



## BRIDGES Inventory: An aid to marital bonding and stability

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**T**he most recent research on religion in America, U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, reports that the U.S. population remains highly religious but is increasingly diverse (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). It also notes that, among people who are married, nearly four in 10, or 37%, are married to a spouse with a different religious affiliation (Pew Forum, 2008). The significance of religion coupled with the fact that more than one-third of marriages involve spouses with different religious affiliations suggests the need for marriage education resources that focus specifically on the religious dimension of the marital relationship.

The most common pastoral response to the changing and critical situation of marriage in the United States is marriage education, which typically includes a premarital inventory, such as PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, at [www.prepinc.com](http://www.prepinc.com)) or FOCCUS (Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding & Study, at [www.focusinc.com](http://www.focusinc.com)), both of which are widely used and highly respected instruments. Research shows that couples who use such an inventory as part of their marriage preparation report increased relationship satisfaction and commitment, more positive readiness for marriage, increased awareness of individual and couple strengths and risk factors, and improved couple communication, and conclude they may have prevented future relationship problems.

A national study of interchurch mar-

riage conducted by the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University (1999), found that religion could be either a cohesive or bonding force in a relationship when the partners create a joint religious life, or a divisive force when the partners have not dealt with religious differences. In the latter case, there is a potential danger to both the stability of and the satisfaction with the marital relationship. This finding suggested a need for a resource that helps couples, both before and during marriage, to create a joint religious or spiritual life.

To meet this need, the Center for Marriage and Family created BRIDGES (Building Relationship Interaction, Decision-making, Growth and Enrichment through Spirituality), a relationship inventory that enables couples to identify religious values and differences, to explore ways of dealing with and resolving them, and to develop a joint religious life. The most widely used relationship inventories address religion but only in a general way. BRIDGES, on the other hand, is an inventory that addresses only and more specifically the religious dimension of a couple's relationship.

Research has shown consistently that religion makes a difference in marital stability and quality. The institutions of religion and family are closely related and generally mutually supportive because they both promote the values of marriage and family.

It follows that relationships with common religious values are more likely to rebound more successfully in times of crisis. The way each person in a couple lives out his and her religious value system affects

the relationship. Positively, religion can provide a source of shared hope and a basis for shared decision-making or negatively, religion can be a source of dissatisfaction or conflict.

BRIDGES helps couples identify what they have in common in terms of religious values, and what they want and hope for as a couple. A second step is to explore relevant factors about each other's background, attitudes and support systems. A third step is to evaluate individual and shared ways of dealing with strengths and challenges related to religious values.

*Religious Differences.* How couples handle differences can be a mark of how committed they are to one another and to their relationship, and commitment can be a predictor of the quality of the relationship. (Mullins, Brackett, Bogie, & Pruett, 2004; Myers, 2006). Certain topics, such as religion, can be difficult to discuss because each person has feelings and beliefs which, if challenged, can lead to vulnerability, defensiveness, and a sense of being discounted or overpowered by the other.

Developing productive ways to handle religious differences and viewing them as strengths in a relationship is a process that can build one of the most satisfying and stabilizing intimacies of a relationship. Fear of religious conflict and the unwise handling of religious differences can inhibit a couple's discussions and prevent building connection across their differences.

*Shared Religious Activity.* A number of researchers have shown that shared religious activity can enhance relational quality and stability. In order for religion to work as a bonding force in their relationship, couples do not need to believe all the same things or share all the same personal religious practices. They do, however, need to develop some kind of shared religious activity that can provide mutual attitudes, respect and understanding. Attending worship services together, discovering their own forms of shared prayer or worship, participating together in volunteer or service work, or placing their shared decision-making

within the context of their religious lives are examples.

### USING BRIDGES

Building a joint religious life is a task for all couples, even for those who share the same religious affiliation.

The BRIDGES inventory invites each partner to respond to religious issues such as the priority of religion; religious intimacy; religious attitudes, practices and worship; religious commonalities and differences, the religious upbringing of children; a sense of right and wrong; and the role of religion in a couple's social life. After comparing their individual responses, couples are led through exercises that generate discussion about religion that can lead to greater marital bonding, stability and satisfaction.

### REFERENCES

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