

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

The Effects of Pre-Marital Counseling

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the Faculty of the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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The action research project explores the implementation of a pre-marital program at Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church in Conroe, Texas. The pre-marital counseling program equips couples with practical and impactful tools for building strong marriages. The church's 120-year history emphasizes the importance of family and Christian values, and the counseling program is a natural extension of that commitment.

Chapter Two delves into the biblical foundations of marriage, exploring God's vision for this sacred covenant, and establishes a precedent for churches that offer similar programs to their congregants. Such an understanding shapes the program's pre-marital context, ensuring couples embark on their journey with a strong foundation. Chapter Three outlines the methodology used to develop and implement the program within the church. The program is designed to help couples identify potential areas of weakness within their relationship and equip them with tools to overcome these challenges, fostering a more resilient partnership.

Chapter Four explores the experiences and outcomes of the program participants. Analysis of the results provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of pre-marital counseling. The concluding chapter examines the overall effectiveness of the program and the need for such resources within the church community. Chapter Five examines the impact of pre-marital counseling on both engaged and married couples, highlighting its potential to strengthen families and build a thriving church body.

Results show that findings from the action research project confirm the need for a pre-marital counseling program at Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church. Implementing this pre-marital program offers many benefits that contribute to the overall well-being of the church and its mission to build strong Christian families.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Marriages can see great trials such as addictions, adultery, job loss, infertility, and so much more. Often, couples face these problems and find themselves too weak to endure because the load is heavy. During pre-marital counseling, the storms of life that could potentially impact a marriage will be discussed to equip couples with the tools to endure the challenging moments during matrimony.

Accessing pre-marital counseling is such a significant investment for the relationship. The effects of this counseling will strengthen the bond, and the relationship will start strong because it is through this counseling that the couple can work through scenarios, concerns, and issues that are present. Pre-marital counseling will help develop the necessary skills needed to endure and overcome the problems that couples face. Couples who spend the time and work in pre-marital counseling are given a realistic view of marriage, and their commitment to one another flourishes to a deeper level of commitment to one another.

Pre-marital counseling is nonexistent in Victory Tabernacle. Since the institution of this ministry, there are no records of a pre-marital counseling program within the church. There could be an abundance of reasons as to why, for example, the church size was much smaller in its humble beginnings and the resources may have not been available to adequately fund a program as such or the focus of the ministry could have been the prioritization of other ministries over pre-marital counseling. As of today, the reason for not having a pre-marital counseling program is primarily due to the focus of other ministries along with the expectation that with prayer and faith, these two factors are sufficient enough to wage through marriage. Not having a designated system in place for counseling for newlyweds is a problem. The problem negatively impacts the ministry because it is saddening when newlyweds encounter issues in the marriage and have no

foundation for finding a resolution other than screaming for divorce. What transpires within the Williamson marriage is common. The Williamson's are a newlywed couple who have experienced hardship beginning after the "I do's". When the question is posed, "Did you have pre-marital counseling?" and the answer is "No," the realization is that the support needed for marriages in the ministry is non-existent, which sets these relationships up for failure.

This issue seen in Victory Tabernacle is not just occurring within this ministry; it is a problem from coast to coast. Having the opportunity to speak to others in different parts of the country and the question posed, "Is there pre-marital counseling in your ministry?" and the response is, "No," one shall consider the reason why. Data from the National Center for Health Statistics reveals a rising Texas divorce rate. While the rate remained relatively stable at 1.5 in 2020, it has jumped to 1.9 by 2022, reflecting a significant increase.¹ In light of this trend, it's worth considering the role churches can play in equipping couples for a successful marriage. By offering robust pre-marital counseling programs, churches can empower couples to build strong foundations for their lifelong commitments. If the church would begin to focus on the needs of marriages, the result would be positive. Research shows that when the church is assimilated into the lives of those preparing for marriage, the guidance and counseling the couple will receive will help address relationship problems, promote persistence, and constrain separation and divorce.² The ultimate goal is to help couples prepare for obstacles they may face and provide the skills and tools needed to work through them. The impact would be significant if they

¹ National Center for Health and Statistics, "Marriage and Divorces: Change In the Reporting of Marriage and Divorce Statistics," last modified July 1, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/marriage-divorce/state-divorce-rates-90-95-00-22.pdf>.

² B. Umubyeyi, Mtapuri, O., & Naidu, M., "The Role of Religion and Religious Leaders in Marital Conflict Resolution: A Perspective of Congolese Migrants' Families Living in Durban, South Africa," *The Family Journal* 28, no. 4 (2020): 414.

collectively began implementing pre-marital counseling coast to coast. Not having this program within the ministry has a detrimental effect on kingdom marriages.

Today's generation is different from what it was just ten years ago. People desire to marry but have yet to learn what a kingdom marriage is. Ask any couple what is the purpose of marriage; most will say to build a future together and live a great life. This response sounds good, but the intention of a kingdom marriage is different. Marriage is to reflect Christ. The reflection of Christ shows selfless love and sacrifice in Ephesians 5:25; the writer explicitly states, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her." This means that to reflect Christ, a spouse must put their needs and well-being to the side. Reflecting Christ also means replicating what God has created amongst His people, which is a covenant relationship. This relationship signifies lifelong commitment, which mirrors God's faithfulness to the Church. Marriage also reflects the way Christ and the Church are united as one. Ephesians 5:31 states, "For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." When spouses become one, they are a team; they work together towards their goals and support one another through life's challenges.

When God created marriage, His overall intent was to expand his kingdom. The man and woman join to become one, and once this union occurs, this relationship is now under the authority of the Sovereign and Divine God; this relationship will be a replication of God's image. Couples desiring to marry must understand that marriage is about replicating God and following His commands. Young girls who see the fairytale stories on television or read about the love stories in different books, or even those young girls who see the mystical weddings on soap operas, have a clouded mindset of what marriage is. The story of Cinderella is a perfect example. Cinderella, a hardworking girl under the rule of her wicked stepmother, has hopes and

aspirations of living a beautiful life away from her stepmother. Her dream comes true once she receives a makeover from her fairy godmother. The makeover is transformative, and she is able to dance with a prince and ultimately live a beautiful life with her prince in a castle. To overcome the cloudiness of the mindsets of many, it is the church's responsibility to teach what God intended marriage to be. All in all, this has to be taught, and the perfect place for this to occur is during pre-marital counseling within the ministry.

Because barriers exist amongst newly married couples, such as adjusting communication styles, merging finances, learning to live with one another, and emotional needs along with external factors such as family dynamics and friendships, couples need to gain the know-how to maneuver effectively in a marriage. Research shows that “one in five first marriages will fail within the first five years, and 40-50% of first marriages will end in divorce. It has also been proven that marital distress leads to broad classifications of anxiety and mood disorders.”³ Research says that counseling has been shown to improve marital success and happiness in approximately two-thirds of unselected distressed couples who implement it prior to getting married.⁴ These common hurdles are why Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church needs to implement an effective pre-marital counseling program. Pre-marital counseling can provide the skills couples need for a successful marriage. Brittany Stahnke used 141 men and women who had been married twenty or more years in 2022 for her research. The majority of couples in Stanke’s research stated that marriage requires commitment and hard work. Still, pre-marital and marital counseling helped them overcome hard times in their marriage.⁵

³ Arthur Nielsen, *Integrative Couple Therapy in Action: A Practical Guide for Handling Common Relationship Problems and Crises* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Brittany Stahnke, “To Be or Not to Be: Advice from Long Term Spouses in a Mixed Methods Study,”

Implementing pre-marital counseling will lead couples to work together as a unit. Teaching couples how to work as a team is critical. “Marriage preparation makes a big difference. It can be expected that quality, evidence-based marriage preparation can help couples have healthy, lasting, God-honoring marriages.”⁶ Another benefit of pre-marital counseling within the ministry is helping couples align themselves with significant life issues and changes. Jeynes and Martinez stated, “Investing in these marriages can counteract the cultural message that marriage is trivial and transient, and the investment can yield dividends for churches and families that continue to grow across generations.”⁷ During this time, couples can work through potential disagreements by learning to communicate effectively through significant life changes.

Another critical benefit of pre-marital counseling is transparency. During this time of counseling, both sides should be able to put everything on the table. Reflecting on the Williamson’s, the husband knew that his job was preparing to do layoffs. He was not transparent about this situation. Not sharing this information caused much turmoil, especially when the truth emerged. During this time, the benefit is sharing and being honest about their past and present lives. The time is now for effective pre-marital counseling to be instituted into the ministry. Marriage is a kingdom business, and the people must be prepared for the work ahead.

