

MAKING A PRE-MARRIAGE COURSE THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE FOR MASTER OF DIVINITY

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MEQUON, WISCONSIN

March 7, 2018

## ABSTRACT

Graduates from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary will be expected to fulfill all of the roles of pastor which include giving pre-marriage counseling. This is a daunting task for any young, inexperienced pastor. One might borrow a pre-marriage course from a veteran pastor, read a popular marriage book, or use what little experiences they have in marriage, and give it their best shot. This may provide a sufficient pre-marriage course, but it is the opinion of this author that with a few simple approaches to pre-marriage counseling, pastors can be prepared to give an excellent pre-marriage course. Pastors need to be able to give their best possible pre-marriage counseling course because the marriage success rate in the United States is dreadful. If pastors are able to provide the best possible pre-marriage counseling they can give, a couple may be better prepared to have a successful marriage. This thesis explores techniques, strategies, and topics that a pastor can use to give excellent pre-marriage counseling.

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## INTRODUCTION

The divorce rate today in the United States is about 50 percent and it is not just the non-Christians.<sup>1</sup> According to Barna, more Christians are getting married but are getting divorced at the same rate as the non-Christians.<sup>2</sup> Many marriages have become a shattered mess from what God originally planned marriage to be. What can an engaged Christian couple do to avoid being another number in that dismal statistic? They can go to pre-marriage counseling with their pastor. The pastor has the unique opportunity to take an engaged couple through pre-marriage counseling, preparing them for the challenges and blessings of marriage. Some pastors are experts at this. Their experience and gifts help them to apply the scriptural principles to a couple in an effective way. Some pastors, however, may be fresh out of the seminary and do not have the experience to give an excellent pre-marriage counseling course that will well prepare a couple for marriage. If that inexperienced pastor does a poor job preparing a couple for marriage and applying scripture, does he possibly carry some small part of the blame if that marriage ends up in a divorce? What, then, do pastors have to do, what do they have to learn, what do they have to implement into their pre-marriage counseling course that will make the course excellent?

What does the pastor have to do to set up a couple for a successful marriage?

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *National Marriage and Divorce Rate Trends*. November 23, 2015 [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/marriage\\_divorce\\_tables.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/marriage_divorce_tables.htm) October 3, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Barna Group. *The Trends Redefining Romance Today*. 2017 <https://www.barna.com/research/trends-redefining-romance-today/> October 3, 2017

No seminarian would claim to be an expert in pre-marriage counseling. He would not be naïve enough to think that he could write this paper based on his own knowledge of what he perceives would make excellent pre-marriage counseling. A small advantage a seminarian would have writing this paper is that he is a blank slate. He can rely on experts in the field and experienced pastors. In order to gain insight, four interviews were done with experienced pastors who are known for their gifts of giving excellent pre-marriage counseling. Also, one interview was done with a professional WLCFS<sup>3</sup> pre-marriage counselor. This author also read literature on marriage and relationships. The goal of this author is to demonstrate a format for great pre-marriage counseling which is especially needful with the rate that marriages are ending in divorce. After reading this paper, a pastor will have options and ideas to help craft his own excellent pre-marriage counseling course.

How will this be done? Crafting an excellent pre-marriage counseling course is like decorating an excellent Christmas tree. This analogy will be used throughout the paper. No two pre-marriage counseling situations are alike. Each one is done by a different and unique pastor. Each couple that goes through pre-marriage counseling is unique. Each culture that the pastor and couple are coming from is different. Therefore, it would be counter-productive for this author to come up with a pre-marriage counseling course and expect everyone to follow it. There are, however, certain elements which seem to be a part of every pre-marriage counseling course. How and if these elements are used in a pre-marriage course is unique to the pastor. It is like the Christmas tree. A Christmas tree needs to be a tree, but it can be real or fake. A Christmas tree normally has lights, but the color of lights can be different or have no lights at all. A Christmas tree normally has ornaments, but the decorator gets to pick and choose which ones he prefers. Each Christmas tree has the same elements but is unique to the decorator.

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<sup>3</sup> Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Services

The same is true with forming a pre-marriage course. God in pre-marriage counseling is the Christmas tree. It is a must, but how a pastor wants to bring God into his pre-marriage counseling can be unique to him. The andragogical method of teaching is the lights. It is not absolutely necessary to use in pre-marriage counseling but it sure makes it prettier. Finally, there are the ornaments. There are topics a pastor could talk about in pre-marriage counseling. The goal is to make these topics available for the pastor to pick and choose what he wants to implement into his own unique pre-marriage course.

## BRING GOD INTO PRE-MARRIAGE COUNSELING

Step one for creating a Christmas tree is the tree. Without a tree you really do not have a Christmas tree. The same is true with incorporating the Bible into a pre-marriage course. The experts on pre-marriage counseling with whom the author did interviews emphasized the importance of God and his word in pre-marriage counseling. Pastor Don Patterson emphasized that marriage is a God thing and should be treated as such.<sup>4</sup> Pastor Jeremy Mattek's goal for pre-marriage counseling was to get the couple grounded on the foundation of Christ's love for them. Show them the value of Christ engaged in the couple's marriage.<sup>5</sup> Pastor Kent Reeder described pre-marriage counseling as contextualizing the connection and experience of God into a new context called marriage. Therefore, pre-marriage counseling has to start with understanding who God is and what that effect has on the couple's particular relationship.<sup>6</sup> Sarah Reik explained that there is an importance of praying together, devotions, and attending church for a successful marriage.<sup>7</sup> God in marriage is an essential part of any pre-marriage counseling just like a tree is essential for a Christmas tree.

