other helping professionals cannot meet. Ironically, however, many secular counselors find themselves dealing with people's spirituality and belief systems and often perceive a lack of training in counseling from a theological perspective; at the same time, some pastors tend to operate from either a purely religious perspective or a purely psychological one, without integrating these disciplines (Jordon, 1986).

Another distinction between pastoral counselors and other counselors is that clergy often are required to take a public stand on controversial issues (Oates, 1974). Therefore, they are not allowed the luxury of appearing neutral on ethical issues, as can other counselors who typically are not expected to become involved publicly.

*Aspects of Counseling by the Clergy*

Clergy tend to see counseling as an important aspect of their role. In fact, McCann (cited in Morris, 1965) reported from a survey of 291 participants representing 14 Protestant denominations and 24 states that counseling was perceived by clergy as second only to preaching in contributing to the emotional and spiritual growth of their church community—more important than pastoral visiting, worship, church fellowship, and teaching.

There are various ways of categorizing types of pastoral counseling. Givens (1976) reported marriage counseling to be the most frequent type of counseling service rendered by the clergy, followed by premarital counseling; crisis intervention and personal counseling both were less frequent. McCann (cited in Morris, 1965) reported that the relative frequency of types of problems brought to clergy respondents in his study were (in order of decreasing frequency) marriage and family concerns, psychological distress, youth behavior, illness and aging, alcoholism, religious and spiritual issues, and vocational/occupational problems.

According to Oates (1974), much of the pastoral counselor's work is preventive, such as premarital counseling, newlywed counseling, and marriage counseling, all of which have as a goal the prevention of divorce. Crisis counseling—such as counseling families of the terminally ill, of persons facing surgery, of persons involved in life transitions, and of families experiencing parent-child conflicts—also comprises a large portion of pastoral counseling involvement.

*Preparation of Clergy as Counselors*

Because the clergy are a primary source of information and counseling for the general public, it is important to consider their clinical background and preparation for counseling. In general, this preparation appears to be limited. In Orthner's (1986) survey of involvement in all areas of counseling by United Methodist ministers, 61% of the respondents reported personal knowledge to be their primary source of knowledge in counseling sessions. Most clergy also reported that seminary had not provided much information that was helpful in pastoral counseling. Hill (1968) reported from his national sample of Methodist ministers that 24% reported receiving no training in counseling during their formal education; furthermore, 64% reported that the training they received consisted of one or more courses in pastoral counseling, pastoral...
psychology, pastoral care, marriage counseling, or pastoral theology. Moreover, only 10% reported receiving any actual counseling experience under clinical supervision. Some training in counseling after completion of their formal education was reported by 50% of the respondents, but for most this was short-term training. Finally, Hill (1968) reported that only 24% of the respondents indicated having had personal counseling experiences of their own, though this is a standard requirement or practice for training of most other mental health professionals.

Logically, confidence of clergy as counselors appears to be related to their preparation for that role. McCann (cited in Morris, 1965) found that the clergy he surveyed (representing a variety of Protestant denominations) felt inadequate in the counseling role, and they cited two primary reasons: (a) feeling inadequate and incapable as persons and (b) lack of training and experience in the field of counseling. However, Nameche (cited in Morris, 1965), who also surveyed clergy from several Protestant denominations, found that only about 7% of clergy were spending as much as one-fourth of their time delivering counseling services—and these were the ones who had received the most training in counseling and who tended to be theologically moderate.

More recent results from Orthner’s (1986) study of United Methodist clergy reflect a similar relationship between confidence and competence. The clergy in this study reported feelings of inadequacy in the pastoral counseling role, although (or perhaps because) over 90% conducted such counseling and almost half perceived a need for more counseling for parishioners. Again, the more theologically conservative clergy reported the greatest concern about the role of pastoral counseling in the church.

CLERGY AS PREMARITAL COUNSELORS

The role of clergy as premarital counselors is significant both in frequency of performance and potential implications. In its conceptualization, the emphasis has shifted from just planning the wedding ceremony and the couple’s religious practices to include realistic and effective preparation of the couple for a marriage relationship, thus preventing or minimizing future marital distress. Despite its recognized significance, there is little information in the literature about this role as distinguished from other aspects of premarital counseling.

Preparation of Clergy as Premarital Counselors

Few seminaries or universities offer graduate courses on premarital counseling (Schumm & Denton, 1979). Individuals who have received training in marriage counseling or family life education usually have not received training focused on premarital counseling as such because of the belief that knowledge in the former two areas can be generalized easily to the premarital situation.