The Williamson’s have been a newly married couple for the past six months. The process of getting to the wedding was a joyous time for them, and both were extremely excited. The couple, however, focused on preparing for the wedding but not so much on preparing for the marriage.

The Family Journal 31, no. 2 (2023): 265.

⁶ William Jeynes and Enedina Martinez, *Ministering Spiritually to Families* (Heidelberg, Germany: Springer, 2015), 121.

⁷ Ibid.

Young couples often make the mistake of preparing more for the wedding than the actual marriage. Everyone is focused on the marriage details to ensure a perfect day, but what happens the next day or when the honeymoon ends? In the Williamson's case, after the "I do's" and within a few months life happened, frustration set in, and they both were screaming divorce. As they reflected, the preparation was solely for the wedding and not the marriage. Their failure to prepare for marriage caused them both to cry out for a divorce because they had not considered how they would work through the challenging moments in every marriage. The challenges this couple experienced were tough situations that most people would want to run away from. The emotional load of marriage was extremely heavy.

The Williamson's experienced job loss, sickness, financial instability, emotional distress, and sadness, all within six months of being married. Having faced trying times, they resolved to divorce. Dissolving the marriage seemed more accessible to them. This is not an uncommon scenario; however, to decrease the rate of divorce and separation, couples must be prepared for what is to come in a marriage. Couples must be ready for the jarring times in marriage and must implement commitment and hard work. God designed marriage to be the closest relationship among human beings. People live in a world that is broken and full of sin, and marriage is not exempt from the difficulties that make marriage difficult at times. Marriage requires couples to center Jesus in the relationship and commit to hard work and dedication.

In the book of Ephesians 5:21-22, the reader is reminded to "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord." These scriptures emphasize that there must be respect within the marriage as well as have respect for God's will. In the book of Colossians 3:16-17, the Word reads, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual

songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." In everything, including marriage, couples must live according to God's teaching and include Him in everything. Marriage is a blessing from God, and in this, it requires hard work and dedication. Proverbs 18:22 states, "He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord." Marriage is seen as a blessing from God but also requires effort. In the book of Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, the writer writes, "Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has no one to lift him up." The dedication to one another in a marriage is depicted as a partnership where spouses must support each other during difficult times. The entire chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians displays a complete description of love, which is essential to a marriage. This chapter highlights patience, kindness, perseverance, and selflessness, in which each of these attributes requires hard work and dedication in a marriage. The components of a loving and beautiful marriage (hard work, commitment, and dedication) are necessary and critical. Centering Jesus at the core of marriage will guide couples toward the kind of love, commitment, and respect needed to maintain a strong and lasting marriage.

Having the necessary tools to build a solid foundational marriage is critical. Throughout the Bible, Jesus talks often about experiences of trials and tribulations. The first marital trial and tribulation seen in the Bible is the relationship between Adam and Eve. Their marital bliss culminated in mutual blame-shifting. In the book of Genesis 3:6, Eve's desire for the tree she was commanded not to eat from grabbed hold of her, and it could not be shaken. The original sin of disobedience to God caused Adam to blame Eve, Eve to blame Satan, and future generations to blame Eve. In Genesis 3:13, Eve shifts the blame by stating, "The serpent deceived me, and I

ate.” The end result of this problem within the first marriage resulted in God stating, “I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring.” (Genesis 3:15, CSB) The blame game leads to lasting consequences and disharmony, which dominates trials and tribulations in marriages.

The story of Abram and Sarai in the Bible offers another example of tribulation within a marriage. Struggles arose due to Sarai's impatience with God's promises and her subsequent actions fueled by jealousy. Sarai sends her husband Abram to her maid-servant Hagar: Sarai says to Abram, “Since the LORD has prevented me from bearing children, go to my slave; perhaps through her I can build a family.” And Abram agreed to what Sarai said (Gen. 16:2, CSB). Once Hagar becomes pregnant, the seed of jealousy grows between Sarai and Abram. Even though this was Sarai's plan, tension and frustration grew within the union, reducing their once happy union to a union of frustration.

From the examples in the Old Testament, marriages face the toils of life. Marriages are not exempt from the trials and tribulations. Challenges in life and within a marriage can potentially destroy the union. In the book of Judges, the story of Samson and his Philistine bride tell the story of a marriage that takes a brutal hit from the beginning. This marriage immediately experienced lies and manipulation. Reading further into the story, Samson chose to compromise his faith for his flesh. This is a precise topic of being unequally yoked, not serving, and believing the same God, which can cause much detriment in a marriage as it did in the story of Samson. His marriage quickly came to a demise.

Ministry Context

Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church is a ministry that has existed for over one hundred years, with a solid foundation of biblical principles and deeply rooted practices. The church is a work in progress; the key word is progress. The hope is that when someone walks through the doors of this church, they feel the love of God and presence of the Holy Spirit that leads to a genuine experience with God. Most importantly, a visitor hears the Pastor preaching and teaching the Word of God that can be applied to one's life. Being a member of this ministry for thirty-plus years, the opportunity to see both the growth and downfalls allowed time to pinpoint problems that are present, solved, and resolved.

Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church was founded in 1901 in a small town north of Houston, Conroe, Texas. The original members were few but kingdom-minded and ready to do the work of the Lord. Their humble beginnings started in the living room of one of the members, and they labored together to impact their community by preaching the gospel and serving in all capacities to benefit and uplift the community.

Leaders led the ministry with a vision to effectively impact the community by teaching them how to be self-sufficient, apply the Word of God to their lives, and work together within the community. There came a time when some of the members disagreed with the leader's vision, and a split occurred. When the split occurred, it impacted the church heavily. One group remained in the edifice on the northeast side, creating a new name for the church. The remaining members moved across town; they kept the church's name and continued to operate as Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church.

Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church continued to thrive after the split. They were able to build a brand-new edifice and remained there for years. The ministry continued to make an

impact on the Conroe area. The church's growth accelerated under visionary leadership. By 2005, the ministry had expanded to a larger building with a school, further solidifying its positive impact on the community.

In 1996, a new pastor, a dynamic leader from outside the community, breathed fresh energy into the ministry. His innovative approach brought a previously unseen vibrancy, fostering the growth of new ministries and revitalizing existing ones. This shift transformed the congregation from a traditional, established group to a more dynamic one with a stronger focus on young adults, leading to a period of rapid expansion.

Within this transition, ministries that fit the needs of the congregants began to develop; one of the strongest ministries was the youth ministry. This ministry grew by leaps and bounds; this allowed the youth to engage in fellowship and learn about the Bible. The music ministry changed to a more youthful sound because younger musicians became a part of the ministry and worked with the youth. More servants wanted to work with the youth and do more ministry work with this group in the community by serving those in the nursing homes, cleaning the elderly's yards, and taking food to the sick and shut-in.

Other ministries that did not exist before the new leadership were created, such as the women's and men's ministries and a marriage ministry. These ministries thrived and grew for years. They allowed the congregants to grow in areas of their lives biblically in new and different ways. Bible-based teaching occurred in every area of the ministry, and the congregants were growing spiritually.

Victory Tabernacle prioritizes education, equipping its members with knowledge and understanding of the Bible. This empowers them to live as Christ-like examples, fulfilling the Great Commission as written in Matthew 28:18-20 "Then Jesus came to them and said, "All

authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded. And surely, I am with you always to the very end of the age.” By following this model, Victory Tabernacle actively creates disciples both locally and on a global scale.

In 2005, Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church moved into a previously established church with a school within the building, making the purchase price over one million dollars. Victory Tabernacle's ministry took a significant leap forward, relocating from a 4,000-square-foot building to a sprawling 25,000-square-foot facility. This move marked a historic moment for African-American churches in the Conroe, Montgomery County area, as Victory Tabernacle became the largest African-American church there in terms of both building size and congregation.

Although a split did occur within the congregation, God continued to add to the ministry. The addition continued to help the church fine-tune the ministries, and growth was seen in every area. The ministry maintained its peak for years in the new building from 2006 until 2012. However, there came a time when another shift began. The newness appeared to have worn off, and people began to murmur and complain. Membership began to decrease. The biggest downfall was the music ministry. The choir director left along with the musicians. The entire music ministry began to crumble. Discord occurred amongst many people and the pastor for unknown reasons. The discord during this time impacted the ministry significantly because it started affecting the other ministries within the church. Although plans were put in place to come to a resolution in the music ministry, it was not the same. The quality of the musicians chosen was not the same as before. Leaders who were over significant ministries in the church, such as

the youth, the marriage ministry, and the men and women's ministry, either stepped down or left. These once significant ministries collapsed all because of discord.