This does not mean that how a pastor puts God into marriage is going to be the same, just like every Christmas tree is not the same kind of tree. Each pastor interviewed put God and his word into their pre-marriage course in a different way. There were however three aspects of God

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<sup>4</sup> Don Patterson, (Senior Pastor at Holy Word Lutheran Church, District President of the South Central District), in discussion over the phone with the author, October 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Mattek, (Pastor at Garden Homes Lutheran Church), in discussion over the phone with the author, October 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Kent Reeder, (Pastor at Illumine Church in Rock Hill, SC), in discussion over the phone with the author, November 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Riek, (Professional Counselor with WLCFS), in discussion over the phone with the author, November 2017.

in marriage that each pastor seemed to touch on in some way or another. The first is that God made marriage and therefore owns it. Second is that God designed marriage, therefore he is the one who decides what it is going to look like. Finally, God gave humans the power to have a successful marriage. Therefore, a couple will want to use what God has given them to succeed. If a young pastor was designing a pre-marriage course for the first time, it is this author's suggestion to have these three aspects of God in marriage in his pre-marriage course.

Marriage is God's thing. He created marriage at the beginning of time to be a life-long union between one man and one woman. Since God is the one who created marriage, he owns it. He gets to decide what it is going to look like. He is the one who is glorified when marriage serves the purpose for which he intended it. Pastor Patterson teaches to his marriage seminar students about God and marriage, "He made it. Do not break it. You serve him when you stay well married."<sup>8</sup> The way a pastor teaches that marriage was created by God can be done in a variety of ways. It should, however, be in the course and as we will see later, done in a way that sets up the learners successful learning.

A key aspect of adult teaching, which will be addressed later, is having a reason why a topic being taught is relevant or important for the learner to know. Why is it important for a couple in pre-marriage counseling to know that God made marriage? Pastor Timothy Keller gives insight into the value of teaching that marriage is God's thing. According to Keller, there was a shift in the way people perceived what marriage was and what it meant for them. Timothy Keller said,

A new view of marriage emerged from the eighteenth and nineteenth century Enlightenment. Older cultures taught their members to find meaning in duty, by embracing their assigned social roles and carrying them out faithfully. During the Enlightenment, things began to shift. The meaning of life came to be seen as the

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<sup>8</sup> Pastor Don Patterson in discussion with the author



fruit of the freedom of the individual to choose the life that most fulfills him or her personally. Instead of finding meaning through self-denial, through giving up one's freedoms, and binding oneself to the duties of marriage and family, marriage was redefined as finding emotional and sexual fulfillment and self-actualization.<sup>9</sup>

Keller viewed a shift in culture that saw marriage as a “me” thing and not a God thing. Instead of looking at marriage as an opportunity to give glory to God and to enjoy the blessings of marriage, the trend look at marriage as an opportunity to fulfill self-gratification.

Keller cited a study done by the National Marriage Project entitled, “Why Men Won’t Commit.” What Keller found most striking about the study was “how many men said they wouldn’t marry until they found the perfect soul mate, someone very compatible.”<sup>10</sup> The two factors that make up a soulmate according to the study were sexual chemistry/physical attractiveness and compatibility or acceptance of who they are.<sup>11</sup> The result is that if one’s spouse does not fulfill them in the way that they want to, that person figured he or she did not find their soul mate. That person then might get a divorce, and keep looking for the person who will make their life happy again. “How many couples today walk down the aisle with the attitude: we’ll give it a try, but if it doesn’t work out we can always take it back?”<sup>12</sup> “If only they had chosen “Mr. Right” or “Ms. Right,” everything would have worked out.”<sup>13</sup> This may explain why the divorce rate is so high. Of course, this may not be true for every couple. It is up to the teacher to determine if this is an issue that needs to be addressed in a pre-marriage course.

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<sup>9</sup> Keller, Timothy and Kathy Keller. *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2011. 28

<sup>10</sup> Keller 30

<sup>11</sup> Keller 31

<sup>12</sup> Gronholtz, Gene and Mark Zarling, *Growing Together in Christ*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2010. 10

<sup>13</sup> Parrott, Drs. Les and Leslie. *Saving Your Marriage before it Starts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006:

God also designed how marriage was going to work. God designed marriage to be a lifelong union between one man and one woman.<sup>14</sup> God also designed marriage so that the husband has the role of headship in the family to serve God and the wife has the role of helper to serve God.<sup>15</sup> Finally, God designed marriage so that the husband and wife show each other Christ like love and submit to each other.<sup>16</sup>

There are many ways to teach God's design for marriage to a couple. One could do a Bible study of Ephesians five. The pastor could show the model of Jesus and his bride, the Church, being a perfect example of marriage. Another way suggested by Pastor Jeremy Mattek is to tell the story of Hosea.<sup>17</sup> God commanded Hosea to marry a prostitute. Despite her unfaithfulness, he forgave her. What a great example of what *agape*, or Christ like love, looks like. What the principle that God wants spouses love each other like Christ loves the Church looks like will be touched on later in this paper.

Finally, God gives the power to make marriage work. Ephesians chapter five explains what marriage should look like and begins with two key verses. "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."<sup>18</sup> The motivation for a man and woman to selflessly love each other is because Christ loved them first. Couples who stay in the word and sacrament are reminded of the love Jesus has for them. This strengthens their faith and fruits of faith will follow.

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<sup>14</sup> Genesis 2:24 and Ephesians 5:31

<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 5:22-23

<sup>16</sup> Ephesians 5:21,33

<sup>17</sup> Pastor Mattek in discussion with author

<sup>18</sup> Ephesians 5:1-2

This is the way God empowers married couples and is a key aspect to be taught in pre-marriage counseling. Professional counselor Sarah Reik said that in her pre-marriage courses, she has the couple make a spiritual vision or plan for their married lives.<sup>19</sup> Some of the things in the plan include what their prayer life and devotional life will look like. When and where are they going to attend church? Pastor Patterson in his pre-marriage course has a section called forgiveness friendship. Forgiveness friendship focuses on forgiveness making the marriage happy and last. It is remembering the forgiveness that Christ has shown you that is reflected in a couple's marriage and protects that marriage. Forgiveness should be taught to prepare the couple for conflict and resolution. Pastor Reeder stressed the importance of the family not only going to church but also having a family devotion.<sup>20</sup> Having new family centered around the means of grace is the glue that keeps a family together.