Two decades ago, 53% of the Methodist ministers in Hill’s (1968) study said there was not emphasis on premarital counseling in any of their training. The situation today seems to have changed very little (Orthner & Morley, 1986; Weddle & Cunningham, 1986, 1987). In their survey of premarital counseling by clergy in seven major denominations, Weddle and Cunningham (1986) found that clergy used personal experience as the primary means by which they had learned about both counseling theory and techniques and also about marriage and family theories and research—more than from books and articles, from college seminary courses, or from continuing education.
Weddle and Cunningham (1987) also found that clergy in their study gave moderate importance to their role as premarital counselors and reported feeling moderately prepared for that role. However, on a test of empirically based information about marriage and family, they did not perform well, but rather they tended to accept many myths about families. Furthermore, they ascribed somewhat limited importance to knowledge about theory and research in marriage and family as far as the premarital counseling role is concerned. Even less importance was ascribed to knowledge of counseling theories and techniques, with primary importance being given to knowledge of scriptures and theology.

Approaches to Premarital Counseling by Clergy

A commonly accepted perspective for viewing premarital counseling is within the framework of the church's family life program, so that it is an ongoing component of the church and so persons are exposed consistently to the teachings. Schumm and Denton (1979) noted that clergy consistently report the use of family life education literature as an essential component of their premarital counseling programs.

Jordon (1986) reported that many pastoral counselors focus on family of origin issues. Because conflict in marriage can grow out of different family histories, intensive work is required to explore both individuals' family histories and patterns. However, Weddle and Cunningham (1986) found strong contrasts between the purposes of premarital counseling as perceived by clergy and what they actually did in premarital counseling. In order of decreasing importance, clergy reported their perceptions of the purposes as self-disclosure, education, enrichment, identification of clergy as a resource, moral teaching, screening, rehearsal for the wedding, and evangelism. However, the areas to which they actually gave the most attention were expectations of marriage, arrangements for the wedding, expectations of the partner as spouse, and religious faith and practices; least attention was given to specific attitudes and areas of behavior (gambling, drinking, and smoking; extramarital sex; birth control; and cohabitation).

Many clergy use guides or evaluation forms in premarital counseling as a means of spurring conversation about various areas and topics in the couple's life and to alert the couple to areas of potential conflict. Many clergy also use premarital questionnaires as a counseling tool (Smith & Smith, 1981). When asked to report their use of various resources in premarital counseling, however, clergy identified scriptures as the most frequently used resource, followed (in order of decreasing frequency) by published religious materials, published secular materials, and standardized assessment instruments (Weddle & Cunningham, 1986).

A major constraint in premarital counseling by clergy is the amount of advance notice they receive from engaged couples. In Hill's (1968) study, 73% of the clergy said a major frustration for them in premarital counseling was that couples came to them too close to their wedding date. The majority of the clergy conducted three or fewer sessions with engaged couples but noted this was because couples did not allow more time rather than their own perception of the importance of premarital counseling. This pattern appears to have persisted, as Weddle and Cunningham (1986) also found that clergy reported an average of about three premarital counseling sessions with an average length of slightly more than an hour.
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Premarital counseling by clergy remains a significant link in the connection between the family and the church. Despite its significance, only limited attention has been given to this role by professionals (through education or research) or by engaged couples. Clergy receive limited preparation in academic knowledge of counseling theories and techniques or theory and research related to marriage and family, much less to the specific topic of premarital counseling. They receive even less supervised clinical experience to facilitate skill development and refinement, and most do not receive personal counseling to help them overcome their perceived feelings of inadequacy as individuals.

Recommendations for Professional Groups

There are many needs to which family life educators can respond. Development of programs to prepare clergy for the premarital counseling role appears to be a critical need; work with seminaries and other institutions through which clergy receive their education is an avenue that needs to be explored much further. Development of theoretically based programs of premarital counseling and of materials to use with those programs is an obvious area of need. At the other end of the continuum, there is a need to educate potential consumers of premarital counseling about its potential value and about the importance of contacting clergy well in advance of the proposed wedding date. Clergy also can be helped to develop confidence as well as competence in their premarital counseling role.