A lifelong member of Victory Tabernacle Church, the author felt a calling to explore new ministries and broaden their faith perspective. The author actively participated in various ministries for ten years, gaining valuable experiences beyond Victory Tabernacle's approach. However, upon returning in 2021, the author encountered concerns that mirrored their observations from 2012: a defunct youth ministry, a dissolved marriage ministry, ongoing issues with the music ministry, and a noticeable decline in membership. Witnessing this state of affairs, the author felt compelled to contribute to the church's revitalization.

There has been a major shift at Victory Tabernacle regarding the direction of the ministry. Returning to this ministry in 2021, observation of the state of the church was quite fragile. Members who had been committed to the church for years remained however, there had been such a decline the only active ministries that were operative at the time were; Sunday School, Bible Study, and regular Sunday morning worship service. Since returning, the tide has turned; membership is now increasing, the youth ministry has been reconstructed, and it is growing, and ministries have been revived, such as the food pantry and clothing pantry. Many other ministries are going through the revitalization phase and are increasing significantly. The ministry has always been solid in biblical teaching; however, the shift has been implementing what Christian believers should execute in the world over the years. Kim and Tidwell stated, "Discipleship is a process and a vital part of kingdom building. Churches need a strategic design to adequately train members to be effective disciples of Jesus Christ. Effective discipleship prepares people to participate in ministry, missions, and evangelism".⁸ The shift included

⁸ J. Jonathan Kim and Charles Tidwell, *The Educational Ministry of a Church* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Publishing, 2020), 49.

collaboratively working together and deciding that a change was needed; the team revisited the church's mission. It refocused on the mission and began to act, reviewing the list of active ministries, and a decision was made on whether or not to re-establish them; a marketing team was created, energy was poured into the youth ministry, small groups were created, the urge to get people involved was pushed, and audio and visual technology was improved for livestream sermons and Bible studies. Even with changes, a structured ministry for pre-marital counseling remained non-existent.

Demographics

Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church is a predominantly African-American church. The church comprises middle-class workers, of which 85 percent of the members are college-educated. The current leader of the ministry has been in leadership for this ministry for the past thirty years and has an advanced degree in education. The congregation reflects his accolades greatly, because 75 percent of the members are current or retired educators.

This ministry also comprises 65 percent of married couples, of which 15 percent are newly married couples with one to ten years of marriage. The remaining 50 percent are married and have fifteen or more years of marriage.

The demographics in this ministry could be more diverse regarding race and ethnicity. Still, the diversity of those married couples provides a good sample from which to pull research and data on the current topic of study, the effects of pre-marital counseling. Looking at the sample pool of married people, the years of marriage range from 0 years to 50 plus years of marriage.

Problem Presented

Marriages require work to be effective. Angel Skurtu wrote that marriage is a complex system that requires both people to work together to accomplish the goals they have set forth.⁹ When those who desire to be married lack the tools to help them be successful in their marriage, marriages can come to a demise quickly. Implementing pre-marital counseling will give couples the tools to make their marriages work. Within the Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church, the inadequacy of their pre-marital program has had a not-so-positive impact on newly married couples. The shortcoming causes freshly married couples to struggle in their marriage because they need the necessary tools to successfully combat the fight for their marriage. Bethany Bray concluded that pre-marital counseling is preventive.¹⁰ The ministry program will save marriages well before they begin. Pre-marital counseling will help couples learn skills for building a godly and healthy relationship, and it will help them learn how to communicate through tough situations. New couples preparing for marriage must know what occurs in a covenant marriage. Anna Silvas, the author of the article titled “*The Mystery of Christian Marriage through the Ages*,” defined marriage using Scripture by stating, “The man henceforth cleaves to the woman so that they become one flesh (Gen 2:24, Christian Standard Bible). In short, this one-flesh union of one man and one woman is monogamy.”¹¹ Couples who prepare for marriage are better off than those who do not prepare. When couples choose to prepare, the tools provided to help in

⁹ Angela Skurtu, *Pre-Marital Counseling: A Guide for Clinicians* (Routledge, NY: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 2.

¹⁰ Bethany Bray, “Building a Foundation in Premarital Counseling,” *Counseling Today* 64, no. 8 (2022): 36.

¹¹ Anna M. Silvas, *The Mystery of Christian Marriage through the Ages: The Scriptures and the First Thousand Years* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020), 14.

communication and conflict management allow the couple to be more committed to one another, have more positivity in the union, and reduce the chances of divorce.¹²

The absence of a pre-marital counseling program in ministry can cause new marriages to crumble. Les and Les Parrot stated they never had pre-marital counseling but spent the first year in counseling; the first years were difficult right from the start; they stated that right after the wedding, tears began to fall, and they immediately married and felt like refugees.¹³ Since there is no adequate program at the Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church, couples cannot develop the skills they need for a successful marriage. When they are not made aware of what happens in a marriage, the result could end in the marriage's demise. Rencan Marbun emphasized that pre-marital counseling is essential, designed to create a harmonious atmosphere in God.¹⁴ A ministry program must be practical and adequate for couples desiring to become one flesh. The pre-marital program implemented at Victory Tabernacle will help couples develop a blueprint for their marriage and their lives.

Couples who have experienced a lack of pre-marital counseling and especially those who are active in their ministry, have experienced struggles in their marriages. These couples needed more tools to face their problems. Due to the absence, some marriages failed while others remained committed yet struggled and continued to struggle because their toolbox is empty. Most seem to think marriage is a fairy tale, but it is quite the opposite. The trials and tribulations in a marriage can cause one to give up and walk away quickly. Such challenges could easily

¹² Skurtu, *Pre-Marital Counseling: A Guide for Clinicians*, 5.

¹³ Les and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts* (Detroit, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 12.

¹⁴ Rencan Carisma Marbun, "Pastoral Correlation of Pre-marriage Counseling to Family Harmony." *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 9 (2021): 4816.

explain why the divorce rate is high. If an adequate marriage counseling program is established, new couples can be made aware of the obstacles they could experience and be prepared.

Muluhya, Kipnusu, Tarus, and Karimi pointed out that marital harmony is psychological and takes time to mature; marriage takes time to develop, and learning the skills develops the relationship into harmony.¹⁵ Implementing a pre-marital counseling program at the Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church will benefit couples seeking marriage by providing them with tools and fellowship to support the marriage over time. The program will help them develop the skills needed to conquer life together, plan, and merge into one flesh. The problem is the lack of effective pre-marital counseling in ministry at the Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church in Conroe, Texas.

¹⁵ E. Muluhya Keverenge et al., "The relationship between premarital counselling and marital harmony among families in Lugari, Kakamega County, Kenya." *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 20, no. 3, (2020): 557.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this DMIN action research project is to develop and implement practical tools that can be used in pre-marital counseling. This project stems from the lack of an adequate and effective pre-marital program at Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church. This church has been established over 100 years and has never been a counseling program. Implementing a pre-marital counseling program at Victory Tabernacle aims to develop a resolve for marriages before they begin. The foundation of the institution of marriage was created by God in Heaven, so it makes sense to have an effective program in place to keep this union intact. Nick and Chelsea Hurst describe marriage as a kingdom marriage built upon Christ, focusing on what can be done for Him within the union.¹⁶ Implementing a much-needed counseling sector for married couples in this ministry will be practical and impactful because married couples need a resource within their church to receive support during difficult moments in the marriage.

Developing this program will help those beginning their new journey as a married couple to receive resources and tools they can use and implement. The overarching goal of the pre-marital counseling program is to serve and support both engaged and married couples. When a ministry lacks what the congregants need, a church may suffer stagnate growth within the church. Since marriage is vital in the kingdom, this much-needed program will finally be available within this ministry, allowing the ministry to elevate and serve the needs of the congregants in a new way.