God and his word is the foundation that great pre-marriage counseling that will make a difference in a couple's married lives is built on. Pastor Kent Reeder said when talking about pre-marriage counseling, "Use scripture and use law and gospel. Don't depend on gimmicks."<sup>21</sup> With so many best seller books out there on how to improve and enhance one's marriage, it is important to remember that there is no better marriage preparation book than the Bible. This is why God and his word in pre-marriage counseling is an essential part like a tree is essential for a Christmas tree and should be the thread that is woven throughout the course.

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<sup>19</sup> Sarah Riek in discussion with the author.

<sup>20</sup> Reeder, Kent. *Preparing for Stronger Marriages*. Presented to the Cottonbelt Conference in January, 2017 in Mobile Alabama.

<sup>21</sup> Kent Reeder in discussion with the author

## ANDRAGOGICAL TEACHING METHOD

After interviewing experts in pre-marriage counseling, it became evident they all used the andragogical teaching method<sup>22</sup> in their pre-marriage counseling whether it was intentional or not. A young pastor can mimic the experts and intentionally use adult teaching methods when designing their own pre-marriage counseling course. The andragogical teaching method is the lights on the tree in the Christmas tree analogy. Lights are not necessary for a Christmas tree, but they sure makes it look pretty. In the same way, it may not be absolutely necessary to use the andragogical teaching methods for pre-marriage counseling, but it may enhance a pre-marriage course.

Pastor Randy Hunter specifically suggested using andragogical teaching method in pre-marriage counseling.<sup>23</sup> Jane Vella, a published expert in adult education, suggests that there are twelve principles that educators can use when teaching adults.<sup>24,25</sup> A pastor's goal for pre-marriage counseling is to prepare a couple for marriage. The best way to prepare a couple is to get them to internalize and apply what they learn to their lives in the future. These andragogical principles may help the pastor accomplish this goal.

### Twelve Principles

- Needs Assessment
- Safety

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<sup>22</sup> Andragogical Teaching method is the art and science of helping adults learn.

<sup>23</sup> In discussion with the author

<sup>24</sup> Vella, Jane. *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Vella's principles are meant for secular large group setting but these principles may be valuable to pre-marriage counseling.

- Sound Relationships
- Sequence and Reinforcement
- Praxis
- Respect
- Ideas, Feelings, and Actions
- Immediacy
- Clear roles
- Teamwork
- Engagement
- Accountability

### Needs Assessment

No two people are alike. Each individual comes to pre-marriage counseling with individual experiences, cultures, and expectations. The pastor should discover what the individual's needs are, what the individual already knows, and what aspects of the course will work best for that person. He can do that best by listening.

Why is needs assessment important? "People are naturally excited to learn anything that helps them understand their own lives."<sup>26</sup> If learners do not see the need to learn what the instructor has to teach them, they may walk away with less than what the pastor intended. If, however, the pastor asks the learners what they want to learn, the needs for the course will become evident. If the pastor thinks that the couple does not realize a certain need, it is up to the pastor to show the couple that need.

The pastor can implement the needs assessment principle strategically. He can give each person a questionnaire to fill out.<sup>27</sup> The questionnaire is intended to identify what the couple

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<sup>26</sup> Vella 6

<sup>27</sup> Suggestion made by Pastor Patterson, Pastor Hunter, and Sarah Reik in discussion with author.

needs to learn. The results can be shown to the couple and the couple can come to the conclusion of what they need to learn.<sup>28</sup>

### Safety

The safety principle is about making the learner feel comfortable and confident. When a pastor is designing his pre-marriage course for the specific couple, he should make a course that is doable in order for the couple to feel safe. If the course is too challenging or an individual feels like what is being taught goes over their head, then they may shut down and not learn.<sup>29</sup> The pastor may want to create a safe environment before teaching challenging material.

Vella highlights some strategies for creating a safe environment. First is creating trust in the teacher by making experience and competence clear.<sup>30</sup> A pastor has some advantages in that he probably will already have a relationship and comes with the powerful word of God. The pastor can also create safety if he reviews the goals and objectives of the course at the beginning.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the pastor can create a safe environment for the couple by the way he designs his course from easier tasks to harder ones.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Pastor Hunter suggested using “Prepare Enrich” an assessment tool online. Sarah Reik and Pastor Patterson had their own questionnaire.

<sup>29</sup> Vella 8

<sup>30</sup> Vella 9

<sup>31</sup> Vella 9

<sup>32</sup> Vella 9

### Sound Relationships

Sound relationships involve respect, safety, open communication, listening, and humility.<sup>33</sup> The learners need to feel like they are on the same level as the pastor. Pastor John Schuetze, in his book *Doctor of Souls*, suggests the canoe paddle approach to counseling is the best form of counseling.<sup>34,35</sup> This approach may create a better relationship with the couple. Vella says, “Learners are in the immediate position of decisions makers, deciding what they want to tell us, feeling safe enough to share their true feelings.”<sup>36</sup> People are more likely to share their thoughts and feelings with a friend than to a superior. Therefore, it is valuable for the teacher to be careful about showing respect, affirming, and listening carefully.

### Sequence and Reinforcement

The sequence and reinforcement principle focuses on the design of the course. Vella says that courses should go from the simple to the complex, from easy to difficult.<sup>37</sup> This principle is closely linked to the safety principle.

### Praxis

Praxis is action with reflection.<sup>38</sup> When a learner learns a new skill, knowledge, or attitude, they then take what they have learned, apply it to the context of their own lives, and reflect on it.<sup>39</sup> In

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<sup>33</sup> Vella 11

<sup>34</sup> The canoe paddle approach to counseling suggests that the pastor open up the Bible with the person he is counseling, have them read the passage, and then have the person tell the pastor what the passage means. The pastor is there in the canoe with the person being counseled but is steering the canoe.