Clergy obviously have an important role to play in improving their own effectiveness as premarital counselors. Recognizing the importance of this role, they can enrich their own background to ameliorate specific deficiencies. For example, formal and nonformal courses and other educational programs can be identified--and perhaps requested through existing continuing education mechanisms. Clinical supervision can be sought from trained pastoral counselors/counselor educators. Personal counseling can be undertaken as a means of enhancing personal and professional effectiveness and building confidence. They can develop personal standards for conduct of premarital counseling that help ameliorate some of the present constraints, such as amount of time required for premarital counseling. Finally, feedback can be given to seminaries and other educational institutions and church organizations about the importance of building adequate preparation into preservice and inservice education.

Counselors trained in other disciplines also can be helpful in remedying some of the limitations of the existing situation. Cooperative efforts in premarital counseling might be established, either through church or other programs. Recognition of the complementary roles they might play could enhance the quality of services offered by both.

Researchers, of course, also have a myriad of opportunities. There is very limited information about most aspects of premarital counseling by clergy, including specific areas of clergy preparation and effectiveness of specific programs and approaches. Only if such information becomes available will it be possible to provide the basis for optimal performance of clergy in their premarital counseling role.

Development of a Model for Premarital Counseling

One suggestion for helping clergy who administer premarital counseling services is the development of a model for premarital counseling. This could be presented in the form of a model for counseling, a relationship model, a life timeline, and other models that can be used as a reference in their work. The model could be used by clergy to help couples understand the importance of premarital counseling and its impact on their relationship.


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form of modules that build on one another in the exploration of the couples’ relationships, or the modules could be structured in various combinations to meet the time restraints under which so many clergy are forced to work. Accompanying these “weekly modules” could be some concise reading material designed to dispel common myths of family and marriage. This would be extremely helpful to those clergy who lack background on marriage and who, for whatever reasons, generally do not gain updated information through continuing education and/or professional reading. Various plans could be included, guiding clergy through the premarital counseling process, depending on the number of sessions available for counseling the couple. Such a procedure could allow even the minimum amount of premarital counseling to involve more than just planning for the wedding ceremony.

Churches also might offer a premarital counseling group several times during the year, within which couples have opportunity to explore their relationships in depth before meeting individually with clergy to make wedding plans. In areas of lower population density, an ecumenical approach might be used to organize such a program. Because clergy are generally so busy with other aspects of their profession, premarital counseling modules could be an efficient way to offer premarital counseling services. Goals and exercises could be laid out in these modules, and clergy would be able to facilitate the process rather than having to develop the background for preparing their own programs. An example of the foundation that might be used is the work of Smith and Smith (1981), who have devised a manual for clergy about marital relationships, providing an abundance of facts and exercises to be presented to couples as a way of exploring their relationships.

Development of a model of premarital counseling could be a collaborative effort among family life educators, researchers, and clergy. Educators and researchers could provide the theoretical and empirical information about marriage that could help clergy feel more confident in administering a program to couples. Clergy could provide the theological perspective as well as guidance in the pragmatic considerations of premarital counseling within a church context. Then, the clergy could focus their time and energy in presenting premarital counseling to the counseling and/or screening process.

Follow-up modules also could be included so that newlywed couples could continue receiving support as the realization of the marriage begins to be formulated. Eventually, couples could be encouraged to get involved in a marriage enrichment group so that their relationships would grow rather than just be maintained.

Clearly, it would be helpful for family life educators, researchers, and clergy to work together in planning well-rounded premarital counseling programs that contain accurate information for couples. Developing evaluation techniques also is needed so the effectiveness of programs can be determined. The strategy of “early intervention,” which has become so widely accepted in ensuring the optimal development of young children, has equal applicability to the development of new marriages.

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The literature on the role of the pastor in premarital counseling is extensive. Many pastors maintain that their job is to foster the spiritual growth of their parishioners, and some are actively involved in premarital counseling. As suggested by Smith and Smith, the role of the clergy in premarital counseling is to focus on the spiritual and emotional aspects of the relationship.

Although the role of the clergy in marriage counseling is well-documented, little published research has been conducted specifically on the role of the clergy in premarital counseling. The paucity of research in this area is unfortunate, as it is important to understand the role of the clergy in premarital counseling and how it compares to that of other professionals in the field.

In summary, the role of the clergy in premarital counseling is a complex and multifaceted one. The clergy can provide a unique perspective and a valuable resource in this area, and further research is needed to fully understand the role of the clergy in premarital counseling.

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