

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Preemptive Church-Based Marital Education and Counseling as an Intervention to Increase  
Marital Satisfaction and Reduce Divorce Rates

A Thesis Project Submitted to  
the Faculty of Liberty University School of Divinity  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry

By

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**Thesis Project Approval Sheet**

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# PREEMPTIVE CHURCH-BASED MARITAL EDUCATION AND COUNSELING AS AN INTERVENTION TO INCREASE MARITAL SATISFACTION AND REDUCE DIVORCE RATES

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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, April 4, 2022

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## ABSTRACT

Marriage is a fundamental component of the Christian experience; it is an institution that ideally bonds two believers in a lifelong relationship through which they can grow spiritually and emotionally, support one another, and often create and raise the next generation within the warmth and nurturing of a united family. Unfortunately, marital dissatisfaction and divorce—common phenomena in the United States—can have a wide range of negative consequences not only for spouses but also for their children, parents, and friends. This Doctor of Ministry thesis examines how the author’s local church ministry, River of Life Fellowship Ministries, deals with issues of divorce and marital dissatisfaction and determines if there were more effective options that could be developed to increase positive outcomes for spouses. Specifically, the purpose of this thesis is to provide a marital education ministry that improves marital satisfaction and decreases the likelihood of marital dissolution through a combination of couples counseling and marital education group sessions. After conducting a three-week marital education program, participants reported a 12.5% increase in marital satisfaction and a high likelihood of recommending such programs to friends and family, indicating that a church-based marital education program can improve marital satisfaction, thereby reducing the probability of marital dissolution.

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## **Abbreviations**

DMIN	<i>Doctor of Ministry</i>
LUSOD	<i>Liberty University School of Divinity</i>
ROLFM	<i>River of Life Fellowship Ministries</i>

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Marriage is a fundamental component of the Christian experience; it is an institution that ideally bonds two believers in a lifelong relationship through which they can grow spiritually and emotionally, support one another, and often create and raise the next generation within the warmth and nurturing of a united family. Unfortunately, marital dissatisfaction and divorce, which are common phenomena in the United States, can have a wide range of negative consequences not only for spouses but also for their children, parents, and friends.<sup>1</sup> Marital dissolution can result in negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, depression, and loneliness; health problems; and even suicide.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, scripture provides evidence that divorce is contrary to God's plan for Christian couples (Matthew 19:4-6, 19:9, Genesis 2:24, etc.); thus, it is imperative that the church works to strengthen marriages, thereby preventing marital dissolution. Keeping the above factors in mind, it is important to consider what can be done to address marital dissatisfaction at the local church level.

This Doctor of Ministry (DMIN) thesis examines how the author's local church, River of Life Fellowship Ministries (ROLFM), deals with issues of divorce and marital dissatisfaction, and it inquires whether there are more effective options to increase positive outcomes for spouses. Specifically, the purpose of this thesis is to provide a marital education ministry that improves marital satisfaction and decreases the likelihood of marital dissolution through a combination of couples counseling and marital education group sessions. Additionally, due to the challenges associated with working with couples having high distress levels, it can be more

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<sup>1</sup> Sheela Kennedy and Steven Ruggles, "Breaking Up is Hard to Count: The Rise of Divorce in the United States, 1980-2010," *Demography* 51, no. 2 (2014), 587-588.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Clarke-Stewart and Cornelia Brentano, *Divorce Causes and Consequences* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 67-76.

effective to prevent relationship problems through a combination of education and therapy.<sup>3</sup> The author, therefore, believes that if an effective marital education and counseling ministry is established at ROLFM, a better understanding of the causes of marital dissatisfaction and divorce can be achieved, which is the ultimate pursuit of this thesis.

### **Ministry Context**

The author performed the research for this DMIN thesis at ROLFM, a small American church of approximately 100 members located in Lehman, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, USA. Lehman has a population of 3,508 and is a suburb of the larger Wilkes-Barre/Scranton metropolitan area.<sup>4</sup> The church's congregation comprises members from both the immediate town and the surrounding county. Lehman township's racial/ethnic composition is as follows: 97.89% white, 0.54% Hispanic/Latino, 0.51% African American, 0.31% American Indian, 0.23% Asian, 0.77% two or more races, and 0.29% "some other race."<sup>5</sup> Male residents comprise 49.89%, females account for 50.11%, and the median age for both is 44.0.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Luzerne County has 320,918 residents with the following racial/ethnic composition: 94.53% white, 6.70% Hispanic/Latino, 3.19% African American, 0.09% American Indian, 1.03% Asian, 0.01% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 1.07% two or more races, and 0.08% who fall into a different racial category.<sup>7</sup> The county's residents are 48.87% male and 51.13% female, and the median

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<sup>3</sup> Howard J. Markman and Lane L. Ritchie, "Couples Relationship Education and Couples Therapy: Healthy Marriage or Strange Bedfellows?" *Family Process* 54, no. 4 (2015), 658.

<sup>4</sup> US Census Bureau, "Pennsylvania: 2010. Summary Population and Housing Characteristics. 2010 Census of Population and Housing," 56.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>6</sup> US Census Bureau, "Pennsylvania: 2010. Summary Population and Housing Characteristics. 2010 Census of Population and Housing," 57.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 246-247.

age for both is 42.5.<sup>8</sup> River of Life's congregation's demographics are similar to the populations of both Lehman and Luzerne County. The congregation is predominately white with a notable (>10%) Asian minority and contains a diverse, equally distributed age range except for an underrepresentation by teens.

The church has struggled to attract and retain local nonwhite, nonAsian minority families in the past, and the notable minority presence in the county (approximately 10% African American and Hispanic/Latino alone) indicates a possible cultural/social disconnect in the church's outreach or worship programs. Of the church's 100 members, approximately 50–70 are single or currently divorced/separated, whereas 30–50 are married; most of them, as assumed by the author, would be willing to participate in the marital education program of this DMIN research.

ROLFM's congregation size has ebbed and flowed over its 15 years tenure for a few reasons. As noted earlier, ROLFM has struggled to attract visitors from the more populous Wilkes-Barre/Scranton metropolitan area. This is likely due to the distance, political stratification within the church, failure to actively engage in ministries locally, and in the author's opinion, weak intercultural/racial awareness of groups other than the church's two predominant racial identities (white and Asian). Challenges have also been posed recently by the conservative political identities of some members of the pastoral staff and congregation, which, in turn, could be witnessed as polarizing and potentially discouraging for less conservative visitors, congregants, and staff. Further, ROLFM occupies an area with older, larger, more well-known, and active churches with better funding enabling these churches to pay staff, build and improve facilities, and engage in many community-based programs. Moreover, due to ROLFM's

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 56.

financial constraints and below-average congregant engagement in evangelistic activity within their friend groups, families, or communities, the church does not receive significant visitor foot traffic.