<sup>35</sup> Schuetze, John *Doctor of Souls*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2016: 292

<sup>36</sup> Vella 11

<sup>37</sup> Vella 12

other words, it is a test to see if what they have learned will work for them. When a pastor designs a learning activity for the couple to do, the goal is to get them to take new knowledge, make it their own, and then reflect on what they just learned. For example, “When we actually told each other that we loved each other, it really did create a better environment between us.”<sup>40</sup>

### Respect for Learners as Decision Makers

Adults by nature prefer to be decision makers and resist being treated as objects or something that can be used by someone else. They like to control their own destiny.<sup>41</sup> If a teacher gives adults some decision-making opportunities in the learning process, they will likely approach the learning with more motivation to learn. It is not just asking adults what they want to learn but also giving them a chance to decide how they want to learn.

### Ideas, Feelings, and Actions

It is not one or the other. Adult learners will have the best opportunity to learn if all three are intentionally used. Learning is done with the mind, emotions, and muscles, which means giving attention to the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of adult learning. Vella says that this is one of the most vital parts of adult learning that is often overlooked.<sup>42</sup> The pastor should avoid dumping information on the couple and then expect the couple to learn a whole lot. The

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<sup>38</sup> Vella 14

<sup>39</sup> Vella 14

<sup>40</sup> Professor Thomas Kock, (Professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary), in discussion with the author, February 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Vella 15

<sup>42</sup> Vella 17



goal of the teacher may want be to get the information necessary for learning a new skill, knowledge or attitude to the learner. Then, have the learner do the work, try the exercise, or apply the information to themselves. Finally, have them consider the implications of what they did or reflect on what happened.

### Immediacy

If the adult learners cannot immediately see that what they are learning will be useful in their lives, their motivation for learning will be minimized. Adult learners need to see the immediate usefulness of the new skills, knowledge, or attitudes they are working to acquire. They do not want to waste their time. They want to learn what will make an immediate difference in their lives.<sup>43</sup>

### Clear Roles

The clear roles principle is about how the learner perceives the teacher. The teacher is the teacher and the learner is the learner but that does not mean the learner does not have a voice. Dialogue between teacher and learner is one of the best forms of learning. If the learner perceives that the teacher is a highly educated professor type with whom there can be no disagreement, questions, challenges, then the dialogue is going to be dead in the water.<sup>44</sup> If the learner, however, perceives that the teacher is willing to listen and shows a willingness to learn from the learners, dialogue will be more likely. A good teacher wants to encourage dialogue between teacher and learner.

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<sup>43</sup> Vella 19

<sup>44</sup> Vella 20

Better dialogue may come if the role of the teacher and learner is identified to both as important to the dialogue.

### Teamwork

Teamwork will be more applicable if your situation calls for group pre-marriage counseling. Splitting up a large group into smaller groups provides safety for the individual. The individual can share an idea with a small group and have it be discussed. Once the individual receives affirmation from the smaller group, the individual may hopefully feel safe enough to share with the larger group. Smaller groups provide responsibility, accountability and competition.<sup>45</sup>

### Engagement

Get them working! A pastor's pre-marriage course may struggle if he expects the couple to sit and listen while he does all of the talking. Learners want to be actively engaged in what they are learning.<sup>46</sup> Instead of telling the couple they need to have a budget, maybe the pastor will have the couple write out a budget.<sup>47</sup> Instead of just telling them about conflict resolution theories, have the couple actually resolve a conflict.<sup>48</sup> With a little effort, the pastor can design a pre-marriage course that gets the learners engaged in what is being taught.

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<sup>45</sup> Vella 21

<sup>46</sup> Vella 22

<sup>47</sup> Suggestion made by Pastor Mattek in discussion with author

<sup>48</sup> Suggestion made by Pastor Patterson in discussion with author.

## Accountability

Both the designer of the learning and the learner must be accountable. What the teacher says will be learned at the beginning of the class needs to be learned. What was said to be taught, taught. The skills that were intended to be learned need to be visible in the learners. Attitudes intended to be changed are changed. Knowledge conveyed must be manifested.<sup>49</sup> In other words, what was promised as a goal of the course needs to be clear to everyone that those goals were met by the end of the course. Pastor Randy Hunter suggested having the couple do a course evaluation.<sup>50</sup> This way if not all the goals were met or some aspect of the course seemed lacking to the learner, the pastor can know about it and reevaluate that part of the course.

The learner needs to be accountable to take what they learned and apply it to their own lives.<sup>51</sup> This may be a challenge for a couple going through pre-marriage counseling because of the timing. The pastor can teach everything well. The couple can walk out of his class thinking they have learned skills that will immediately impact their marriage. The problem is they are not married yet. A few weeks or months later, the couple gets married. After a few more months, they forget what they learned in pre-marriage counseling and end up back in the pastor's office, but this time for a marriage in crisis counseling. In this scenario, the timing made it difficult for the couple to be accountable. Pastor Kent Reeder suggested having pre-marriage counseling classes before and after the wedding.<sup>52</sup> This strategy helps the couple stay accountable even with the difficult timing.

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<sup>49</sup> Vella 25

<sup>50</sup> In discussion with author.

<sup>51</sup> Vella 26

<sup>52</sup> In discussion with author

By remembering these twelve principles when designing a pre-marriage counseling course, a young pastor will hopefully be more prepared to teach in a way that will make an impact on a couples lives. The best part of the twelve principles is that a pastor can still make a course unique to his own style, situation, and couple.

### **Eight Steps for Course Design**

The twelve principles help decide what and how you are going to teach. It may however still be difficult for a pastor to determine just how he is going to design and organize the lesson. Vella suggests an eight step process to help guide a course designer make the most effective course to reach the designer's goals in each individual situation.<sup>53</sup>

Step one is determining who the learners are. What is their present situation? What are their needs? How many learners will there be?

The next step is determining why? Why does the present situation call for this course? Why are the named outcomes necessary? What do the participants need to be able to do as a result of the course? This step helps to identify the true goal of the course. Every pre-marriage course will have the goal of preparing the couple for marriage. Where the couple is spiritually or what kind of role models the couple has had for a good marriage may determine a unique why for that course.

