



Clergy and Marriage Education Research Brief

Clergy and Marriage Education Research Brief

Background

Clergy, a general term used to describe a religious leader of any given religion, have long presided over key events, like marriage, in the lives of families. In fact, it is estimated that 75% of all first marriages in the United States are conducted in a church (Stanley, et al., 2000). Tabitha Staier (2007) studied the role of clergy in Community Marriage Initiatives (CMIs)¹ and traced the evolution of modern marriage preparation to efforts by Protestant and Roman Catholic programs during the 1940's and 1950's. In the 1970's,

It is estimated that 75% of all first marriages in the United States are conducted in a church. (Stanley, et al., 2000)

these religious efforts evolved into the Association of Couples for Marriage Enrichment (ACME), an organization that provides highly structured, faith-based marriage enrichment programs and assists with the creation and sustainability of marriage enrichment ministries. Also during this period, social scientists entered the field and created various programs based on theoretical orientations, such as family systems or cognitive behavioral therapy, and a focus on communication (active listening, non-verbal behavior, managing conflict).

Recently, both the federal and state governments have begun initiatives to strengthen marriages, and in some cases, have partnered with faith-based organizations to support these initiatives within communities.

Scholars (Laurenceau, 2004; Silliman, 2003; and Stanley, Markman, St. Peters and Leber, 1995) suggest that religious organizations have many characteristics that make them a good fit for marriage education efforts. Not only are most first marriages conducted in a religious organization, but such organizations also have “a reverence for the institution of marriage and the importance of preventing marital declines, a historical affinity for education as part of the means to living a better life, and a level of embeddedness in communities that can enhance the effectiveness of applying techniques that are culturally relevant and sensitive” (Laurenceau, 2004, summarizing from Stanley et al., 1995).

This Research Brief examines the training/preparation available to leaders of the faith community, with an emphasis on Christian clergy, formally trained through a seminary or other organized system. Most of the scholarly literature available exploring the preparation for and practice of marriage education/preparation among clergy is in the form of unpublished doctoral dissertations.



¹ A CMI is an intervention at the local community level that encourages healthy marriages by involving the local leaders and organizations.

Headlines/Trends

Marital preparation is not new to the faith sector. However, it is new to the public sector and many policymakers and community leaders have asked about the effectiveness of these services in improving relationship quality and stability. Some researchers have conducted needs assessments and qualitative research into the marriage education practices within their own denominations, while others have conducted broader surveys. Studies show that most faith-based organizations place a high value on marriage education, especially marriage preparation. In fact, some denominations require a minimum number of sessions (between a representative of the church and the couple) prior to the wedding (anecdotal). The content of these sessions may vary by facilitator and/or denomination. This brief begins to explore the training/preparation that faith leaders receive to deliver these sessions. We refer to them generally as “marriage education.” The terms marriage education and marriage preparation are used interchangeably to refer to couple-based services which discuss relationship issues like expectations, finances, children and teach communication and problem solving strategies, etc.

Clergy believe in the importance and effectiveness of premarital counseling and desire more training in this area.

Marriage Education/Preparation – Clergy Support

Wilmoth (2005) surveyed over 400 clergy in Oklahoma and found that clergy believe in the importance and effectiveness of premarital counseling and desire more training in this area. In fact, in a randomly selected sample of 231 clergy from four mainstream

Protestant denominations, 94% of the respondents agreed that premarital education should be required of all couples, but only 31% said marriage preparation was required by their denomination (Jones and Stahmann 1994).

Service Delivery by Clergy

An anecdotal survey of pastors from several denominations and one rabbi indicates a wide variety of approaches to marriage education/preparation. However, clergy indicate that there is a gap between expectations and reality when it comes to the delivery of marriage education services. Basically, pastors reported no set pattern of premarital counseling practices, suggesting that no particular program or paradigm was in place, beyond what pastors did case by case (Buikema, 2001).

There are a variety of research-based marriage education assessment tools and curricula available to faith leaders. Assessment tools can be used to identify relationship satisfaction, process skills like communication and problem solving, and value-based attitudes that account for long-term stability in marriage. Inventories, such as PREmarital Preparation (PREPARE), RELATIONSHIP Evaluation (RELATE) and Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study (FOCCUS) have been empirically evaluated; researchers concluded that all three “may

be confidently used in premarital assessment and counseling.” (Larson, J.H., Newell, K., Nichols, S., & Topham, G., 1992). Similarly, skill-based programs such as Relationship Enhancement (RE), Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) and Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) teach common relationship skills (such as communication strategies and problem solving techniques) to better equip couples with the tools needed

to handle life's ups and downs which can challenge a marriage.