Victory Tabernacle's pre-marital program will focus on married couples within the church community, given the limited number of engaged couples available. By interviewing

¹⁶ Nick Hurst and Chelsea Hurst, *Marriage Minded: 10 Ways to Know If You've Found the One* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023), 55.

couples who have already participated in the program, this research project will capture valuable insights into the program's effectiveness. These couples' experiences can serve as a powerful testament to the program's impact, demonstrating how it equips couples with tools to navigate the challenges of married life. Throughout the program, couples can share their obstacles (obstacles, trials, and tribulations) and the tools they gained to overcome them. Highlighting these real-life experiences will showcase the program's significance for strengthening marriages within Victory Tabernacle.

Each couple chosen to participate in this research has a story. Their story will benefit the empowerment of this program that is developed. Each couple will share whether pre-marital counseling was received before they were wed. Each couple will be able to share the effects and the impact it had on the current state of their marriage. There will also be couples who did not receive counseling who will participate in this research. They will also have the opportunity to share how the lack of pre-marital counseling has impacted their marriage.

Each participant in this research holds such value, and allowing each couple to participate and share their experiences will benefit this program within the ministry. This experience with research will serve Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church in a positive way to implement the newly developed pre-marital counseling program to help save marriages in the future.

Basic Assumptions

The group that will be chosen for this research will be couples who have been married for various amount of years, there will be 35 couples chosen to participate in the research. The plan is to provide detailed instructions to this selected group so they will clearly understand the why behind this research and data collection process. Going into this research, it can be assumed that

some participants may think counseling does not work and is not adequate, whereas others may think it is. The researcher can also assume that one spouse will be willing to fully participate because effective counseling can be impactful as the other spouse may have a different perspective.

Another assumption is holding back on truth; the thought behind this is whether either spouse will not effectively communicate true feelings and ideas about various topics because of what the other spouse may think or what the response and reaction will be. These couples may hold back on different topics of conversation.

Definitions

This project covers the lack of a pre-marital counseling program with the Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church. The terms used within this project will be seen repeatedly to provide an understanding of the need for a pre-marital counseling program in the ministry. Key terms used in this project will be Christian counseling, pre-marital counseling, covenant relationship, commitment, divorce, and other terms that apply to this research study.

Christian Counseling. Christian counseling is a term that has been used and implemented for years. This form of counseling helps Christians navigate their struggles by integrating spiritual beliefs and practices into everyday life. Gary Collins defines Christian counseling as spiritual direction.¹⁷ This direction allows the person to effectively pay attention to God, grow in intimacy with God, and live out the consequences of this relationship.¹⁸ In counseling, advice is

¹⁷ Gary Collins, *Christian Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2019), 37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

given, teaching is done, and disciplining occurs. Intertwining Christian counseling and spiritual direction allows one to cultivate a deeper and more personal relationship with God.

Relationship building is critical during counseling, and relationship growth between the couple and God is extremely critical. The relationship between the counselor and counselee is also critical. Lauren Whitman stated, “Entering a counseling relationship with someone is saying, “I am with you in what you are going through. Just as God is for you and your flourishing, I, too, am for you. With God’s help, we will find a way forward together.”¹⁹

Influencing couples allows the counselor to impact their world. This will cause trust to embody the relationship between counselor and counselee so the help that is needed for the couple can flourish.

Counseling. Jude and Austing defined counseling as “A professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals.”²⁰ Counseling has evolved over many years into a highly professional field. Counseling opens the doors to help people who are struggling with substance abuse, familial issues, mental issues and much more. “While there are various types of counseling, they all share the fundamental goal of empowering people to lead more fulfilling and productive lives.”²¹

Commitment. A commitment is an obligation to follow a certain course of action. Everett Worthington stated that this term implies people are walking hand in hand, unable to see the

¹⁹ Lauren Whitman, *A Biblical Counseling Process: Guidance for the Beginning, Middle, and End*. (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 19.

²⁰ Julius A. Austin, and Jude T. Austin. *Doing Counseling Developing Your Clinical Skills and Style*. (Alexandria: American Counseling Association, 2023), 2.

²¹ “What is Counseling?” Northwestern The Family Institute, last modified April 29, 2024, <https://counseling.northwestern.edu/counseling/become-a-counselor/what-is-counseling/>

future yet determined to remain together over time despite any changes.²² Commitment is a foundation where the principles of love, trust, and respect are laid. Being committed takes work; it requires effective communication, compromise, forgiveness, and sacrifice. John Michael pointed out that “commitments make individuals’ behavior predictable in the face of fluctuations in their desires and interests, thereby facilitating the planning and coordination of joint actions involving multiple agents.”²³ Commitment is a foundational piece that is needed in a relationship. When you commit “you decide, you make a plan, and you’re intentional and deliberate in how you carry the commitment out.”²⁴

Conflict. If conflict is not resolved quickly within a relationship, the root of this issue can soon turn to stubbornness, pride, hurt, anger, and bitterness. These issues can easily lead to a breakdown in communication within the relationship. Stephen Betchen defined conflict as the representation of duality or two opposing forces inside of oneself, usually beyond awareness; this awareness often competes to direct the behavior in any given context.²⁵ Spouses need to understand that conflict will occur, and when it does, the response is critical. The marriage quality will suffer if the response is not respectful and honorable towards one another. Steve Hoppe stated that couples must hydrate themselves with living water- they must be filled with the Holy Spirit, the more living water consumed the healthier the roots of the heart will be and

²² Everett Worthington, Jr., *Hope Focused Marriage Counseling*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 61.

²³ John Michael, *The Philosophy and Psychology of Commitment*. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2022), 1.

²⁴ Harry Benson, *Commit or quit: the ‘two year rule’ and other rules for romance*. (Oxford, England: Lion Books), 36.

²⁵ Stephen Betchen, *Control and Conflict* (Routledge, NY: Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 1.

the holier the communication will be when conflict arises.²⁶ Spouses must understand the cause of the conflict and be willing to put in the work to come to a resolution.

Covenant Relationship. Worthington said in a covenant relationship, both parties treat each other as one flesh.²⁷ This relationship is what a marriage is built upon. In the book of Mark, chapter 10, verses 6-8, the writer tells the reader that “man will leave his father and mother, and the two will become one flesh.” In this relationship, promises are made to love self-sacrificially. Tony Evans stated that this relationship is a “permanent bond.”²⁸ This relationship is where man and woman are bound to each other to work together to reach a common goal continuously.

Divorce. Sloane Hughes stated that divorce happens when two married people decide they don't want to be married anymore.²⁹ This decision impacts the entire family. Clinton and Hawkins have defined divorce as the legal act that permanently ends a marriage.³⁰ Marriages dissolve for several reasons, most of which are “irreconcilable differences.” Even in this instance of irreconcilability, Bradley Coates states that marriages dissolve due to four behaviors: chronic criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and/or withdrawal.³¹ Visser and Lawick stated that divorces are more likely to happen when one partner feels less happy than the other.³²

²⁶ Steve Hoppe, *Marriage Conflict: Talking as Teammates* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 21.

²⁷ Stephen Betchen, *Control and Conflict* (Routledge, NY: Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 70.

²⁸ Tony Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2019), 940.

²⁹ Sloane Hughes, *Families Through Divorce* (New York, NY: Powerkids Press, 2020), 6.

³⁰ Clinton and Hawkins, *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling*, 283.

³¹ Bradley A. Coates, *Divorce with Decency: The Complete How to Handbook and Survivors Guide to the Legal, Emotional, Economic, and Social Issues* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 31

³² Margreet Visser and Justine van Lawick, *Group Therapy for High Conflict Divorce: the no kids in the middle intervention program* (S.I.: Routledge, 2021), 17.

Effective Communication. In marriage, communication is critical and it is the foundation of having a successful relationship. At times, the communication can be broken and become ineffective. Graham Lee wrote that facilitating effective communication is an approach pivotal to the lives of others. “By evoking hope, containing fear, and deepening inquiry, we can foster paradigm shifts in how people understand themselves and their choices. By choreographing their interactions with others, we can elevate mutual understanding and open hearts and create the conditions for startling breakthroughs.”³³

Faith. Faith is extremely important in marriage. When two become one, two independent people come together and merge their lives together. The merging alone takes faith. These two independent people have two different backgrounds, which causes two people to step into a place of uncertainty. This space allows the two to grow and learn more about each other. Couples must lean on their faith because there will be difficult times that will present themselves, and it is faith that will help overcome the tribulations couples face in a marriage. Couples must stand on the principles of faith to endure those trying situations they will have to endure. Kenneth Copeland Ministries identified four principles that are applicable to marriages: Nothing intimidates God, the Word of God is true, building your faith by reading and studying the Word of God, and understanding that you have the faith you need to stand for your marriage.³⁴ The Bible describes faith as the “reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen” (Hebrews 11:1, CSB). “Faith means putting your trust in God and having confidence that he will fulfill His promises.”³⁵

³³ Graham Lee, *Breakthrough Conversations for Coaches, Consultants and Leaders*. (Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge, 2022), 1.