Next is determining where the course will take place. Deciding where the course is going to be held will show application of the inclusion, respect, and safe environment principles. It makes sense that the pastor would make the course convenient and accessible to all participants.

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<sup>53</sup> Vella 37-38

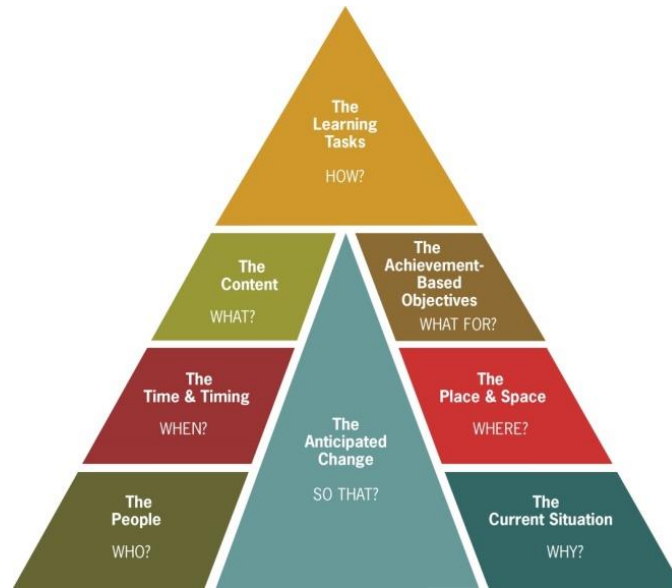
Closely linked with where is determining when the pre-marriage counseling will take place. Again the pastor will want to pick a time that makes the course convenient and accessible. Depending on the situation this may change from couple to couple.

Once a pastor can determine who, why, when and where for the pre-marriage course, he can move on to what. What identifies the content of the course, the goals, the immediacy, and the accountability. It is what the pastor wants to teach.

Then a pastor can determine what for. What for identifies the purpose of each individual task in class. Each task will have a specific goal the teacher is trying to get the learner to reach in class. Each achievement will contribute to the overall goal of the course. Having gone through the steps, the designer of the course will be ready to come up with a design for the course and the learning tasks he is going to use.

All of this is done to figure out the so that. So that is what the teacher wants the learners to take away after the course. It is what the learners will apply to their lives and the change that will help them outside of class. So that is the thread that is throughout the design of a course. It keeps in mind at each step what is the intended change the teacher wants to see in the learner. Keeping so that in mind at each step of designing a course will help the teacher design a course that stays on track and is always moving toward the intended goal.

The final step is how. The previous seven steps lead to the final step. The pastor can decide how he is going to teach his course in order to meet the goals and use the principles determined earlier. If a pastor goes straight to the how without building the foundation of the other steps, the preparation will probably take longer or his class will suffer.



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### Eight Steps of Learning Diagram

## PRE-MARRIAGE COUNSELING ORNAMENTS

Continuing with the analogy, the ornaments are next to go on the Christmas tree. Some ornaments are more precious or valuable than others. Some ornaments may be preferred over the other. The next section in this paper will set before the reader a selection of options a pastor could implement into his pre-marriage counseling course. The pastor can pick and choose which ones he likes best or fits his situation.

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<sup>54</sup> Global Learning Partners. *Eight Steps of Learning*. <http://www.globallearningpartners.com/about/about-dialogue-education/the-8-steps-of-design>

## Marriage is a Cross Cultural Event

The first of these ornaments is that “Every marriage is cross cultural.”<sup>55</sup> Each individual in every couple is from a different culture which means that a person brings into a marriage their own habits, expectations, and traditions. A couple may not realize the cultural differences between each other until after they are married. In the book *Every Man’s Battle*, a section gives insight how this could be possible. “Early in a relationship, the mind is nimble in filling in the blanks with its creative imagination. That’s part of the fun. The less you know about her, the more blanks there are to fill, and the more your mind can run with its fanciful thoughts.”<sup>56</sup> When one person knows only a little about another person, those few insights may match well. The mind then fills in the rest of the blanks about him or her. The couple thinks they know each other well enough to get married. It is only after they get married and are living together that they begin to more fully know their spouse. Those blanks their mind filled in about their spouse may have been wrong. That is why it is can be heard, “He or she is not the same person I married.” When a couple gets married, it may be helpful for them to know how to communicate and understand each other’s different cultures to avoid problems. This is where the pastor can help in pre-marriage counseling.

Material on marriage written by professionals can come in handy especially for a young and inexperienced pastor. The first difference that a pastor can address is the different languages the couple speaks with. By languages, this writer does not mean actual language like English or Spanish. This writer is talking about love languages, how the individual speaks and receives

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<sup>55</sup> Pastor Randy Hunter in discussion with the author.

<sup>56</sup> Arterburn, Stephen and Fred Stoeker and Mike Yorkey, *Every Man’s Battle*. Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2002; 163

love. Gary Chapman's book, *The 5 Love Languages*,<sup>57</sup> would be an excellent resource in this writer's opinion. Chapman explains how there are five love languages: quality time, gifts, words of affirmation, acts of service, and physical contact.<sup>58</sup> Chapman suggests that each person has a particular way that they communicate love that is giving and receiving love.

Communicating love can be a challenge and a frustration in a marriage. For example, imagine a husband's love language is acts of service. In order to communicate love to his wife, he washes the dishes, vacuums the house, and does the laundry which are acts of service. At the end of the day, however, his wife is upset at him because she does not feel loved. Her love language is quality time. In her eyes, her husband practically ignored her while he was doing chores instead of spending time with her. She may not feel loved because he did not speak her love language of quality time, and he may be frustrated thinking that she did not appreciate the love he was communicating by his acts of service. A misunderstanding of love languages could lead to struggles in the marriage. The pastor can help avoid this problem by teaching the couple each other's love language. They can go through the book with the pastor, or better yet, can go through the book outside of class. They can then come to pre-marriage counseling class and discuss what they learned with the pastor.