Sullivan observed that clergy did not use empirically proven techniques such as PREPARE (Olsen, Fournier, & Druckman, 1986) or FOCCUS (Markey, Micheletto, & Becker, 1985) in their marriage education/preparation classes. In addition, most clergy did not use established, empirically validated curricula, such as PREP, RE, or PAIRS; many were still relying on personal experience as their basis for working with premarital couples. Another study found that many clergy are not aware of what premarital resources or curricula are available to them. (Wilmoth, 2005)

Clergy Training

The literature illustrates that many religious leaders do not feel that seminary school has adequately prepared them to deliver marriage education services. However, when clergy members do receive specialized training on this subject, they are likely to continue to offer marriage education/preparation

Many religious leaders do not feel that seminary school adequately prepared them to deliver marriage education. An overwhelming amount of clergy indicated that they wanted more guidance in this area.

services. Sixty percent of clergy reported some coverage of premarital education in seminary, while 39% said they had taken some sort of marriage education delivery training course (Jones and Stahman, 2004). The study did not detail exactly what sort of training clergy received, however. Sullivan (2000) found that more clergy had received some training to work with couples than the Jones and Stahmann (1994) findings.

Pastors' insight into their training did not indicate feelings of preparedness. A qualitative study investigating pastors' perceptions of their education in delivering marriage preparation found that clergy felt generally ill-prepared to do premarital counseling (Buikema, 2001). Other surveys of Roman Catholic (Loskut, 1993) and Wesleyan (Babb, 1991) pastors also reveal that clergy feel insufficiently prepared by their seminary training to deal with marriage and family issues in sophisticated way. Each of the studies cited above call for improved seminary training in marriage preparation.

An overwhelming amount of clergy indicated that they wanted more guidance in this area. Manley (2006) conducted a survey with a sample of 247 African American clergy and found that 85% indicated a desire for more training to deliver marriage education, and those who had some marriage education training reported being more confident in working with couples. The majority indicated a willingness to attend seminars to enhance their knowledge of marriage education. (Wilmoth, 2005). Clergy felt that seminary should have prepared them better, and they agreed that pastors, congregations, and denominations have a responsibility to pursue continuing education in premarital counseling.

One way in which faith leaders can achieve additional training is to participate in a curriculum-based training led by a curriculum developer or trained leader. However, these trainings are curriculum-specific and are open to a variety of practitioners, including lay leaders. They may/may not provide the necessary background on marital discord needed to improve the comfort level of clergy who feel unprepared to counsel couples.

Clergy and Domestic Violence Issues

Research investigating the way in which domestic

violence is addressed by religious leaders is scant. Clergy tend to stay in their traditional “gatekeeper” role, encouraging parishioners to make use of community resources when the issue comes up. However, Livingston (1997) examined awareness among clergy who do marriage and marriage preparation work. She found that the personal experiences and gender of clergy largely determined the degree to which they discuss domestic violence as part of marriage preparation. Female clergy were more likely to address the issue.

Evaluation of Services Delivered by Clergy

There have been few systematic efforts to assess the effectiveness of clergy as marriage educators. Those that do exist typically look at the delivery of marriage education curricula, not general “premarital preparation” services which are more commonly delivered by clergy. However, Laurenceau, et al. (2004) concluded that clergy actually demonstrated some advantages over university-based program delivery staff, suggesting that community leaders who are

Clergy demonstrated some advantages over university-based program delivery staff, suggesting that since clergy are known to their congregants, some level of authority or credibility to their work as marriage educators exists.

known to couples, as clergy are to congregants, may add some level of authority or credibility to their work as marriage educators that “unknown” clinical experts may not enjoy.

Stanley, Markman, Prado, Olmos-Gallo, Tonelli, St. Peters Leber, Bobulinski, Cordova &Whitton (2001) suggest that interventions developed for and delivered in community settings, such as religious organi-

zations, should meet three criteria. First, there must be some empirical support to show that the program actually works (programs should demonstrate *results*). Second, couples should find the program useful and helpful to their daily lives (programs should have *relevance* to participants). Finally, they should be able to be delivered without undue obstacles, that is, it should be able to be delivered by trained lay leaders and clergy in a way that is practical and useful in community contexts (programs can move from the laboratory to the *reality* regular life situations).