The congregation's overall belief system is best described as evangelical, noncharismatic, and conservative with a contemporary worship style. Traditional male–female marriage is preached and accepted among most congregants, premarital sex is strongly discouraged, and church leadership views on divorce/remarriage vary from moderate to extremely conservative. The church ministry itself is approximately 15 years old and has been at its current location for 12 years. ROLFM's ministries all take place at its physical location, which is a large former middle school building. The church's leadership comprises three pastors and four deacons, each with different core responsibilities. The church's senior pastor delivers most sermons for ROLFM's Sunday Worship Service, teaches the church's Wednesday Adult Bible Study, manages the church's finances, and is responsible for the overall performance of the ministry and the spiritual health of its people. ROLFM's associate pastor occasionally delivers Sunday Worship Service sermons and is highly involved as a co-administrator in the church's primary ministry, River of Life Christian Academy, a K-12 private Christian school. The author himself has served as a pastor with the church for over five years, with an emphasis on working with the ministry's youth and operating River of Life Christian Academy.

The church ministry currently offers services to congregants and visitors alike. The church's primary services are its weekly morning Sunday School and Worship Service, both offering a combination of pastoral teaching and contemporary worship led by a praise band. In terms of pastoral teaching, the range of sermon topics is extensive, though there have been no sermons in the past few years specifically addressing divorce, marriage, or remarriage. River of

Life also offers a Wednesday night Bible Study and Youth Group/AWANA program, a midweek teaching and fellowship experience for adults and teens/younger children alike. The church has other less frequent offerings, such as a monthly women's group and church breakfast fellowship. In the past, ROLFM has hosted a young adult Crossroads group and multiple cell groups, though they are not currently operating. The church does not offer formal counseling or marital education programs; instead it relies on rendering counseling services by one of its pastors for couples in distress, as and when need arises for such services. Of the church's three ministers, only one has specialized training in pastoral or marital counseling.

The church operates on an extremely modest budget and does not have significant funds available for new ministry offerings. Furthermore, all of the church's pastoral and deacon leaders serve on a volunteer basis, as most have full-time nonministry careers to provide financially for their families, and thus, the time they are able to dedicate to the development of new ministries is limited. Congregants are active in supporting and assisting with the current ministry offerings, though none have specific training or experience in marital education or counseling ministry. The author, however, believes that the congregants would be supportive of a new marital education and counseling ministry and would make use of the program in both its trial and implemented forms.

To summarize, ROLFM is a small, predominately white, age-diverse evangelical congregation in Pennsylvania. It does not currently benefit from a formal marital education or counseling ministry; instead it relies on the provision of marital counseling on need basis by one of its pastors with advanced training in pastoral counseling. Such a system is inadequate for countering marital dissatisfaction and threats of divorce, as there are no preemptive measures in place to address increasing marital dissatisfaction before reaching a critical stage forcing one or

both spouses to seek counseling. The key interventions of this study were the development and implementation of a marital education program in small groups and couples counseling ministry to operate in tandem with the church's overall ministry.

### **Problem Presented**

ROLFM lacks counseling services and marital education opportunities required to effectively address marital dissatisfaction, which can be pivotal in reducing divorce rates. Additionally, due to the congregation's diverse age range, congregants are at different stages of life and marriage, making a one-size-fits-all model for marital counseling even more insufficient. For instance, an older couple may have spent much time in church under the leadership of the same pastor, and therefore, might feel comfortable with bringing marital concerns to them, whereas, a younger, recently married couple may be less likely to do so, thereby contributing to the already low number of couples seeking marital counseling.<sup>9</sup> An additional issue in the delivery of quality marital education and counseling interventions is the fact that not every church has a pastor or an individual with extensive training in pastoral or general counseling, thus restricting the available types of interventions. For interventions utilized by this or other research to be useful to the general local church, they must be effective when performed by both extensively trained ministers and those without formal pastoral counseling training.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this DMIN thesis is to provide a marital counseling ministry to improve marital satisfaction and reduce the likelihood of divorce. The author believes that marital satisfaction is a key to a long-lasting marriage that is edifying to God and resistant to divorce;

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<sup>9</sup> Joshua N. Hook, Everett L. Worthington Jr., Jan P. Hook, Beth T. Miller, and Don E. Davis, "Marriage Matters: A Description and Initial Examination of a Church-Based Marital Education Program," *Pastoral Psychology* 60, no. 6 (2011), 870.

therefore, services that can increase marital satisfaction can further a local church's ability to minister to families. If the counseling and marital education programs are successful, couples should experience increased marital satisfaction, decreased marital dissatisfaction, and decreased likelihood of a divorce. Through a combination of couples counseling and marital education group sessions, this research evaluated the efficacy of these tools in a local ministry setting. It is important that these intervention measures are both feasible and effective when implemented by the average pastor who lacks specialized training. If these interventions are successful and practical for use in a local church setting, then ROLFM will implement them as both a nontargeted marital education program intended for married congregation members in general and a targeted marital counseling program intended for married couples experiencing conflict or discord.

### **Basic Assumptions**

The author conducted this DMIN research under the assumption that marital education and marital counseling interventions delivered within a local ministry context will be successful in helping couples achieve high marital satisfaction, thereby decreasing the likelihood of divorce. The author believes that effectively delivered marital education and marital counseling will positively impact the marital satisfaction of participating couples. The data obtained from this research, particularly the pre- and postintervention surveys, must be carefully analyzed to ensure that no bias influences the determination of the effectiveness of the study's marital education and marital counseling interventions. Further, these surveys must be designed in a manner that will provide clear and unbiased measurement of each couple's perception of their marital satisfaction before and after receiving the interventions.

## Definitions

Three concepts must be defined to clarify their use within this study. The term “intervention” implies a practice or strategy designed to change behavior or increase knowledge on a particular subject, which will involve the use of marital education and marital counseling provided during this study.<sup>10</sup> “Marital education” is a type of intervention that involves teaching couples in a group setting about interactions, which can reduce or increase marital satisfaction, and methods of improving the quality of marital interactions.<sup>11</sup> “Marital counseling,” meanwhile, is provided by a therapist who seeks to help couples “recognize and resolve conflicts and improve their relationships,” often in a short-term setting and usually including both partners.<sup>12</sup> These definitions will provide a framework for the key terms that will be used throughout this DMIN thesis.

## Limitations

Owing to the nature of this DMIN research, there are certain limitations to consider. First, this study relied on voluntary participation in its interventions, and although each participant was asked to persist throughout the entirety of the research period, this could not be guaranteed. Second, there was no guarantee that the participants would be honest about answering certain questions on their pre- and postparticipation surveys, which could skew certain data. Third, as this DMIN research was to be completed over a determined time period, this may or may not have reduced overall participation in the study. Fourth, as this study was performed within a

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<sup>10</sup> Missouri Department of Health & Senior Services, “What is an intervention?,” [https://health.mo.gov/data/interventionmica/index\\_4.html](https://health.mo.gov/data/interventionmica/index_4.html).

<sup>11</sup> American Psychological Association, “Marital Education Programs Help Keep Couples Together,” <https://www.apa.org/research/action/marital>.