³⁴ “Kenneth Copeland Ministries”, 4 Truths about Faith that Can Save Your Marriage, last modified April 30, 2024, https://www.kcm.org/real-help/relationships/learn/4-truths-about-faith-can-save-your-marriage?language_content_entity=en-US.

Forgiveness. Blyth, Mills, and Taylor described forgiveness as “the opening up of ‘space’ or the offering of an opportunity for both victim and offender, not to be hurt even more, but in full awareness of what has happened, to change and grow as persons and eventually to be reconciled.”³⁶ The word forgiveness is seen more than forty times in the Bible, and the word forgive is seen almost 400 times in the Bible. Jesus went to the cross so we all could be forgiven of the sins committed daily. Forgiveness is the representation of God’s love for us. This precious gift is something that must be embraced and shared. Couples must view forgiveness as God views it, and He views it with love. Scripture informs the reader that “all bitterness, anger, wrath, shouting, and slander be removed from you, along with malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.” (Ephesians 4:31-32, CSB). Butch Losey states that “forgiveness is an ongoing interaction between the forgiving person, the offending person, and the relationship between the two of them.”³⁷ Forgiveness is not easy; it takes strength and faith to endure the pain and hurt caused by a loved one. Once the goal is set to forgive, one will follow the example set by Jesus Christ.

Marriage. The concept of marriage as a formal social institution with legal and religious recognition has roots extending back to the ancient world in Western history. Rosa Vazquez and Tijerina stated that, “It was in the ninth century that the Western marriage came about and the institution continues to survive today, based on the family unit “father, mother, children,” its structure identified with the paternal lineage and the factor of love that unites all its

³⁵ Grace Theological Seminary, “What does faith mean?,” Grace Theological Seminary, May 27, 2022, <https://seminary.grace.edu/what-does-faith-mean/>.

³⁶ Myra Blyth, Matthew Mills, and Michael Taylor, *Forgiveness and restorative justice: perspective from Christian Theology* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 40.

³⁷ Butch Losey, *Acceptance, Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (Routledge, NY: Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 139.

members.”³⁸ The term marriage has been defined eloquently by Catherine Parks and Linda Strode as being patterned after Christ’s covenant relationship to his redeemed people, the church. Therefore, the highest meaning and the ultimate purpose of marriage is to put the covenant relationship of Christ and his church on display.³⁹ This union is designed by God specifically for one man and one woman. This foundation that God created is the most solid foundation to build a family and again, He designed it to mirror His covenant relationship with His people.

Pre-Marital Counseling. Counseling is designed to provide a blueprint of biblical marriage, preparing the pathway of being a husband and wife. Clinton and Trent stated that pre-marital counseling is an intentional and vital process for a prospective husband and wife to cut through the façade of the dating relationship and help them learn the truth about each other’s expectations, habits, flaws, beliefs, and values as they prepare for marriage.⁴⁰ Pre-marital counseling is a critical tool needed for couples desiring to be married. Tan concluded that the role of Christian theology based on Scripture in a Christian counseling setting is crucial and central.⁴¹

Reconciliation. Losey stated that “reconciliation is the next step beyond forgiveness. With reconciliation, a new relationship is born through movement to consistent positive experiences as a couple; one person has intimately sought forgiveness and expressed deep remorse, one partner has freely given forgiveness, and the couple has intentionally created

³⁸ Cecilia de la Rosa and Paris Tijerina, *Marriage and the culture of peace: communication skills for families, therapists, and society* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 6.

³⁹ Catherine Parks and Linda Strode, *A Christ-Centered Wedding: Rejoicing in the Gospel on Your Big Day* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 19.

⁴⁰ Clinton and Hawkins, *Christian Counseling*, 303.

⁴¹ Siang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 403.

a vision for the new relationship.”⁴² When couples can reconcile, this opens the door for new beginnings. It allows for a pathway to a fresh and healthier relationship that is cared for and nurtured by both partners. Reconciliation and forgiveness are closely related; Rutledge stated that, naturally, it appears to be that thing which forgiveness aims.⁴³

Roles. Understanding the roles in a marriage is critical, and it is meaningful to understand roles through God’s perspective. Dr. Tony Evans has defined the husband's role as to love, know, honor, and pray for his wife.⁴⁴ The role of the wife is not what society expects of the wife, who tends only to the children, cooks, and cleans. Dr. Evans defines the role of the wife as discovering with their spouse how God wants the two to use their skills, talents, time, and treasure to advance the kingdom on this earth.⁴⁵ Traditional interpretations of marriage within Christianity depict the husband as the head of the household, with leadership responsibilities. This view finds support in Ephesians 5:23, which likens the husband's role to Christ's leadership of the church. Similarly, Genesis 2:18 establishes the wife's role as a helper to her husband. Ephesians 5:22 instructs wives to submit to their husbands, further evidence of the husband's leadership position.

⁴² Losey, *Acceptance, Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, 139.

⁴³ Jonathan Rutledge, *Forgiveness and Atonement: Christ’s restorative Sacrifice* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 15.

⁴⁴ Evans, *Kingdom Marriage*, 67-68.

⁴⁵ Evans, *Kingdom Marriage*, 74.

Limitations

This study will have limitations—expected limitations include time limits, face-to-face meeting times, targeted participant groups, and drop-outs. These limitations are most likely to occur due to time constraints and schedules. Hard deadlines will be given when the process begins to collect the data. It will be understood that these limitations will occur because the couples sought out are a mixture of families; couples are raising children who are active in extra-curricular and ministry activities. Other couples that will be sought out have responsibilities of caring for elderly parents or other relatives.

It also can be assumed that attempting to meet face-to-face will be a limitation. This is believed to be a limitation because of conflict in time; schedules may vary, making meetings problematic. The goal is to meet face-to-face; however, alternate scheduling opportunities will be provided if this meeting does not work for the participants.

The goal is to choose 35 married couples who have been married zero years to at least twenty-plus years. Another possible limitation could be a lack of experience using technology. Surveys will be sent to each participant. The concern is that mature married couples may struggle depending on how comfortable they are navigating online surveys and questionnaires.

Another possible limitation is the participant's willingness to open up, share, and discuss the questions needed for this research. There is a concern that some will be reluctant to answer questions such as: What does my partner do that makes it difficult to share myself with her? Identify one aspect of your relationship you have been reluctant to discuss with your wife or how you handle conflict. These are thought-provoking questions that couples tend to avoid discussing; there is a great possibility that this could be a limitation.

Delimitations

The first delimitation is choosing the topic of research; there are a multitude of foci when it comes to counseling. Targeting the area of pre-marital counseling is a delimitation because some participants may believe that pre-marital counseling is unnecessary and does not affect marriage. The goal is to show the results of pre-marital counseling with couples who are preparing to marry. The results will show that couples who receive adequate pre-marital counseling will attain a solid understanding of marriage and gain the knowledge and tools needed to overcome the obstacles that will become present in the marriage. The population of engaged couples at Victory is small; to delimit this research, the researcher will focus on couples who have been married from zero years to twenty-plus years. Among the chosen couples, this must be the first marriage for at least one of the spouses; the couples must also come from a two-parent household where their parents were married.

Another delimitation in this study will be to focus on the areas implemented in pre-marital counseling. Many topics can easily be focused on; however, the topics chosen for this project will be communication, conflict, forgiveness, and problem-solving. These topics are chosen because most problems stem from poor communication, leading to conflict if forgiveness is not offered and received, leading to couples attempting to figure out how to solve problems. The researcher will have no control over the couples who had previously received pre-marital counseling or counseling during their marriage. This delimitation could be impactful because others may believe different topics should be focused on outside the chosen ones.

Thesis Statement

For this intervention, the expectation is to develop a pre-marital counseling program within the Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church ministry. A pre-marital counseling program will help engaged and married couples strengthen the covenant relationship ordained by God. Initially, this program will be designed for engaged couples or couples who desire to become married; the intervention program will also be open for married couples. Opening the door to married couples will allow the information that will be provided to couples an opportunity to receive concrete information to assist in the difficulties that may have been experienced in their marriage because some married couples may have misunderstandings that need to be addressed that were not addressed due to them not receiving pre-marital counseling.