Another aspect of the cross cultural difference a pastor can address is the difference in the way of thinking between men and women. Many books have been written about the difference between men and women like *Men Are Like Waffles Women Are Like Spaghetti*<sup>59</sup> and *Men Are*

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<sup>57</sup> This book was recommended by Sarah Reik to get into the hands of a couple going through pre-marriage counseling.

<sup>58</sup> Chapman, Gary D. *The 5 love languages*. Chicago: Northfield Pub., 2015. 10

<sup>59</sup> Farrel, Bill and Pam. *Men Are Like Waffles Women Are Like Spaghetti*. Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2002.



*From Mars Women Are From Venus*<sup>60</sup>. If a man and woman do not understand how the other thinks, the marriage will likely have some confusion and frustration. This is why Shaunti and Jeff Feldhahn's series, *For Men Only* and *For Women Only*<sup>61</sup>, may also be a good resource for a pastor giving pre-marriage counseling. *For Men Only* explains how women's thought process works in a way that men can understand. Similarly, *For Women Only* explains how men's thought process works in a way that women can understand. Instead of a wife getting frustrated that her husband seems to always want sex or is trying to fix everything, she can understand his different culture of thinking. And instead of a husband getting frustrated at his wife for being worried about what he thinks is nothing; he will understand her different culture of thinking. Again, a pastor may want to have the couple go through these books on their own. When they come to pre-marriage counseling, the pastor can go through what they learned.

A third aspect of marriage being a cross cultural event is the fact that men and women have different necessities. Willard Harley writes in his book, *His Needs Her Needs*,<sup>62</sup> that as a young marriage counselor, he would give marriage advice, but then the couple would get a divorce. Something had to change. After extensive research, Harley came to the conclusion that men and women have different needs. If those needs are not provided then love is lost and the marriage suffers. After asking hundreds of spouses, Harley categorized the different needs into ten categories, affection, sexual fulfillment, conversation, recreational companionship, honesty and openness, physical attractiveness, family commitment, domestic support, financial support

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<sup>60</sup> Gray, John. *Men Are From Mars Women Are From Venus: The Classic Guide To Understanding the Opposite Sex*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.

<sup>61</sup> Feldhahn, Shaunti, and Jeff Feldhahn. *For men only: a straightforward guide to the inner lives of women*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Harley, Willard F. *His Needs Her Needs: Building an Affair-Proof Marriage*. Grand Rapids: Revell, 2001.

and admiration. Harley asked men and women to prioritize what needs were most important to them. Harley found that what men categorized as their top priorities were the complete opposite of what women put for their top priorities. What women need most to feel loved is the least needed things for men and vice versa.<sup>63</sup> If a couple does not realize this, then it would not be surprising if they did not feel loved by the spouse. A pastor can teach a couple in pre-marriage counseling about their different needs and prepare them to give their spouse what they need to feel loved.

Another aspect of a marriage being a cross cultural event is the fact that two individual and unique cultures are being brought together. A couple could grow up on the same street, go the same schools, date for years, but they both are bringing two different cultures together to make a new family, a new culture. For example, he might be a morning person and she might be a late night person. He might think that his wife should make supper and have the house cleaned and she might think that it should be team effort or his responsibility. She might think that a romantic date is getting dressed up and going out on the town, and he might think that it is cooking supper at home and snuggling on the couch to watch a movie. What do they do on the holidays? When does this new family open presents, on Christmas, Christmas Eve or Christmas morning? What food should there be for the Thanksgiving feast? Should the fourth of July be spent with friends or should they be spent with family? The list could go on and on. How can these two cultures come together to make a new culture? This is where the pastor can help in pre-marriage counseling. Some of these issues can become evident from the questionnaire or survey

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<sup>63</sup> Harley, Willard F. *His Needs Her Needs: Building an Affair-Proof Marriage*. Grand Rapids: Revell, 2001. P 15

the couple takes before pre-marriage counseling.<sup>64</sup> The pastor can teach the couple to listen to each other and compromise. Have the both of them make a list of what is important to them. Then they work together to make that list one list. It is better to have the couple learn how to listen and compromise when they are excited to make their marriage the best possible marriage instead of down the road when they are at each other's throats over something silly.

### **Conflict Resolution**

A key to making a “cross cultural marriage” work is being able to resolve conflicts. The most important aspect of conflict resolution is to be able to forgive like God forgives. Some books on marriage can help apply this biblical principle. In Ed Wheat's book, *Love Life for Every Married Couple*, there is a chapter on the prescription for a superb marriage. One part of his equation is sharing. ”Sharing demands giving of yourself, listening to your partner, and, as you live life together, developing a sensitive awareness of moments that offer possibility for deepening the love between you.”<sup>65</sup> Married couples need to communicate with each other in order to solve conflicts that come up in their marriage. John Gottman says in his book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, “The popular approach to conflict resolution, advocated by many marital therapists, is to attempt to put yourself in your partner's shoes while listening intently to what he or she says, and then to communicate empathetically that you see the dilemma from his

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<sup>64</sup> Pastor Hunter, Pastor Patterson, and Sarah Reik use surveys before their pre-marriage courses to identify potential cultural differences that need to be addressed.

<sup>65</sup> Wheat, Ed and Gloria Oke, *Love Life for Every Married Couple*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 1980; 245

or her perspective.”<sup>66</sup> But he noticed in his studies, some couples, even though they did not follow expert rules for communication, were still able to resolve conflicts. Gottman then came up with five principles for conflict resolving in a loving relationship: soften your startup, learn to make and receive repair attempts, soothe yourself and each other, compromise, and be tolerant of each other’s faults.<sup>67</sup> These five principles can be a simple way for a pastor to teach a husband and wife to love each other in conflict situations.