<sup>12</sup> Mayo Clinic, “Marriage Counseling,” <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/marriage-counseling/about/pac-20385249>

specific local church ministry (i.e., ROLFM), constraints on demographics and sample size may have occurred. Specifically, the demographics of ROLFM may not have reflected the broader US demographics, as its congregation is overwhelming white with a notable Asian minority, and most, if not all, of the participants were evangelical, nondenominational Christians. Additionally, due to the relatively small size of ROLFM and the fact that not all of the church's married congregants will participate, the sample size of this research project was small, involving less than 30 couples. Lastly, determining the effectiveness of long-term marital counseling was beyond the scope of this research, but nonetheless may play a role in certain church-based contexts. This implies that participants who required more intensive or long-term interventions were referred elsewhere.

### **Delimitations**

In addition to its limitations, there were constraints on this research due to its overall purpose. As the author was studying the impact of certain interventions within a single local church setting, participation in the study was limited to congregants of ROLFM. Moreover, there was a single intervention provider (i.e., the author) for both marital education and marital counseling programs in this study, implying that the effectiveness and style of these programs was only reflective of a single practitioner.

### **Thesis Statement**

Through the author's research and interventions at ROLFM, the ultimate goal of this DMIN thesis was to determine whether marital education and counseling interventions will help congregants reach a greater understanding and reduce the likelihood of marital dissatisfaction and divorce. Ultimately, if a thorough, well-developed marital education and counseling ministry is established and services are provided to congregants at ROLFM, a better understanding of the

causes of marital discomfort can be determined, thereby reducing the impact of marital dissatisfaction on the quality of lives of couples and the likelihood of divorce.

The effectiveness of the program was ascertained using a preliminary survey of participating couples' knowledge of the causes and impact of marital dissatisfaction and divorce compared with a concluding survey and pre- and postparticipation survey of couples' perceptions of key indicators of marital satisfaction. All participating couples were instructed to take these surveys, which demonstrated whether the study's interventions decreased marital dissatisfaction and reduced the likelihood of divorce for those who received one or both of the interventions. Additionally, the surveys were used to determine whether one of the interventions (education or counseling) was more effective than the other in either increasing marital satisfaction or reducing the likelihood of divorce.

## **Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework**

As marriage relates to the lives of believers, there is immense information and background context available through the Word, church history, and previous research. For this DMIN research, examination of past studies on marital education and marital counseling was essential to provide context for what was to be accomplished. Both theological and theoretical frameworks will serve as the bedrock of this study.

### **Literature Review**

There is extensive research available on the subject of marriage and marital counseling for counselors. Among several themes in literature, five were of relevance to the subject of local church-based marital interventions. The five relevant these were as follows: benefits offered through marital education; the fact that few couples actively seek marital counseling; common causes of marital dissatisfaction; negative consequences of divorce; and marital education interventions that have been used and are supported by literature.

#### **Benefits of Marital Education**

The literature on marital education has determined quite decisively that well-planned and delivered educational interventions have benefits for couples who participate in such programs. Marital education programs are effective in improving marriages and initiating changes that last over an extended period.<sup>13</sup> Marriage maintenance education programs have been found to reduce divorce and separation rates a decade after participation while also improving marital quality and relationship skills.<sup>14</sup> Counseling can improve marital and sexual satisfaction for couples who are

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<sup>13</sup> Hook et al., 870.

<sup>14</sup> James J. Ponzetti, *Evidence-Based Approaches to Relationship and Marriage Education* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 65.

experiencing infertility.<sup>15</sup> Devlin et al. determined that the use of the integrative model can be highly effective in producing a “clinically significant increase in relationship satisfaction that was shown to persist for at least 5 years after treatment, with benefits further extending to individual, coparenting, and child functioning.”<sup>16</sup> The reciprocity counseling procedure utilized by Azrin et al. was effective in increasing marital happiness over the course of three–four weeks, with the first week witnessing the most substantial increase.<sup>17</sup> Shamblen et al.’s marital education had a positive impact on relationship satisfaction and a minor effect on reducing the likelihood of divorce.<sup>18</sup> Hawkins et al. found that marriage education interventions produce modest yet reliable benefits, at least for white middle-class families, as the researchers could not find enough data to examine efficacy for other ethnicities and social backgrounds.<sup>19</sup> In one case, the discernment counseling method resulted in 42% reconciliation, 47% divorce, and 11% hold rate among participating couples after two years, despite the study been conducted with couples with far above average rates of distress.<sup>20</sup> Relationship education programs can provide

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<sup>15</sup> Maryam Vizheh, Mino Pakgohar, Gholamreza Babaei, and Fatemeh Ramezanzadeh, “Effect of Counseling on Quality of Marital Relationship of Infertile Couples: A Randomized, Controlled Trial (RCT) Study,” *Archives of Gynecology and Obstetrics* 287, no. 3 (2013), 583.

<sup>16</sup> James M. Devlin, Jennifer Toof, Linda West, Nicole Andrews, and Jessica Cole, “Integrative Family Counseling,” *The Family Journal* 27, no. 3 (2019), 320.

<sup>17</sup> Nathan H. Azrin, Barry J. Naster, and Robert Jones, “Reciprocity Counseling: A Rapid Learning-Based Procedure for Marital Counseling,” *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 11, no. 4 (1973), 380.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen R. Shamblen, Andrew Gluck, William Wubbenhorst, and David A. Collins, “The Economic Benefits of Marriage and Family Strengthening Programs,” *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 39, no. 3 (09, 2018), 400.

<sup>19</sup> Alan J. Hawkins, Victoria L. Blanchard, Scott A. Baldwin, and Elizabeth B. Fawcett, “Does Marriage and Relationship Education Work? A Meta-Analytic Study,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 76, no. 5 (2008), 730.

<sup>20</sup> William J. Doherty, Steven M. Harris, and Jason L. Wilde, “Discernment Counseling for “Mixed-Agenda” Couples,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 42, no. 2 (2016), 252.

“substantial immediate increases in [marital] satisfaction after RE.”<sup>21</sup> After or during divorce proceedings, divorce education programs lead to lower rates of conflict, fewer returns to court, more positive family functioning, fewer symptoms of psychological distress, and better divorce adjustment.<sup>22</sup> Both integrative behavioral couple therapy and traditional behavioral couple therapy provide a wide range of benefits to participating couples as long as they are effectively delivered.<sup>23</sup> Based on this research, it is evident that the implementation of marital education and counseling interventions yields numerous benefits.

There are several reasons why marital education and counseling is effective in helping couples improve marital satisfaction and overall perceived marriage quality. Marital counseling can be crucial in helping couples recognize common and specific stressors leading to anxiety and dysfunction in the overall emotional system of their relationship.<sup>24</sup> Frederick DiBlasio found that decision-based forgiveness sessions were found to be effective in helping couples seek and offer forgiveness and improve their overall marital satisfaction.<sup>25</sup> Marital counseling can serve as a means to address misunderstandings that often negatively impact sexual health and satisfaction

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<sup>21</sup> W. Kim Halford, Christopher A. Pepping, Peter Hilpert, Guy Bodenmann, Keithia L. Wilson, Dean Busby, Jeffrey Larson, and Thomas Holman, "Immediate Effect of Couple Relationship Education on Low-Satisfaction Couples: A Randomized Clinical Trial Plus an Uncontrolled Trial Replication," *Behavior Therapy* 46, no. 3 (2015), 418.