A review of the available literature yielded only one quasi-experimental design study of an effort to train and follow a group of clergy in a marriage education program (Stanley et al., 2001). The researchers found that couples who received the PREP training had more favorable patterns of communication than those who received whatever marriage preparation was regularly offered in their various church settings. Secondly, program satisfaction ratings and couple interaction outcomes suggested that clergy and lay leaders can effectively deliver a program in a church setting. In a five-year follow-up to that study, Mark-

man, Whitton, Kline, et al. (2004) explored whether a program would continue to be used over time.

A large majority (82%) of clergy and lay leaders originally trained in the 2001 study continued to deliver some form of the program, working with more than 1,000 couples over the course of five years, especially the parts of the program that addressed communication skills and conflict management. Clergy also extended their work from premarital to married couples in their churches. Once trained, clergy continued not only to use what they had learned but they went on to inte-

grate key aspects of the program into their other work with couples. The researchers concluded that rather than creating new systems to deliver such services, efforts should be made to work with existing organizations that already serve couples in the community.

Implications

Both scholars and clergy members agree that lack of training is a barrier to performing marriage education services well. Little seminary training, awareness of and access to relationship education curricula are concerns that can be addressed by a greater collaboration between clergy and mental health professionals (Weaver, Koenig and Larson, 1997). It is evident that clergy need a coherent system of marriage education delivery that can be easily tailored to take into account the differences in faith traditions and individual denominations. If seminary programs or other formal religious institutes do not offer such training, curriculum training may help to fill this gap. It may be that continued faith-based and community initiatives can be a channel for information and training to clergy in local communities. Empirically based programs should be readily available and training on how to deliver these programs should be accessible to clergy. Finally, efforts to train clergy in marriage education should include domestic violence prevention and awareness as part of seminary training as well as post-ordination training in relationship education.

Because minority and economically disadvantaged groups tend to be less likely to participate in premarriage education (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Stanley, 2006), faith systems may serve as an important gateway for marriage and relationship education services.

Because minority and economically disadvantaged groups tend to be less likely to participate in premarriage education (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Stanley, 2006), faith systems may serve as an important gateway for marriage and relationship education services. This also demonstrates the need for members of the clergy to be more equipped to offer this assistance. The messenger matters, and it seems that marriage education delivered by people or organizations familiar to couples may have an enhanced degree of effectiveness; this is especially important for members of the population who have negative perceptions of social services programs and/or have had bad experiences with such programs.

There are many examples in the literature of efforts to help specific congregations or denominations improve or systematize their marriage education efforts (Barlow, 1999; Downes, 2003; Marks, 2007; Van Dussen, 1996; Weitzel, 1986). However, a larger scale movement is necessary. Many communities also have ministerial alliances of various kinds, comprised of clergy from across denominations and sometimes faith traditions. These groups could be potential audiences for ongoing marriage education training.

Special thanks to Lief Noll, Ph.D. a psychologist with extensive experience working with Catholic clergy and religious orders, for his contributions to this research brief.

References

Babb, D. D. (1991). An assessment of premarital counseling practices of pastors in the Wesleyan Church. The American University. Ph.D. Dissertation. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from Dissertations & Theses: A&I database. (Publication No.