Couples within this ministry have experienced serious struggles in their marriage. Many of those couples expressed that they did not experience pre-marital counseling before getting married. Although all couples did not resolve to divorce or separate, some did. Many married couples in this ministry have noted the absence of pre-marital counseling. Including married couples in this intervention will create a reference point to analyze the effectiveness of the program developed at Victory Tabernacle. It is essential for couples contemplating marriage to go through pre-marital counseling. Pre-marital counseling will provide beneficial tools for understanding the challenges and uncertainties in marriage. If the tools implemented in pre-marital counseling are utilized at Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church, then pre-marital counseling will be effective.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This Doctor of Ministry project aims to contribute significantly to the existing body of knowledge on pre-marital counseling. The author conducts a comprehensive literature review focusing on pertinent themes within this field to achieve this goal. The author gains valuable tools and insights for developing an effective pre-marital program by delving into existing scholarly works. The chosen literature is crucial in informing the completed research and shaping the project's direction.

Literature Review

The initial thrill of a relationship often blossoms into engagement and wedding planning, a time filled with joyous anticipation for many couples. Society tells us that marriage is a hugely celebrated and emotionally charged event that provides hope in dark times.⁴⁶ Marriage is an institution that was developed and created by God (Gen 2: 21-24, Christian Standard Bible). When He performed the first marriage in the Garden of Eden. God made marriage an excellent and perfect institution. God desired marriage to radiate the love both spouses have for the Savior.

Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church has not had an adequate or formal pre-marital counseling program that provides the necessary tools for married couples. This literature review will analyze and synthesize current research from researchers who have approached pre-marital counseling and developed a set of tools that comprise an adequate pre-marital counseling program. This chapter will review the foundations needed to develop an adequate and effective pre-marital counseling program for Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church and congregants desiring to marry.

⁴⁶ Janet Carsten, *Marriage in Past, Present and Future Tense* (London: UCL Press, 2021), 2.

The overall purpose of marriage is to advance God’s kingdom rule here on earth so He can receive the glory and honor (Matt 19: 4-6, CSB). Married couples should have a kingdom of God mindset, but mindsets are easily shifted to the kingdom of self through decisions, thoughts, plans, actions, and words that relate to the original sins that led to the Fall of man.⁴⁷ Being able to advance God’s kingdom through the adversaries couples will face in a marriage is a part of living God’s divine plan. Paul Tripp describes God’s divine plan for marriage as the way God purposefully intended, not only to use Adam and Eve’s original sin as the ultimate test couples face, but also how God’s teaching helps couples endure when tested.⁴⁸ Although these issues are present in marriages due to the Fall, marriage is still desirable in the eyes of God. All marriages face tests over time, but through acceptance of God’s Word and teaching, marriages endure.⁴⁹ Marriage is a blessing, “a covenant that is an unbreakable promise, a binding agreement.”⁵⁰ God designed marriage that way, and His plan grounds the infrastructure of the family unit.

The Fall caused imperfections, causing couples to “live in a broken world”⁵¹ within which marriages face problems. Before the Fall, marriage was perfect and beautiful. There were no issues. However, as soon as Adam and Eve had forsaken God, marriage became imperfect, and problems began to appear. The consequences of Adam and Eve’s separation from God meant they would experience sickness, pain, and even physical death because they no longer lived in the protected world of God’s kingdom. Their experiences would not only affect them,

⁴⁷ Paul Tripp, *Marriage: 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make* (Illinois: Crossway, 2021), 47.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁰ Lisa Jacobson, *Loving Your Husband Well: A 52-Week Devotional for the Deeper, Richer Marriage You Desire* (Ada, MI: Revell, 2022), 134.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

but also their children. Modern marriages face challenges that can lead to strain, and in some cases, separation or divorce. Kesselring and Stretton differentiate between separation, where spouses live apart, and divorce, the legal dissolution of a marriage. Dissatisfaction within a marriage can also be a factor leading to divorce.⁵² All of this began at the Fall of man in the Garden of Eden. The National Center for Family and Marriage Research Family Profiles reported, “The marriage to divorce ratio was 2.2 in 2018, meaning there were slightly more than two marriages for every divorce in the United States.”⁵³ This provided ratio justifies an in-depth look at inadequate pre-marital counseling. Inadequate pre-marital counseling creates a destructive path for new couples who lack tools to handle issues such as sickness, conflict, trust, and pain.

Pre-marital counseling, a decades-old practice, helps couples build strong foundations for marriage. These programs provide support for implementing a healthy marriage.⁵⁴ By implementing research-based pre-marital counseling, our church strives to equip all couples with the tools they need for a successful marriage. This comprehensive program ensures no couple feels left behind when embarking on their lifelong commitment. In their published article Gholamreza Rajabi and Ghodrattollah Abbasi concluded that an effective pre-marital counseling program assists couples in managing idealistic expectations in their marriage.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid.,1.

⁵³Valerie Schweizer, "Marriage to Divorce Ratio in the US: Geographic Variation," *Family Profile* 19, (2019): 19-24.

⁵⁴Dion Robin, "Healthy Marriage Programs: Learning What Words," *The Future of Children* 15, no. 2 (2005): 140.

Framework Development

Noting a myriad of information on pre-marital counseling, one can build upon the research and develop a unique program that fits the needs of the people directly impacted. Pre-marital counseling should target and focus on essential building blocks leading to a successful marriage.⁵⁶ Most researchers focus on effective communication, conflict management, and problem-solving skills as the building blocks.⁵⁷ These three building blocks are essential in marriages. Researchers have concluded that marriages differ from what society has made them appear to be. For example, Cook and Tripp piloted a study and concluded that marriage programs are needed to help strengthen relationships because being married and being happily married are not synonymous.⁵⁸ These counseling program topics have been deemed practical intervention tools to benefit the marriage.⁵⁹

When researching pre-marital counseling on the World Wide Web, one can find a multitude of counselors who offer the service. The number of counselors serves as a positive outlook because those offering this service know that pre-marital counseling is effective and improves relationships.⁶⁰ Diving deep into the research that grounds pre-marital counseling, researchers focus on the term “couple relationship education.” Howard J. Markman, Alan J. Hawkins, Scott M. Stanley, W. Kim Halford, and Galena Rhoades thoroughly explain couple

⁵⁵Golamreza Rajabi, and Abbasi Ghodratollah. "The effectiveness of premarital counseling based on a relationship education program on the idealistic expectations of single young adults." *Iranian Journal of Psychiatry and Clinical Psychology* 25, no. 4 (2020): 386.

⁵⁶ David Ayers, *Christian Marriage: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Ashland: Lexham Press, 2019), 163.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 141.

⁵⁸Jerry Cook and Paula Tripp, “Development of an Online Marriage Program: A Pilot Study,” *North American Journal of Psychology* 15, no. 3, (2013): 538.

⁵⁹David Ayers, *Christian Marriage*, 141.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 147.

relationship education and how it applies effectively to pre-marital counseling. They have described couple relationship education as an option to prevent relationship dysfunction and address common problems most couples encounter.⁶¹ Implementing the tools within couples' relationship education has proven to strengthen relationships.⁶²

Several variations of the specific skills and principles embedded in couple relationship education will be implemented at Victory Tabernacle as practical tools. Content must target building blocks to a successful marriage.⁶³ Content is essential in this framework. The content that will be structured for Victory Tabernacle will center on essential focal points that help strengthen marriages: communication, conflict resolution, problem-solving, listening, oneness, commitment, and forgiveness. Not only is content critical, but the application also serves an crucial role. Couples that receive pre-marital counsel will learn to apply the tools given to them through journaling and summarizing each session.⁶⁴ The last component that will be implemented is the follow-up. Following up with the couples allows time to review the outcomes of applying the tools provided. During this time, couples will begin to see that it is possible to work through difficult situations, different feelings, and the inevitable twists and turns they will experience together.⁶⁵ These variations will be implemented and will continue to serve as a guide

⁶¹ Howard J. Markman, Alan J. Hawkins, Scott M. Stanley, W. Kim Halford, and Galena Rhoades. "Helping Couples Achieve Relationship Success: A Decade of Progress in Couple Relationship Education Research and Practice, 2010-2019." *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 48, no. 1 (2022): 252.

⁶²Ibid., 252.

⁶³David Ayers, *Christian Marriage*, 163.