<sup>22</sup> Paul R. Amato, "Research on Divorce: Continuing Trends and New Developments," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 3 (2010), 660.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Christensen, David C. Atkins, Sara Berns, Jennifer Wheeler, Donald H. Baucom, and Lorelei E. Simpson, "Traditional Versus Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy for Significantly and Chronically Distressed Married Couples," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 72, no. 2 (2004), 188.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald W. Richardson, *Couples in Conflict: A Family Systems Approach to Marriage Counseling* (Lanham: Fortress Press, 2010), 30-31.

<sup>25</sup> Frederick A. DiBlasio, "Christ-like Forgiveness in Marital Counseling: A Clinical Follow-Up of Two Empirical Studies." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 29, no. 4 (2010), 291.

in a marriage.<sup>26</sup> Marital education can lead to numerous benefits, such as allowing couples the opportunity to discuss their issues in a controlled, safe setting.<sup>27</sup> Marital education can serve as a means to uncover and address the divergent goals that often arise once a marriage enters distress.<sup>28</sup> The use of marital education can help couples feel more invested in their marriages, seek additional therapy, and depend on a relatively successful education experience, which might be the only option for low-income couples.<sup>29</sup> Husbands and wives have satisfaction differences in regards to why they seek marital therapy; counseling can be used to uncover and highlight these differences to help resolve them.<sup>30</sup> Marriage education can “give individuals and couples the knowledge and skills needed to build and sustain a healthy marriage.”<sup>31</sup> The literature review makes it clear that there are ample reasons as to why marital education and counseling are effective in assisting couples improve numerous areas of marital satisfaction.

#### Minimal Seeking of Counseling by Couples

Another common area of concern in marriage counseling is the unfortunate trend of not seeking marital counseling or education, especially among distressed couples. Hook et al. noted that “many couples do not seek therapy ... indeed, between 80% and 90% of divorcing couples

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<sup>26</sup> Zahra Mofaraheh, Saeedeh Esfahani, and Marzieh Shahsiah, “The Effect of Marital Counselling on Sexual Satisfaction of Couples,” *Journal of Human Health* 1, no. 3 (2015), 85.

<sup>27</sup> Angela Skurtu, *Helping Couples Overcome Infidelity: A Therapist’s Manual* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018), 19.

<sup>28</sup> Frank D. Fincham, Julie Hall, and Steven R. H. Beach, “Forgiveness in Marriage: Current Status and Future Directions,” *Family Relations* 55, no. 4 (2006), 420.

<sup>29</sup> Markman and Ritchie, 660.

<sup>30</sup> Brian D. Doss, Lorelei E. Simpson, and Andrew Christensen, “Why do Couples Seek Marital Therapy?” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 35, no. 6 (2004), 611.

<sup>31</sup> Alan J. Hawkins, Jason S. Carroll, William J. Doherty, and Brian Willoughby, “A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education,” *Family Relations* 53, no. 5 (2004), 557.

have not consulted with a mental health professional.”<sup>32</sup> A second study determined that only 20% of couples going through divorce sought marital counseling prior to permanent separation, indicating that a large percentage of couples never pursue valuable counseling and education resources.<sup>33</sup> A study by Maryam et al. discovered that couples seldom seek counseling; the authors proposed that infertility clinics (who serve a population more likely to experience marital distress) provide a specific location for counseling services to counter this issue.<sup>34</sup> Angela Skurtu notes that “the average couple waits seven years after problems start before coming in to seek help,” indicating that even among couples who do seek counseling, such assistance comes after years of built-up emotional baggage.<sup>35</sup> This explains why many couples start to seek marriage counseling only once the threat of divorce appears to be imminent and practically unavoidable.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, a vast majority of couples divorce without seeking counseling, implying that preventative measures are necessary.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to not pursuing and using marital education and counseling, there are more specific factors that further complicate the matter. Sometimes only one partner will seek counseling; in these cases, it is important to encourage the seeking partner to request that their spouse comes in for counseling as well, and the counselor can neutrally assist in this when the seeking partner is encountering difficulties even after receiving guidance on how to ask.<sup>38</sup> Not

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<sup>32</sup> Hook et al., 870.

<sup>33</sup> Halford et al., 411.

<sup>34</sup> Vizheh et al., 588.

<sup>35</sup> Skurtu, 86-87.

<sup>36</sup> Doherty et al., 247.

<sup>37</sup> Ponzetti, 187.

<sup>38</sup> Richardson, 99-100.

only do couples have a tendency to not seek counseling for marital issues, many do not explicitly seek or grant forgiveness to their partner, which can further derail the healing process.<sup>39</sup> Whether partners recognize trouble in their relationship is central to obtaining counseling, though most couples are unlikely to realize the depth of issues until profound distress has developed.<sup>40</sup> Disadvantaged couples are even less likely to seek counseling than average couples, mainly due to time and financial restraints.<sup>41</sup> While many couples may experience sexual issues at some point in their marriage, few actually consult a professional for counseling.<sup>42</sup> Doss et al. determined in the course of their research that wives are far more likely to seek marital counseling than husbands.<sup>43</sup> Another study determined that women are more inclined to seek couples therapy than men to improve their happiness quotient in relationships and prevent separation.<sup>44</sup> The amount and quantity of marital education might influence the couples' likelihood to seek it (e.g., couples who are less inclined to seek marriage counseling may go for a low dosage offering, while others might seek a high intensity curriculum).<sup>45</sup> On a positive note, using integrative models can be effective in cases where the counselor may only be able to work with one partner due to unwillingness of the other partner to engage in the counseling process.<sup>46</sup> Further, Markman and Ritchie discovered that couples may more likely seek marital education

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<sup>39</sup> DiBlasio, 291.

<sup>40</sup> Shamblen et al., 392.<sup>41</sup> Hawkins et al., "Does Marriage and Relationship Education Work?," 728.

<sup>41</sup> Hawkins et al., "Does Marriage and Relationship Education Work?," 728.

<sup>42</sup> Mofaraheh et al., 85.

<sup>43</sup> Doss et al., 610-11.

<sup>44</sup> Christensen et al., 178.

<sup>45</sup> Hawkins et al., "A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education," 549.

<sup>46</sup> Devlin et al., 322.

than therapy, and that marital education may lead to couples opting for additional, more intensive assistance immediately or in the near future.<sup>47</sup>

### Causes of Marital Dissatisfaction

As marital dissatisfaction is usually the driving force behind divorce and marital counseling and education, it is important to understand its most common causes. Dissatisfaction is likely to develop over time while newlywed couples are experience a period of high tolerance toward one another.<sup>48</sup> Further, negative communication is often a root cause and perpetuating factor in marital dissatisfaction.<sup>49</sup> Marital disruption is most common in the first five years of marriage, after which the likelihood declines dramatically, with a major cause of divorce being dissonance between expectations and the reality of marriage.<sup>50</sup> Infertility and sexual dissatisfaction among couples can be major causes of marital problems; these issues can be tackled though counseling.<sup>51</sup> Several causes of marital dissatisfaction, such as infidelity and lying among others, can be resolved with genuine forgiveness.<sup>52</sup> Misunderstandings regarding sexual issues such as differing levels of libido and sexual disorders can place tremendous stress on a marriage.<sup>53</sup> Couples enter marriage with certain expectations, which at times are not met through the course of the relationship, thereby leading to marital dissatisfaction.<sup>54</sup> A wide range

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<sup>47</sup> Markman and Ritchie, 660; 667.

