



## Application to the church

by Cindy Harr

Clergy invest significant time and effort in crisis intervention with couples who face relationship difficulties. They are confronted with the guilt, deep pain, and confusion felt by those who seek their counsel when a marriage is miserable or when divorce occurs. Faith leaders are well aware that when a family is fragmented, it often creates waves of discouragement and disillusionment that impact other marriages, families, the church, and society as a whole. However, clergy often face significant challenges when attempting to integrate programs such as premarital and marriage education into their ministry and the life of the church.

Wilmoth and Fournier found in their research study that several factors, real or perceived, often prevent or negatively impact the ability of clergy to provide these services. Premarital couples may be focused on the wedding ceremony or may not see premarital education as necessary or valuable preparation for the marriage itself. Clergy often feel unprepared for the task of premarital and marital education due to denominational factors such as the lack of seminary training in this area and the lack of resources. They may experience role conflict when pressured by their congregations to focus on administrative tasks and sermon preparation rather than pastoral care. Clergy seem to be especially influenced by other clergy in the community who demonstrate negative attitudes related to the effectiveness of premarital and marriage education. They may also be facing difficulties in their own marriage and family which inhibit their ability to minister effectively.

The following practical suggestions may assist in overcoming these constraints to premarital and marriage education.

**MARRIAGE EDUCATION** is a process that begins long before premarital sessions with the clergy and continues after the wedding. Parents and other influential individuals in the life of the couple make positive or negative contributions to the individual's readiness for marriage. Their lifestyle and words will have significant impact and they assist in creating behavioral patterns that will continue on into the marriage relationship. Premarital and marriage education should be recognized as a shared responsibility of family, friends, and faith community rather than the individual duty of the clergy.

**MARRIAGE EDUCATION** should be a primary focus of the entire church body with teaching integrated throughout the life span using a variety of venues and methods to promote healthy marriages and families. Healthy marriage support and preparation must be appropriate to age and each developmental stage of life with planned growth in areas such as relationship skills, conflict management, forgiveness, and reconciliation. There should be an emphasis on life modeling and mentoring. The initial years of marriage are often the most challenging. However, premarital education or counseling sessions with the clergy should be just one aspect of a holistic approach by congregations.

**CLERGY OFTEN DO NOT RECEIVE THE TRAINING** and resources they need for ministry in this area. Denominations are key players in leading out in making premarital and marriage education a key focus both in seminary training and in congregational literature. There are many available curricula for use in premarital and marriage education that are both scriptural and research based. Teaching these programs in the seminary

and providing opportunities for continued education would allow clergy to become certified in their use while increasing their confidence and skills in presenting the material.

Clergy who do not feel qualified or gifted in this area should be aware of and recommend the use of community-based marriage education programs in combination with spiritual counseling. Some clergy may find it wise to use trusted professionals or lay persons within the church or community to develop this ministry. Faith leaders should encourage each other in a non-judgmental manner in their attempts to reach out to couples and to families by making it “safe” to discuss areas of needed growth while stressing the importance of this ministry.

**MARRIAGE EDUCATION** counseling may be avoided by clergy who are experiencing family and marital difficulties. They may feel hypocritical when discussing with authority principles they are unable to incorporate into their life. This requires continued self examination and a personal commitment to making the home their primary place of ministry. This may involve participating in marriage education seminars or receiving counseling themselves.

Considering the positive impact that marriage preparation and education has on marital satisfaction, the church should be intentional in their ministry to couples by incorporating practical interventions that provide ongoing support.

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Photo by Sterling Sevens

We are a eucharistic people  
which means that we are a  
people of thanksgiving,  
people who realize that we  
are prodigal sons and  
daughters. We are not called  
to judge or to condemn but  
to be instruments of life,  
to give life and to receive life.

Source: Jean Vanier,  
From Brokenness to Community