- AAT 9208016).
- Barlow, J. L. (1999). A new model for premarital counseling within the church. *Pastoral Psychology*, 48(1), 3-9.
- Buikema, J. K. (2001). The preparation of pastors in premarital counseling. Ph.D Dissertation. Iowa State University. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from Dissertations & Theses: A&I database. (Publication No. AAT 3034171).
- Gordon, L. H., & Durana, C. (1999). The PAIRS program. In R. Berger & M. T. Hannah (Eds.), *Preventive approaches in couples therapy* (pp. 217-254). New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Gottman, J. M., Ryan, K. D., Carrere, S., & Erley, A. M. (2002). Toward a scientifically-based marital therapy. In H. A. Liddle, D. A. Santisleben, R. F. Levant, & J. H. Bray (Eds.), *Family psychology: Science based interventions* (pp.147-174). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Downes, Kenneth R. (2003) A clergy guide to premarital counseling. D.Min. dissertation, Andover Newton Theological School, United States -- Massachusetts. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from Dissertations & Theses: A&I database. (Publication No. AAT 3090320).
- Guernsey, B. G. (Ed.). (1987). *Relationship enhancement manual*. Bethesda, MD: Ideal.
- Jones, E. F., & Stahmann, R. F. (1994). Clergy beliefs, preparation, and practice in premarital counseling. *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 48, 181-186.
- Laurenceau, J., Stanley, S. M., Olmos-Gallo, A., Baucum, B., & Markman, H. J. (2004). Community-based prevention of marital dysfunction: Multilevel modeling of a randomized effectiveness study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 72, 933-943.
- Larson, J.H., Newell, K., Nichols, S., & Topham, G. (2002). A review of three comprehensive premarital assessment questionnaires. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. April.
- Livingston, B. E. (1997). Domestic violence and pastoral premarital education. Boston University School of Theology. D. Min. Dissertation. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from Dissertations & Theses: A&I database. (Publication No. AAT 9809123).
- Loskot, D. W. (1993). Roman Catholic priests as counselors: Perceived effectiveness and actual preparedness. University of San Francisco. Ed.D. Dissertation. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from Dissertations & Theses: A&I database. (Publication No. AAT 9412910).
- Manley, A. T. (2006). Exploring the attitudes, beliefs, preparation, and practices of African American clergy in premarital counseling. University of Florida. Ph.D. Dissertation. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from Dissertations & Theses: A&I database. (Publication No. AAT 3249006).
- Markman, H. J., Stanley, S. M. & Blumberg, S. L. (2001). *Fighting for your marriage: New and revised version*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Markman, H. J., Whitton, S. W., Kline, G. H., Stanley, S. M., Thompson, H., St Peters, M., Leber, D. B., Olmos-Gallo, A., Prado, L., Williams, T., Gilbert, K., Tonelli, L., Bobulinski, M. & Cordova, A. (2004). Use of an empirically based marriage education program by religious organizations: Results of a dissemination trial. *Family Relations*, 53, 504-512.
- Marks, J. P. (2007). Christian premarital training in the local church setting: A study of the effectiveness of the symbis model in reducing divorce and producing stable and satisfying marital relationships. Liberty University. Ph.D. Dissertation. Retrieved October 24, 2008 from Dissertations & Theses: A&I database. (Publication No. AAI3255544).
- McManus, M. J. (1995). *Marriage savers*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

- Olsen, D. H., Fournier, D., & Druckman, J. (1986). PREPARE. Minneapolis, MN: PREPARE/ENRICH.
- Staier, Tabitha R. (2007) Community marriage initiatives and clergy: The impact of support and involvement on clergy's premarital education practices. Ph.D. dissertation, The Florida State University, United States -- Florida. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from Dissertations & Theses: A&I database. (Publication No. AAT 3282668).
- Stanley, S. M., Amato, P. R., Johnson, C. A., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random, household survey. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 117-126.
- Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., St. Peters, M., & Leber, B. D. (1995) Strengthening marriages and preventing divorce: New directions in prevention research. *Family Relations*, 44, 392-401.
- Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., Prado, L. M., Olmos-Gallo, P.A., Tonelli, L., St. Peters, M., Leber, B. D., Bobulinski, M., Cordova, A., & Whitton, S. W. (2001). Community-based premarital prevention: Clergy and lay leaders on the frontlines. *Family Relations*, 50, 67-84.
- Silliman, B. (2003). Building healthy marriages through early and extended outreach with youth. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 31, 270-282.
- Sullivan, P. O. (2000). Clergy's training in and use of premarital counseling. Biola University. Dissertation Abstracts International, UMI 9981451.
- Taylor, R. J., Ellison, C. G., Chatters, L. M., Levin, J. S., and Lincoln, K. D. (2000). Mental health services in faith communities: the role of clergy in black churches. *Social Work*, 45(1), 73-87.
- Van Dussen, M. J. (1996). A program for training and assisting pastors with premarital counseling. Drew University. D.Min. Dissertation. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from Dissertations & Theses: A&I database. (Publication No. AAT 9626928).
- Walker, R. M. (2006). Building a strong and healthy one-flesh marriage program. Regent University. D. Min. Dissertation. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from Dissertations & Theses: A&I database. (Publication No. AAT 3238246).
- Weaver, A. J., Koenig, H. G, and Larson, D. B. (1997). Marriage and family therapists and the clergy: A need for clinical collaboration, training, and research. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 23(1), 13-25.
- Weitzel, H. M. (1986). A covenantal experiential approach to preventative care in marriage building for the church. Drew University. D. Min. Dissertation. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from Dissertations & Theses: A&I database. (Publication No. AAT 8703158).
- Wilmoth, J. D. (2005). Involvement of Oklahoma clergy in providing marriage preparation. Oklahoma State University. Ph.D. Dissertation. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from Dissertations & Theses: A&I database. (Publication No. AAT 3203076).
- Young, J. L., Griffith, E. E. H., and Williams, D. R. (2003). The integral role of pastoral counseling by African-American clergy in community mental health. *Psychiatric Services*, 54(5), 688-692.