<sup>48</sup> Ponzetti, 118.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Clarke-Stewart and Brentano, 16-21.

<sup>51</sup> Vizheh et al., 583.

<sup>52</sup> DiBlasio, 299.

<sup>53</sup> Mofaraheh et al., 85.

<sup>54</sup> Azrin et al., 366.

of factors contribute to marital distress and vary dramatically among couples, with the common theme that they undermine marital satisfaction and increase the likelihood of cost-bearing factors.<sup>55</sup> Affairs have become an extremely common cause of marital discontent, with approximately half or more marital counseling cases involving couples who are dealing with the consequences of an affair at some stage.<sup>56</sup> Transgressions that violate perceptions of marital sanctity are often the most damaging and difficult to repair.<sup>57</sup> Educational level can be a predictor of divorce as high levels of education typically indicate high financial stability. Other factors including the equitable division of household tasks, presence/absence of infidelity, commitment levels, and levels of trust and love are also important.<sup>58</sup> Marital dissatisfaction causes vary dramatically by individual and sex, sex/physical affection, effective communication, and conflict over child-rearing being the most common.<sup>59</sup>

#### Negative Consequences of Divorce

While divorce has become a far more common phenomenon in the United States over the past few decades, the process carries a wide range of detrimental consequences for the couple. There are negative health, social, and economic consequences for both children and the divorcing spouses.<sup>60</sup> Divorce causes mental and physical health problems that can last long after the divorce is finalized.<sup>61</sup> Standards of living decline by 28–48% following a divorce, social

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<sup>55</sup> Shamblen et al., 388.

<sup>56</sup> Skurtu, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Fincham et al., 417.

<sup>58</sup> Amato, 652.<sup>59</sup> Doss et al., 610-11.

<sup>59</sup> Doss et al., 610-11.

<sup>60</sup> Ponzetti, 198.<sup>61</sup> Hook et al., 869-70.

<sup>61</sup> Hook et al., 869-70.

networks shrink for one or both partners, and role changes are common as each partner learns to take on roles that the other formerly had, which leads to distress at least initially.<sup>62</sup> Further, many divorcing couples experience anxiety, anger, depression, and loneliness; face far greater rates of suicide; and have an increased likelihood of developing health problems.<sup>63</sup> Divorce is an increasing trend that has a negative effect on the children of disrupted marriages.<sup>64</sup> Divorce carries dramatic economic consequences, while counseling is 381–432% cheaper than marital dissolution.<sup>65</sup> Temporary separations are rarely a good option for ultimate reconciliation, as 87% of couples who separate eventually divorce.<sup>66</sup> Divorced men and women report worse physical and mental health problems than married couples, exhibit more symptoms of depression and anxiety, more substance abuse, and high overall mortality rates.<sup>67</sup> Due to these negative consequences and challenges of marital counseling with highly distressed couples, Markman and Ritchie discovered that interventions aimed to prevent relationship problems from developing through a combination of education and therapy were far more effective at preventing divorce than waiting for distress to set in.<sup>68</sup>

#### Marital Education Interventions

The final and most important theme identified in literature was that, considering the consequences of divorce, benefits of marriage counseling, and complicating factors in delivering

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<sup>62</sup> Clarke-Stewart and Brentano, 67-76.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Azrin et al., 365.

<sup>65</sup> Shamblen et al., 396.

<sup>66</sup> Skurtu, 47.

<sup>67</sup> Amato, 658.

<sup>68</sup> Markman and Ritchie, 658.

marital education and counseling, it is crucial for counselors to be extremely mindful of the interventions they incorporate into their teaching/counseling process. Marital education and therapy interventions were therefore examined during this literature review from a diverse range of theoretical thoughts and backgrounds. Devlin et al. examined Lebow's model, which is based on a systematic perspective that emphasizes the functions and systems that contribute to the functionality and problems of a family. Instead of depending on a certain sequence, the therapist and client(s) under the Lebow's model explore and explain aspects that may be contributing to counseling session effectiveness and that are adaptable.<sup>69</sup> Ponzetti presents an RME program combined with a logic model framework that emphasizes the particularities of each couple's unique situation by providing inputs (such as staff, curriculum, etc.) and relevant activities; encouraging continual participation; and tracking short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes.<sup>70</sup> Hook et al. utilized a nine-week workshop where couples received information on a topic and then engaged in activities and homework related to the topics, such as family-of-origin issues, empathetic dialog, conflict resolution, forgiveness, sexual intimacy, boundaries, rebuilding trust, managing anger, negotiating finances, and raising children.<sup>71</sup> Richardson used the Bowen theory, which focuses on client's personal relationships rather than the client-counselor relationship to reduce dependence on the counselor and views counseling as coaching clients toward the end goal.<sup>72</sup> In blended families, stepparents should make mild but consistent attempts toward develop positive relationships with their stepchildren, not withdrawing when

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<sup>69</sup> Devlin et al., 322-23.

<sup>70</sup> Ponzetti, 198.

<sup>71</sup> Hook et al., 871.

<sup>72</sup> Richardson, 85-96.

met with rejection and leaning toward having the biological parent discipline their biological child, especially in the early years of partnership.<sup>73</sup> Frederick DiBlasio noted the effectiveness of using a single, comprehensive (three+ hour) forgiveness session of 13 steps that includes discussing, seeking and granting forgiveness, and performing a ceremonial act.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, Mofaraheh et al. advocated for two weekly sessions in a month to cover a wide range of specific and general sexual-related topics for engaged or married couples.<sup>75</sup> Azrin et al. used three –four weeks of reciprocity counseling in several areas of marital satisfaction to improve participants’ self-ratings of their relationships.<sup>76</sup> Four different curricula were used by Shamblen et al., each of which was specialized in helping low-income families and in decreasing negative interactions while supporting increase in positive behaviors.<sup>77</sup> Skurtu presented an infidelity intervention including a nine milestone process that can utilize as many sessions based on each couple’s unique situation.<sup>78</sup> Doherty et al. used a discernment counseling method with couples where one partner has not yet made a final decision regarding what avenue to pursue with their marriage (i.e., to attempt and repair the marriage or to divorce), which included one–five sessions of individual and couples counseling helping “couples have greater clarity and confidence about a direction for their relationship.”<sup>79</sup> Fincham et al. used Enright’s model of forgiveness in their study, which is a four-phase process where a victim explores their hurt, after which the nature of

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<sup>73</sup> Clarke-Stewart and Brentano, 229.

<sup>74</sup> DiBlasio, 292.

<sup>75</sup> Mofaraheh et al., 85.

<sup>76</sup> Azrin et al., 365.

<sup>77</sup> Shamblen et al., 389.

<sup>78</sup> Skurtu, 5.