⁶⁴James Creighton, *Loving through Your Differences: Building Strong Relationships from Separate Realities* (California: New World Library, 2019), 73.

⁶⁵Len Sperry and Paul Peluso, *Interventions in Couple Therapy* (Florida: Routledge, 2018), 266.

for this literature review. The following sections will explore literature that focuses on the building blocks embedded in this program.

In developing a pre-marital program, just like any program, content should be the focal point around which the program should be centered. This portion of the literature review will target the areas addressed in the newly developed pre-marital program at Victory Tabernacle. The goal of the targeted areas will help couples that desire to be married focus on effective communication, conflict resolution, and problem-solving. These aspects will assist in developing a healthy marriage.

Effective Communication

Humans are inherently social creatures designed for communication. This communication serves various purposes, including requesting help, conveying information, and expressing feelings and emotions.⁶⁶ While this capacity for communication is divinely designed, it can often be more effective. Sebastian Ouseph and Lucila Bance remind us that communication is a cornerstone of relationships.⁶⁷ Communication is vital and cannot be underestimated. Without communication, there would be no successful relationships. Communication develops an understanding of one another and helps express ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Communication is needed for humans to thrive in this world. With communication being such a vital component in relationships, it is even more critical that it is clear and effective in marriages. The effectiveness of communication is different from what you say but what your

⁶⁶Les and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts* (Detroit, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 88.

⁶⁷Sebastian Ouseph, and Lucila Ortiz Bance. "Impact of Marital Stress and Communication Quality on Marital Satisfaction: Basis for Proposed Couple Relationships Enhancement Program." *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology* 13, no. 4 (12, 2022): 334

partner understands.⁶⁸ In a poll, 97 percent of married couples rated their communication as excellent, whereas 56 percent rated their communication as poor; this poll concluded that communicating effectively is the most critical contributor to a stable and satisfying marriage.⁶⁹

Effective communication is the lifeline to any relationship that desires to be healthy. Kubicek and Cockram stated that healthy communication is one of the most challenging things to master.⁷⁰ It is imperative to master effective communication in marriage because if the recipient does not understand the transmission, decode it properly, and confirm they have received it then the message is only a one-way transmission.⁷¹ Couples must understand that effective communication is a pathway to building trust. When built trust builds loyalty and allows the recipient to focus on the connection behind the words. Li and Wu stated, “The happiness of a couple depends largely on the effectiveness of their communication.” He further asserted that “how a couple communicates can make or mar their relationship” and that “communicating effectively will allow the couple to negotiate problem areas, fulfill needs, avoid misunderstandings, and develop intimacy over the years.”⁷²

Couples must realize that building effective communication skills will take time; however, during this time, it allows each person to begin to listen with intent and to be able to

⁶⁸Parrott and Parrot, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, 99.

⁶⁹Ibid., 89.

⁷⁰Jeremie Kubicek and Steve Cockram, *The Communication Code: Unlocking Every Relationship, One Relationship at a Time* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2024), 8.

⁷¹Kunicek and Cockram, *The Communication Code*, 9.

⁷²Shan Shan Li and Ying Qi Wu. “Marriage, Conflict and Communication: Pragmatic Inquiry into Impoliteness in the Marital Relationship”. *Register Journal*, 16. no. 1 (2023): 25.

understand what the other person is saying, as well as allowing for the opportunity to ask questions to gain clarity along with building mutual understanding amongst one another. Effective communication happens when the person receiving the transmission is aware of expectations and intent and can respond appropriately.⁷³

To move forward with the first building block, it is essential to understand effective communication; David Ayers coined the term as "learning to be assertive and clear in stating needs and concerns, giving opinions, and sharing feelings."⁷⁴ With abundant research, most researchers agree that effective communication is key in any relationship. Les and Leslie Parrot recorded, "A couple's ability to communicate is the most important contributor to a stable and satisfying marriage."⁷⁵ In contrast, a lack of effective communication can be detrimental. Poor communication leads to misunderstanding which causes the relationship to suffer.⁷⁶ The lack of effective communication can also lead to pain, feeling inadequate, vulnerable, and fearful.⁷⁷ No one wants to feel this in their relationship; ultimately, strategies must be implemented to overcome this obstacle that will surely appear in any relationship.

Within this program, those seeking counseling will gain tools to assist them in being effective communicators. Effective communication creates positivity, openness, and trust,

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid., 171.

⁷⁵Ibid., 89.

⁷⁶Ibid., 262.

⁷⁷Parrott and Parrot, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, 92.

promoting intimacy and fostering support in the relationship.⁷⁸ To develop this effectiveness, delving deeper into communication must be attained.

A further examination of the topic of practical and effective communication literature reveals that communication is developed. The skill of effectiveness or the lack thereof is essentially learned. Hannah Williamson separated communication into two groups based on behavior: affect-based behaviors and skill-based behaviors.⁷⁹ In her research, she found that affect-based behaviors are an accumulation of negative behaviors such as criticism and contempt, and these behaviors cause relationships to deteriorate over time.⁸⁰ Because of the effect, these behaviors negatively impact relationships, making it essential to implement a tool that helps deprogram these behaviors. Her continued research found that the tools or interventions that should be implemented with couples are those that engage in arousing activities to maintain positivity in the relationship.⁸¹ The implemented tools are part of a skill set that the couples must practice regularly. Within that skill set, the couples learn to show warmth towards their partner; warmth equates to acceptance.⁸² Which teaches couples to overlook minor occurrences. Instead, couples learn to accept their partner's thoughts, emotions, and actions. Another skill couples develop is empathy. In this context, empathy has been defined as seeing the world through the lenses of your partner's perspective.⁸³ Couples are learning that they

⁷⁸Ouseph and Bance, *Impact of Marital Stress*, 334.

⁷⁹ Williamson, *The Development of Communication Behavior*, 11.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸² Parrott and Parrot, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, 95.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 97.

cannot expect their partner to know or even assume what they are going through or experiencing. Empathy is a tough skill to learn and apply; couples will journal their feelings, emotions, and experiences to express their experiences to their partner adequately.

Pre-marital counseling programs must cover effective communication because each spouse will experience negativity in the relationship at some point. Hannah Williamson describes skill-based behaviors as “acquired through early life experiences with parents, siblings, peers, and previous romantic relationships.”⁸⁴ These skill-based behaviors are attempts to resolve conflict constructively by offering a solution. These skills taught early on are dually noted as practical skills that are more useful and effective in communication, such as “clearly stating one’s position, actively listening to one’s partner, and keeping the conversation on track.”⁸⁵ When these skills are taught early on, it is typically a positive tool and one that will be most effective. Aaron Sironi pointed out that communication is directly connected to unity, and unity grows as couples communicate authentically.⁸⁶ However, if authentic communication is not learned, communication will be ineffective. The resolve is to teach better communication early on. Authentic communication skills can be developed and taught through the pre-marital content. Within this pre-marital content, the tool generated for effective communication is helping these couples learn how to disagree when communicating. Still, they now have regard for one another’s needs and sensibilities towards one another while communicating.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Williamson, *The Development of Communication Behavior*, 12.

⁸⁵Ibid., 12.

⁸⁶Aaron Sironi, “What My Father Has Joined.” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 35, no. 3 (2021): 20.

⁸⁷Sironi, *What My Father Has Joined*, 20.

Researchers Teresa Nguyen, Benjamin Karney, and Thomas Bradbury took a different approach to effective communication. However, they have stated that “communication processes define and characterize all committed partnerships.”⁸⁸ Representation of how these couples communicate with one another creates a big picture of whether it is effective or not. They believe effective communication results from observed negativity and positivity.⁸⁹ Observing these couples through the program, it has been made clear whether their communication efforts are negative or positive. Their observation is viewed as unfavorable when associated with a decline in the relationship, but positivity can cause lower satisfaction.⁹⁰ In contrast to the behaviors discussed previously, both concepts will be embedded in the program because learned behaviors will be prevalent in the marriage, and the idea of satisfaction will arise. Focusing on interventions and tools within the content to handle the overall effectiveness of communication facing both learned behaviors and the aspect of negativity and positivity will be critical in the pre-marital program.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict is inevitable; every couple will experience it. The question is, how can conflict be handled in a healthy way? Özge Ünal and Akgün Serap defined conflict as a “situation in which the conditions, practices, or goals for the different participants are inherently incompatible.”⁹¹ Hanaway defined conflict as a continued struggle or battle, open warfare

⁸⁸Teresa P Nguyen, Benjamin R Karney, and Thomas N Bradbury. “When Poor Communication Does and Does Not Matter: The Moderating Role of Stress.” *Journal of family psychology* 34, no. 6 (2020): 676.