Another way to teach conflict resolution is to teach the couple how to stay out of the “crazy cycle.”<sup>68</sup> In Emerson Eggerichs’s books, *Love and Respect* and *Cracking the Communication Code*, he explains that, for the most part, men need respect and women need love. When a man is not getting the respect he needs, he is unlikely to give love to his wife. Then, when the wife is not getting the love she needs, she is unlikely to give the respect her husband needs. This cycle goes on and on making the relationship worse and worse. This is the crazy cycle. In order to break the crazy cycle, the couple needs to give to their spouse what they need. If the husband gives the love that his wife needs, she will be more likely to give the respect her husband needs. They get into what Eggerichs call the “energizing cycle.”<sup>69</sup> They can get into the energizing circle by clearly communicating their individual needs and unselfishly give what their spouse needs. A young couple may not know what the each other needs. A pastor can have the couple explore this by fostering communication between the two. By having the couple

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<sup>66</sup> Gottman, John M. and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York, New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999; 157

<sup>67</sup> Gottman 158

<sup>68</sup> Eggerichs, Emerson, *Cracking the Communication Code*. Nashville, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2007; 42.

<sup>69</sup> Eggerichs 42

verbalize their own needs in the relationship, they will hopefully be more prepared to communicate later down the road.

### Common Conflicts in Marriage

In the interviews with the experts<sup>70</sup> on pre-marriage counseling, the question was asked if there were any specific issues that seem to commonly put stress on a marriage that a pastor should address in pre-marriage counseling. Sex, money, children, and in-laws were brought up. If there is no communication between the husband and wife in these areas, there can be real problems. That is why it would be a good idea for a pastor to get a couple talking about these potential issues before they become a problem.

Money can cause problems in marriage. Again, marriage is a cross cultural event and it is true with money. Two individuals with individual ways of handling money are coming together to make one financial system. This can cause stress on a marriage if there is no clear communication between the couple. In Gary Chapman's book, *Things I Wish I'd Known Before We Got Married*, he dedicates an entire chapter to finances entitled, "I wish I had known we needed a plan for handling money."<sup>71</sup> Financial differences that need to be addressed can become clear to the pastor with the questionnaire. One suggestion made was to have the couple come up with a physical budget and bring it to pre-marriage counseling.<sup>72</sup> This forces the couple to communicate and practice handling money together. Another more in depth option is to have the couple go through Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University.<sup>73</sup><sup>74</sup> Ramsey's financial course

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<sup>70</sup> Pastor Patterson, Pastor Hunter, Pastor Mattek, Pastor Reeder, and Sarah Reik

<sup>71</sup> Chapman p 83

<sup>72</sup> Pastor Mattek in discussion with the author

<sup>73</sup> [www.daveramsey.com](http://www.daveramsey.com)

teaches couples how to handle their money, pay off debt, and save for the future. These tools can make finances a success that a couple can share together in their marriage.

The second issue commonly causing stress on a marriage is children. How many kids does each individual want? What are the parents going to do for discipline? Where are the kids going to go to school? A pastor can get the couple to start the conversation about children. The goal is to get the couple comfortable talking about children so that later on in their marriage they will be more comfortable talking to each other.

The third issue that may be wise to address is sex. Thanks to the movies and music, couples can put an unreal expectation of what sex will be like. When the couple consummates their marriage, there can be disappointment because it is not what they expected. One resource that can help a couple is Tim and Beverly LaHaye's book, *The Act of Marriage*. The LaHayes paint a realistic picture of sex, go through the mechanics of it, and show how it is a God pleasing thing, not a sin. In order to keep the couple from falling into the temptation of lust before their marriage, this writer suggests that the pastor be wise when he has the couple read the book together. The couple should read this book, one or two weeks before their wedding. That way they will have realistic expectations of what sex will be like without adding more temptation.

Another important aspect about sex that a pastor may want address in pre-marriage counseling is that men and women generally think differently about sex. For example, Pastor Don Patterson likes to use the phrase, "Men are like microwaves and women are like ovens." Men can be ready for sex at the drop of a hat but women need more time to get ready. If the couple does not realize this about each other, it can cause frustration. Sarah Reik warned that men must not be abusive to their wives and wives should not keep sex from their husband as a

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<sup>74</sup> Suggestion made by Pastor Patterson

weapon or punishment.<sup>75</sup> Many of the books mentioned earlier in this paper have some section on understanding sex from the opposite sex's perspective. The key is to have the couple talk about sex.

The worst thing they can do is keep their sexual frustrations to themselves. Talking about sex can be difficult for Christian couples because sex may have been a taboo topic in the home or church or there could have been abuse in the past. The pastor can help the couple to become comfortable talking about sex in a couple of ways. First, the pastor should be comfortable and open talking about sex since sex is wonderful gift from God. If he is comfortable, they hopefully feel safe to talk also. The pastor can also show from scripture that sex is a gift of God in marriage and is not something sinful or wrong to talk about. In the end, sex is a topic that a pastor should address in his pre-marriage counseling course.

Finally, in-laws can be a stress on a marriage especially early on. In marriage, two individuals come together to make a new family, but they also join each other's family. Gary Chapman identified 5 potential issues with in-laws.<sup>76</sup> The first is holidays. The parents on both sides will probably want you at their house. Second are traditions. Each family has certain traditions they have rooted in their family. It can be a sensitive situation if a son-in-law or daughter-in-law has one idea for a tradition but the parents have another. The third issue is expectations. Parents have certain expectations for their children's spouses. It can be embarrassing for the spouse if he or she does something that does not live up to the expectations of the parents. The fourth issue is that parents can have patterns of behavior that the spouse can

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<sup>75</sup> Sarah Reik in discussion with the author.

<sup>76</sup> Chapman, Gary D. *Things I Wish I'd Known Before We Got Married*. Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2010.

find irritating. Finally, parents can have religious beliefs that are different than the spouse.<sup>77</sup>

These issues if left alone can cause hardships in a marriage.

In order for a couple to avoid these difficulties with in-laws, Chapman suggests three things, learn to listen, learn to negotiate, and learn their love language.<sup>78</sup> By empathetically listening to a spouse's parents, one can begin to understand what the in-laws think, how they came to that conclusion, and how strongly they feel about it. After genuine listening, a spouse can learn to negotiate with his or her in-laws with respect and understanding.