<sup>79</sup> Doherty et al., 248-49.

forgiveness is discussed and the individual attempts to forgive the offender. The offender is then accountable for gaining insights into the hurt they had perpetrated, and the process concludes if/when the victim moves toward finding resolution and meaning.<sup>80</sup> Halford et al. designed a partnership questionnaire for couples; the couples responded to the questionnaire, after which the researchers delivered couple coping enhancement training over a period of six sessions lasting three hours each.<sup>81</sup> Hawkins promoted group-based CRE, emphasizing that it should be ahistorical and may or may not involve the exchange of personal information; the authors presented a seven dimension curriculum that included the following elements: content, intensity, methods, timing, setting, target(s), and delivery.<sup>82</sup>

### **Theological Foundations**

Marriage has a rich tradition and plentiful scriptural support as the bedrock of Christian homes. From the very first marital union between Adam and Eve, from which came the entire human race, the importance of marriage and its intense spiritual and emotional value is made clear in Genesis 2:24, where it is noted that “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”<sup>83</sup> The bond between man and wife is so strong and unique that God itself offered a biblical command to prioritize one’s marriage over one’s earliest and most powerful bond, the parent–child relationship. Similarly, the Old Testament echoes the importance of God-fearing marriages in numerous cases, including the high priority Isaac placed on finding a godly wife for his son, the number of Levitical laws

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<sup>80</sup> Fincham et al., 420.

<sup>81</sup> Halford et al., 417.

<sup>82</sup> Hawkins et al., “A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education,” 547-55.

<sup>83</sup> Genesis 2:24, NASB.

on the subject of marriage, and consequences of David and Solomon’s weakness in having multiple marriages, among others. Moving to the New Testament, Paul preached the high nature of marriage in the lives of Christian believers through his writings, including Hebrews 13:4 where he stated “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”<sup>84</sup> This and other scripture verses reverberate the broader teaching that the institution of marriage has a clear purpose as the ordained manner for men and women to experience sex and bring the next generation into the world without committing sin against God through fornication.<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately, human flaws often lead to dysfunctions in the ability of a husband and wife to relate to one another, the result being marital dissatisfaction and, in the most severe cases, marital dissolution. Christ himself, when questioned on the matter of divorce by the Pharisees, made it clear that divorce is never in accordance with God’s intention for two people who have been brought together, rather it is a result of humanity’s fallen state and the inability or refusal to mend what God has brought (or has allowed to be brought) together. The teachings of Jesus on the subject reflect an emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation, first as a reflection of God’s tremendous love and forgiveness of each and every person as demonstrated through life and sacrifice of Christ, and second as a consequence of mending a relationship as deep and emotionally significant as marriage.<sup>86</sup> It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the first point, as forgiveness is not only a fundamental value of the Christian faith in entirety, but one of the most critical factors in

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<sup>84</sup> Hebrews 13:4, NASB.

<sup>85</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1706, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/matthew-henry/1Cor.7.1-1Cor.7.9>.

<sup>86</sup> D. Stuart Briscoe et al., *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+19&version=NASB>.

assisting couples in recovering from marital distress. Regardless of the exact source of marital dissatisfaction, distress comes from a perceived action (or lack of action) by the other partner; therefore, a combination of promoting awareness of the other partner's feelings and intentions and mutual forgiveness for past, current, and future wrongs is essential for couples to heal and sustain their relationship. Here, a trusted member of the church, usually a minister due to his role as a leader and teacher, can intervene. As a minister is generally the most visible member of a congregation, they are entrusted with safeguarding the local church and usually possess some kind of counseling training and experience; if they have any degree of theology/pastoral education, it makes sense that from a theological and practical standpoint, they are likely to spearhead most of the marital interventions.

The aspects discussed above raise the question of what to do when a marriage enters a period of trial and dissatisfaction, so that partners can stay married out of love and mutual satisfaction rather than obligation. While there are no biblical passages that explicitly reference marital counseling or provide solutions to marital dissatisfaction, there are many that highlight the role of a local church in assisting its members through personal tribulations. As a marriage is the God-intended means through which families are created and the next generation is brought to life, it is critical that the church strengthens and encourages healthy marriages. Many different avenues are available for a church to accomplish this, such as sermons on the importance of marriage and consequences of divorce and remarriage; bible studies on marriage; couples fellowship groups; preemptive marital education programs on the causes of marital dissatisfaction and the value of a marriage (and as this study utilizes); and marital counseling programs that work in an intensive setting to diagnose and combat couple-specific sources of marital dissatisfaction. Since the Word does not emphasize any of these avenues for improving

marital relations and safeguarding against divorce, each local church must determine what interventions will be the most useful in assisting their congregations. For the researcher, meanwhile, the issue is to find the most effective interventions for a specific setting according to data obtained through high-quality research, such as this study. Therefore, considering the high value placed on marriage by scripture and the church's role to strengthen marriages, coupled with the role of local ministers as shepherds, teachers, and healers of their flock, the author believes that a marital education and marital counseling program delivered by a minister in a local church setting is a theologically supported method for dealing with marital dissatisfaction and reducing the likelihood of marital dissolution.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

The author used all available means to develop both intervention methods. There were plentiful models in both groups, some of which were previously noted in the literature review. Of particular note was Hook et al.'s nine-week workshop model,<sup>87</sup> which is the foundation of the marital education program, with slight modifications to accommodate additional models and to match with the specific needs of participants based on the preparticipation survey.<sup>88</sup> The author utilized the seven dimension curriculum of Hawkins's model to ensure that this research's marital education program has fundamental elements similar to the foundation of education sessions.<sup>89</sup> In addition to Hawkins's model, a questionnaire similar to Halford et al.'s was incorporated in the first session of the marital education program to guide the author through the areas of greatest need among participating couples and to bridge knowledge gaps.<sup>90</sup> Ultimately,

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<sup>87</sup> Hook et al., 871.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Hawkins et al., "A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education," 547-55.

<sup>90</sup> Halford et al., 417.

this research's marital education raised awareness of common causes of marital dissatisfaction, addressed sources of discord, trained couples on available techniques for increasing marital satisfaction, and held dialogs to raise participants' concerns.

Note that none of the participating couples were interested in receiving marital counseling. Regardless, for the purpose of this and possible future studies by other researchers, the premise and objectives of the counseling portion of the program are presented in this and subsequent sections of this thesis. The guiding philosophical principle of marital counseling in this study was to diagnose and address dysfunctional elements in the marriages of participating couples and help them rebuild healthy, God-honoring marriages with happy, mutually loving, and supportive spouses. Each couple was to be treated in a personalized manner that accommodated the needs of not only the couple as a unique unit but also as an individual partner. Additionally, the author believes that it is important for Christian marital counseling to be rooted in Christ-like forgiveness and love between partners rather than simply addressing causes of marital dissatisfaction in a checklist fashion. A number of particular models and instruments shall be considered for this study to pursue these stated goals. To this end, this DMIN research utilized a form of Lebow's model as identified by Devlin et al. that emphasized flexibility in terms of counseling session structure rather than following a formal, standardized counseling process.<sup>91</sup> Whenever it may have appeared appropriate for each couple in their marital counseling trajectory, the author attempted to provide a forgiveness session based on DiBlasio's 13-step model.<sup>92</sup> Lastly, each counseling session was to be self-rated to track each partner's perception of their relationship to determine whether progress had been made or a different

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<sup>91</sup> Devlin et al., 322-23.

<sup>92</sup> DiBlasio, 292.

approach should have been taken to assist the couple.<sup>93</sup> The author believes that by basing this study's marital counseling program on values noted above and by utilizing the models and instruments from several other studies in literature review, the marital counseling program would have been effective in identifying and addressing key causes of marital dissatisfaction among participants and assisting them to reevaluate their overall perception of what marriage is from a Christian perspective.

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<sup>93</sup> Azrin et al., 365.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This study provided a marital education program for the married congregants of ROLFM; the program intended to increase awareness regarding causes of marital dissatisfaction, enhance participants' knowledge of techniques to improve marital satisfaction, and raise overall perceptions of marital satisfaction. With this goal in mind, it was important to examine exactly how each intervention was designed and how each of the noted parameters of success was measured.

#### **Intervention Design**

Initially, it was essential to obtain approval of ROLFM's senior pastor for both parts of the program before beginning to administer the interventions of this DMIN research. Once IRB approval was obtained for both marital education and marital counseling, the researcher informed ROLFM's congregation that the program would be starting within a few weeks. Married congregants from ROLFM were asked to participate in the program through several avenues, including Sunday Worship announcements, the church's Facebook page and text message system, and word-of-mouth. Participation in this study officially began when a couple attended the first marital education session. During the first session, couples were informed of the study's procedure and objectives, including limitations of the program's short-term marital counseling and how marital education workshop and marital counseling will be conducted, among others. Further, a participation agreement stating the program's details and expectations and encouraging participants to stay through to its completion was provided to all couples to sign.

At least five couples were required to conduct this DMIN research; couples who willingly participated in the program were asked to attend all marital education sessions.

Additionally, the initial marital education sessions were used to evaluate which participants would benefit most from solely participating in the marital education aspect of the program rather than a combination of marital education and counseling. If it was determined that marital counseling would be helpful or a couple requested for it, such couples would receive weekly counseling for up to eight weeks at times convenient to both the counselor and the couple alongside the marital education program. While the content and format of the marital counseling sessions were dependent on the unique requirements of each couple, the marital education program was largely based on Hook et al.'s nine-week workshop adapted to a condensed three-week, three-session program, where each of the sessions focused on a combination of the following topics: family-of-origin issues, empathetic dialog, conflict resolution, forgiveness, sexual intimacy, boundaries, rebuilding trust, managing anger, negotiating finances, and raising children.<sup>94</sup> In addition to the content of the three-week workshop, supplementary topics were addressed as needed to ensure that the education portion of this program was as relevant as possible to the interests and needs of ROLFM's couples.

One of the primary strengths of this marital education and marital counseling program was its low resource and training requirements. Required resources included a room, seating, and access to a screen for projection of digital materials to participants, which were provided by ROLFM's leadership. The marital education workshop was conducted on Saturday evenings from 6:00 to 7:00-8:00 PM. The researcher utilized numerous marital counseling interventions, techniques, and tactics used by other therapists/researchers to assemble an effective repertoire of methods. Lastly, the researcher anticipated further refinement and formalization of the marital

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<sup>94</sup> Hook et al., 871.

counseling program's process to provide a solid framework that offered flexibility based on each couple's requirements.

In terms of the overall flow of the marital education program, week one of the workshop comprised an introduction to the goals of the program, an analysis of which couples may benefit from marital counseling, and a discussion/lesson on empathetic dialog and conflict resolution skills. The second week covered family-of-origin issues, including their impact, how they manifested in a marriage, and what can be done to resolve or minimize their impact, as well as how to manage anger in a healthy and productive manner. The third week began with setting boundaries, continued with rebuilding and strengthening trust within a marriage, and concluded with the power of forgiveness and how couples can work toward offering and receiving it. The fourth and final week covered negotiations and methods of improving family finances; issues involving sexual intimacy, particularly the benefits of proper sexual intimacy; common roadblocks faced by a majority of couples; tools for identifying areas of improvement in marriage; and discussions on raising children, including learning how to take parenting decisions, parenting as a team, and dealing with common conflicts such as differing parenting personalities/styles. In addition to these major topics, it was the researcher's goal to ensure that couples felt comfortable raising other topics of discussion that may be included in one of the four weeks or combined during a fifth week of the workshop.

The flow of marital counseling was more fluid and dynamically structured. After determining that a couple would benefit from marital counseling or on request, the couple and the researcher set a weekly day and time that worked for both parties. The first counseling session was mostly used to gather information on the couple's situation, observe the interactions and dynamics between the couple, and determine a framework of topics to be emphasized over

the course of the counseling sessions that lasted for four to eight weeks. Each subsequent week included a debrief of what had occurred during the previous sessions, including the results of any assigned homework, review of relevant topics based on the couple's requirements, and conclusion that included an appropriate homework assignment for the following week. As the middle of the program was based on each couple's unique situation, the final week of counseling involved a recap of everything that had occurred over the course of the counseling period, a reminder of the tools and techniques that had been discussed, and an emphasis on any progress made. This final session served as a transition for the couple to set aside their differences and work on their marriage without the researcher's intervention or, if needed, a referral was made to a qualified marital counselor.

Based on the researcher's knowledge of ROLFM's congregation, there were at least a few couples who were experiencing substantial marital distress. While there were varying degrees of severity of this distress, the marital education and counseling program offered techniques and knowledge that benefited all couples, including those who were yet to experience notable marital distress. Due to the short time frame of the program, the researcher concluded that two to four weeks was adequate to assess if the program was providing any benefits to participants by increasing awareness of the common causes of marital distress and countermeasures to promote feelings of marital satisfaction. If one or both portions of the program were ineffective, the researcher would inquire into whether program adjustments could improve outcomes of the DMIN research, or if marital education and marital counseling was insufficient. As this study was built on models with a proven track record of success, it was anticipated that the current program would be effective.

### **Implementation of the Intervention Design**

The marital education program was delivered to 10 participating couples, in-person and online over the course of three weeks. During the first session, the participating couples were provided with an introductory survey and the goals and structure of the program was explained. Next, the reasoning behind the church-based marital education program was covered and the common causes of marital dissatisfaction, empathetic dialog, conflict resolution skills, and family-of-origin issues were discussed. In the second session, couples were instructed on the giving and receiving of forgiveness, establishment and respect of marital boundaries, importance and maintenance of marital trust, and management of finances as a couple. In the third and final session, topics covered included the consequences and management of anger, sexual intimacy navigation, discussions on raising children, and common blended family issues and avenues for managing conflict, post which the participating couples were asked to complete the marital education exit survey.

## Chapter 4: Results

As participants for the marital education program were recruited, it became clear that no participants were interested in receiving marital counseling; thus, the marital education program was delivered to only 10 participating couples. The marital education program was conducted over the course of three sessions, after which data from the program was compiled.

Based on the Introduction to Marital Education Survey (Appendix A), marital satisfaction at the beginning of the program was rated an average of 3.85 of 5 on a scale of 2 (somewhat unsatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), whereas the couples offered an average 3.75 rating of their anticipation that the marital education program would result in improved marital satisfaction (question five). The average ratings for questions eight and nine, which measured the importance each participant placed on marital satisfaction and how they believed their spouse valued marital satisfaction, were 4.90 and 4.65, respectively, indicating that participants placed a very high value on marital satisfaction and believed that their spouses did so as well. Other important information obtained from the Introduction to Marital Education Survey included concerns that spouses would not communicate openly in the context of a group marital education program.