Holidays make for a good example. If both sides of the family will want the couple over for Christmas, maybe they can go to one family's house for Thanksgiving and the other's for Christmas. Finally, Chapman suggests learning the love languages of the in-laws. Once the love languages are identified, a son-in-law or daughter-in-law can make a conscious effort to speak their in-laws' love languages. This will go a long way in making the in-laws feel loved and keep that stress out of a marriage.

Once again, a pastor will hopefully be able to identify potential in-law problems with the questionnaire. If he does notice something that might cause a problem later on in a marriage, he can bring up the issue or difference. Hopefully he will be able to teach the couple how to talk about issues that might come up due to in-laws.

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<sup>77</sup> Chapman 103-106

<sup>78</sup> Chapman 106-107



## Self-Control

Ephesians 5:25 says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.” 1 Peter 5:8 says, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” Spouses ought to have self-control in their marriage not only to resist the devil, but also because it is a way to show love to the spouse.

One of the common reasons why a couple gets a divorce is because of infidelity. Having sex with someone other than one’s spouse is not the only way people sin against the sixth commandment. Pornography is also infidelity. It is a sin that both men and women struggle with.<sup>79</sup> Another form of infidelity is dwelling on past relationships which can harbor insecurity. Also new relationships can break trust. Anything that breaks the union between the one man and one woman is a sin that can lead to divorce.

A pastor has an opportunity to get a jump on these temptations before they might ruin a marriage. If a man is struggling with sexual purity, *Every Man’s Battle*<sup>80</sup> is a great book to get into his hands. The authors were able to address problem at the heart of these issue of pornography and sexual impurity. Using scripture, they set up defenses on the eyes and guard the heart. This book also teaches a man to lust for his wife, love his wife, and adore his wife. “Conquerors through Christ” is an excellent resource to help deal with sexual impurity.<sup>81</sup>

In the end, it is important for a pastor to bring up the importance of sexual purity in a marriage. If the pastor can get the couple to talk about sexual purity together, then he can create a support system inside of that couple’s marriage. Together they can strive for sexual purity

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<sup>79</sup> Pastor Reeder in discussion with the author.

<sup>80</sup> Arterburn, Stephen, Fred Stoeker, and Mike Yorkey. *Every mans battle: winning the war on sexual temptation one victory at a time*. Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2016.

<sup>81</sup> <http://www.conquerorsthroughchrist.net/>

instead of secrecy and shame. If the pastor talks openly about sex, pornography, and sexual purity with the couple, he will hopefully build a trusting relationship with them. That way if sexual purity becomes an issue in the future, the couple may be more comfortable to come to pastor for help.

Addictions are also an aspect of self-control that may be a good idea to go through in pre-marriage counseling. Addictions can take away from the love that spouses should be showing to each other. If during the pre-marriage counseling or in the questionnaire, it is revealed that there is an addiction, what a wonderful opportunity for the pastor to help that person free themselves from that addiction before the added pressure of marriage. In some cases if the addiction is severe, a pastor would be wise to refer that person to a professional counselor.

#### Cohabitation

Again these are all ornaments that a pastor can pick and choose for his specific pre-marriage course. Another one of these ornaments is addressing cohabitation. How to handle a couple living together before marriage was too large a topic for this author to fully research. It something that a pastor needs to be prepared to deal with if it comes up in pre-marriage counseling. Other essays have been written on this topic.

#### **General Advice for Pre-marriage Counselors**

During the interviews, experts were asked to give advice to a young pastor giving pre-marriage counseling early in his ministry. They were asked if pre-marriage counseling is a valuable use of time for a busy pastor. In all five of the interviews, this opinion was the same. A pastor may be

tempted to shrug off the importance of pre-marriage counseling and slap something together just so he can say he did something. A pastor may feel that his call asks him to prepare sermons and bible studies but will leave the pre-marriage counseling to the experts. Pastors have an excellent opportunity to apply specific law and gospel in counseling. Direct and personal counseling allows the pastor to adjust and feed the people where they are at.<sup>82</sup> Pre-marriage counseling is a great opportunity for the pastor to make a difference in his member's marriage. If the pastor is willing to take the time and give an excellent pre-marriage counseling course, it is time that he may save in the future by avoiding a marriage crisis.

Pastor Randy Hunter gave this advice for a young pastor about to do pre-marriage counseling. "Do it without apology." "Rely on the experience of others who have more experience than you." If someone asks how a young pastor can give counseling advice since he may not be married or only have a few years of marriage experience, that pastor could say to them that "doctors have cured cancer and never had cancer." "Better to be short and excellent than long and mediocre." "Always be improving."

Pastor Jeremy Mattek gave this advice. "Look forward to pre-marriage counseling." "The pastor has an awesome opportunity to teach a couple something important."

Professional counselor Sarah Reik gave this advice. "Know that what you are doing is something really important." "Do not be afraid to challenge people." "If they put the work in now, it will pay off for them later." "Bring up the awkward and tough issues now before they get married. It will pay off in the end."

Pastor Kent Reeder had this advice. "Do not treat pre-marriage counseling as a one and done kind of thing." "You will always be counseling in marriage." "Use scripture and the law and gospel instead of gimmicks. In the end, it is the power of God's word that makes a marriage

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<sup>82</sup> Pastor Reeder in discussion with the author

work.” “Be humble and admit you do not know everything.” “Make up for your lack of experience with zealously and a willingness to learn.” “Be on the journey with the couple instead of feeling like you need to lead them.”

Finally, Pastor Don Patterson had this advice. “Stick to the basics of marriage that you know are from God and are easy for you to articulate.” “Let them experience conflict and how to communicate and resolve it.” “Give the couple hope and be encouraging. Say things like, “You guys are going to be great.””

## CONCLUSION

Marriages in the United States are ending in a divorce at an alarming rate. Hopefully the young inexperienced pastor will now have some ideas on how to approach his pre-marriage counseling and is confident that he has the tools to make it excellent. For the experienced pastor, maybe this paper gave some new insights that will enhance his pre-marriage course. It is this writer’s hope that this paper will help create better pre-marriage courses that will help save a marriage before it is ever in trouble.

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