At the conclusion of the marital education program, a Marital Education Exit Survey (Appendix B) was used to collect data regarding couples' perception of the program's effectiveness in improving marital satisfaction and developing critical marital conflict resolution skills. Question five asked participants to rate their marital satisfaction after attending the marital education sessions, receiving an average response of 4.4. Question six asked participants to rate the effectiveness of the marital education sessions in improving marital satisfaction, which received an average rating of 4.05. Question seven inquired about how likely participants would be to recommend a marital education program to a friend, which received an average rating of

4.65. In the anonymous Part II of the exit survey, participants were asked to rate how effective they found the researcher to be in delivering the material covered in the marital education sessions and in facilitating discussion, with an average ratings of 4.65 and 4.70, respectively.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Several important conclusions can be drawn from the study findings. First, marital satisfaction ratings ranged from 3.85 at the beginning of the study to 4.4 at the conclusion of the study; a 12.5% increase was observed over the course of a three-week marital education program. This indicates that marital education can improve marital satisfaction when delivered as part of a church-based program. Second, participants had a high likelihood of recommending a similar program to others, indicating that when an effective marital education program is established in a church, the program will begin to draw interest as participants recommend the program to their friends and family. Overall, these results verify the hypothesis that a church-based marital education program would be effective in improving marital satisfaction among participating couples, which aligns with the literature review.

Other crucial discoveries were made by the researcher. As noted by several studies in the literature review, couples often delay counseling or marital education until significant marital dysfunction has begun to occur or do not seek counseling or marital education at all. The researcher found it difficult to recruit participants for the program, which could negatively impact the effectiveness of a program aiming to address marital dissatisfaction in its early stages. Additionally, as noted by some of the participating couples, a marital education program has the drawback of possibly reducing the likelihood of participants to communicate openly about specific issues faced in their marriage, which could be disadvantageous to improving marital satisfaction. This could be addressed by promoting a marital counseling component where couples could discuss more specific marital issues in a private setting with a facilitator/counselor.

While this study verified the hypothesis that church-based marital education programs can be effective in improving marital satisfaction among participating couples, future studies

could further expand on these findings. First, a study to establish if improved rates of marital satisfaction were maintained long term (i.e., one year or longer after the delivery of the marital education program) would be useful in determining if marital education programs have long-lasting effects for participating couples. Second, a study on both marital counseling and marital education components, where rates of marital satisfaction before and after participation were recorded, with a control group receiving only marital education along with an experimental group receiving both marital education and counseling, would be beneficial in examining whether marital counseling helped enhance marital satisfaction.

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## Appendix A

### Introduction to Marital Education Survey

### Introduction to Marital Education Survey

This survey will ask for some introductory information on you and your spouse, as well as your expectations for the marital education sessions, including what you hope to gain from them, any concerns you may have, etc. The information from this survey will be kept confidential and any information will be presented in a way that your identity will only be known to the researcher. Your responses will not be made directly available to your spouse unless you desire to make them known yourself. If you have any questions or concerns about anything regarding the marital counseling process or the survey itself please inform the researcher as soon as possible.

1. What is your Couple ID#?

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2. What do you hope to gain from the marital education sessions?

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3. Do you have any concerns regarding your participation in the marital education sessions? If so, please note them in as much detail as possible.

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4. How would you rate your current marital satisfaction based on the following scale? (Please circle only one number)

1	2	3	4	5
Very Unsatisfied				Very Satisfied

5. How effective are you anticipating these marital education sessions to be in improving your marital satisfaction? (Please circle only one number)

1	2	3	4	5
Very Ineffective				Very Effective

6. How much time are you prepared to devote to actively and purposefully improve marital satisfaction?  
(Please circle only one letter)

- A. 0 to less than an hour a week
- B. 1 – 3 hours a week
- C. 3 – 5 hours a week
- D. 5+ hours a week

7. How much time do you think your partner is prepared to devote to actively and purposefully improve marital satisfaction? (Please circle only one letter)

- A. 0 to less than an hour a week
- B. 1 – 3 hours a week
- C. 3 – 5 hours a week
- D. 5+ hours a week

8. How important is improving your marital satisfaction to you?

1	2	3	4	5
Not Important at All				Very Important

9. How important do you believe is improving marital satisfaction for your partner? (Please circle only one number)

1	2	3	4	5
Not Important at All				Very Important

10. How willing would you be to sacrifice activities that you enjoy and/or financial resources, if it would improve marital satisfaction? (Please circle only one number)

1	2	3	4	5
Not Willing at All				Very Willing

11. How willing do you believe your partner is to sacrifice activities that they enjoy and/or financial resources, if it would improve marital satisfaction?

1

2

3

4

5

Not Willing at All

Very Willing

12. Are there specific topics that you are hoping the marital education sessions will cover? If so, what are they?

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**Appendix B**

**Marital Education Exit Survey**

**Marital Education Exit Survey**

**Part I**

This survey will ask for some exit information regarding your experience with the marital education sessions, your overall opinion of their effectiveness, and so on. The information from this survey will be kept confidential and any information will be presented in a way that your identity will only be known to the researcher. Your responses will not be made directly available to your spouse unless you desire to make them known yourself. If you have any questions or concerns about anything regarding the marital counseling process or the survey itself, please inform the researcher as soon as possible.

1. What is your Couple ID#?

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2. What was the most important information you learned from the marital education sessions, if applicable?

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3. Which sessions, if any, did you feel were most relevant to your marriage or you personally?  
(Please circle all that apply)

Session 1

Session 2

Session 3

4. Which sessions, if any, did you feel were irrelevant to your marriage or you personally?  
(Please circle all that apply)

Session 1

Session 2

Session 3

5. How would you rate your marital satisfaction after attending the marital education sessions?  
(Please circle only one number)

1

2

3

4

5

Very Unsatisfied

Very Satisfied



# Marital Education Exit Survey

## Part II

This survey will ask for some exit information regarding your experience with the marital education sessions, your overall opinion of their effectiveness, and so on. The information from this survey will be kept confidential and any information will be presented in a way that your identity will only be known to the researcher. Your responses will not be made directly available to your spouse unless you desire to make them known yourself. If you have any questions or concerns about anything regarding the marital counseling process or the survey itself, please inform the researcher as soon as possible.

1. How effective did you find the researcher to be in delivering the material in the marital education sessions? (Please circle only one number)

1	2	3	4	5
Very Ineffective				Very Effective

2. How effective did you find the researcher to be in facilitating discussion in the marital education sessions? (Please circle only one number)

1	2	3	4	5
Very Ineffective				Very Effective

## Appendix C

### IRB Approval

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# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 7, 2022

Shane Kreller  
Mario Garcia

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-820 Preemptive Church-Based Marital Education and Counseling as an Intervention to Increase Marital Satisfaction and Reduce Divorce Rates

Dear Shane Kreller, Mario Garcia,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

**Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,  
**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**