⁸⁹Ibid., 676.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹ Özge Ünal and Akgün Serap "Relationship of Conflict Resolution Styles in Marriage with Marital Adjustment and Satisfaction," *Psikiyatride Güncel Yaklaşımlar* 14, no. 3 (2022): 324.

between opposing forces; disagreement or clash between ideas, principles, and people.⁹² Since it is known that marriages will endure conflict, those never-resolved conflicts may lead to resentment and bitterness. These two components can lead to the destruction of the relationship.⁹³ John Gottman, a famed marital researcher, has spent decades studying what makes a marriage last. In his research, he discusses acceptable conflict styles that couples can use.⁹⁴ The styles he emphasizes show couples how to develop a culture within the marriage in which conflict does not dominate the marriage.⁹⁵

Components of the healthy styles of handling conflict are used in the pre-marital program, which is shown to be positive. Couples learn to resolve conflict by having positive interactions during the conflict, and positivity counters the negativity.⁹⁶ The first style of conflict that these couples experience is volatile conflict. John Gottman stated that this type of conflict style is visible in couples that argue often; they argue on a grand scale. This type of conflict causes couples to have little interest in hearing each other's points of view; they skip discussing the issue, and they fail to understand and empathize with their partner.⁹⁷ The miscommunication with one another leads to conflict. Couples who experience this type of conflict have been filling their toolbox with positive memories amid conflict. As a result, the conflict is counteracted by all

⁹² Monica Hanaway, *Psychologically Informed Mediations: Studies in Conflict Resolution* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 3.

⁹³ Tim Clinton and John Trent, *Marriage and Family Counseling* (Detroit, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 98.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹⁷ John Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 21.

the good times they have had,⁹⁸ allowing the couple to view the whole picture of their relationship, and feel satisfied.

The following style of conflict experienced within these couples is the validating conflict style, which is defined as being able to listen and understand the other's point of view and emotions.⁹⁹ The couples operating within this conflict style provide confidence to their partner that they are being heard, their partners are validated even when they disagree, and their partners consider each other's opinions and emotions valid. Operating in this conflict style, the couples listen to one another and provide mutual respect.¹⁰⁰ As couples work through this conflict style, they are filling their toolbox with skills by practicing listening to one another, learning to pick their battles carefully, and learning to compromise positively. The end goal is for the couples to talk, listen, compromise, and calmly solve their problems, leading to mutual satisfaction.¹⁰¹

The third and final conflict style is the avoidant conflict style, a method couples use to make light of their differences rather than resolve them.¹⁰² Successful couples confront the issues head-on. They tend to “agree to disagree.” Couples operating in this conflict style are those who are strong-willed, independent individuals who will have different opinions on some issues.¹⁰³ This conflict style is not the best route to operate because conflict may be left unresolved. However, according to John Gottman, couples who operate in this conflict style tend to become

⁹⁸ Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 21.

⁹⁹ Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 18.

¹⁰⁰ Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 67.

¹⁰¹ Clinton and Trent. *Marriage and Family Counseling*, 99.

¹⁰² Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 23.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 23.

lonely in the relationship. The couple eventually begins to feel that neither understands the other¹⁰⁴, and the negativity of this style of conflict overwhelms the relationship. For couples operating in this conflict style, the tools provided for them are to consider the conflict. Meaning they share their feelings about the issue(s). Another tool implemented with them is helping them voice their objections politely and confidently early on. The couples have found that addressing these issues makes the conflict more straightforward to manage. The last tool added to the toolbox is learning to face the issue head-on by thinking through conflict realistically and focusing on a solution. In this program, couples are learning that having a solution within this style of conflict prevents the “back and forth” arguments, and having solutions assists in helping the couple manage the conflict.

Conflict in relationships will happen. Les and Leslie Parrott also stated that conflict is a necessary challenge, and even though it is necessary, it is also natural.¹⁰⁵ The couples within this program have learned that how they view conflict teaches them how to overcome conflict positively. Providing opportunity for growth in the relationship.¹⁰⁶ They trust their partners and feel secure when conflict arises. John Gottman concluded that couples generally discuss their feelings when conflict arises, but what is essential is feeling good about their interactions once they resolve it.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 25.

¹⁰⁵ Parrott and Parrot, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, 143.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁰⁷ Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 26.

Problem-Solving

Problems will occur in marriages just as problems arise in any other relationship because no relationship is without challenges and problems. The problems that become common within marriages can quickly put a strain on the relationship. This strain leads to marital stress and marital frustration. The problems that arise can be solved within the marriage if the couples have the tools needed to maneuver through the problems that arise. It is common for relationships to see money as a problem, having children as a problem, daily stress as a problem, busyness, and many other situational occurrences that come about within the marriage as problems; however, it is vital to change the outlook of these situations. Shifting the mindset from the situation or problem to a solution can help dissolve the problems that arrive on the scene.

If the world was perfect and there was no sin, then this would not be a topic of discussion, but this issue is prevalent in the covenant relationship due to sin entering the world. Paul Tripp stated that sin has complicated every marriage, and the world's brokenness complicates things.¹⁰⁸ Amid the darkness that can quickly cloud a marital relationship, it is essential to have strategies to help overcome these obstacles. The first strategy that couples must understand is that worship in the marital relationship is critical. In chapter 34, verse 3 of the book of Psalms, the author writes, “Proclaim with me the Lord’s greatness; let us exalt His name together.” Worshiping God means magnifying Him in all of His greatness, power, glory, and authority. Paul Tripp points out three ways to worship in marriage to help the couple continue to press on through the problems encountered. The first point is that “a marriage of love, unity, and

¹⁰⁸ Paul Tripp, *Marriage (Repackage): 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 33.

understanding will flow out of a daily worship of God as *creator*.”¹⁰⁹ When couples encounter problems, it is important not to look at the spouse as the problem; when looking at the spouse, look at the person through the eyes of God and see the glory of God’s creative artistry within the person.¹¹⁰ The second point is that “a marriage of love, unity, and understanding will flow out of daily worship of God as *sovereign*.”¹¹¹ Within the marital relationship, two people join together to become one; each individual brings cultural, familial, and experiential influences; couples enter into the relationship with a list of givens that aren’t givens of the spouse.¹¹² Spouses must see the sovereignty of God within each other. When couples can celebrate the sovereignty of God and how He brought the two together for His glory, then the problems that exist become minimal.¹¹³ The third point that Tripp makes is that “a marriage of love, unity, and understanding will flow out of a daily worship of God as *Savior*.”¹¹⁴ Couples must realize that the union of the two is made up of two imperfect people. Being imperfect means that both are sinners. Tripp points out that once this discovery is made, it will determine the character and quality of the union.¹¹⁵ When problems arise, both people must realize how to respond to the issues in the relationship. Tripp then states that spouses should respond to problems in a way that is right, good, and helpful to

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 37.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 39.

¹¹³ Tripp, *Marriage (Repackage): Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make*, 39.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

the spouse's sin, weakness, and struggle.¹¹⁶ Grace is critical. God provides grace to His children continuously, and must be given to one another when problems arise.

Dr. Tony Evans describes the problems that married couples encounter as strongholds. Evans provides an example that it is a problem when couples go to bed arguing and wake up arguing or become strangers to one another, it is a problem.¹¹⁷ These problems within the relationship occur because couples need to understand the purpose of marriage. Evans stated that God created marriage as one of the primary tools through which He fulfills His destiny along with the advancement of the kingdom.¹¹⁸ It is understood that the enemy seeks to destroy marriages. Satan will use everything in his power to accomplish this task. John Eckhardt describes the movement of Satan as a vessel that will come to restrict and obstruct.¹¹⁹ Satan wants married couples to believe the problems that are being encountered within the relationship are there forever and there is no pathway to overcome. Eckhardt further explains that Satan wants to present himself and make one believe that the problem will always last.¹²⁰ As covenant believers in marriages, this is an untruth; God is ready to help couples overcome the problems faced within the relationship.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Evans, *Victory in Spiritual Warfare*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 171.

¹¹⁸ Evans, *Victory in Spiritual Warfare*, 172.

¹¹⁹ John Eckhardt, *Break Every Chain: 25 Strongholds and How to Defeat Them* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2021), vi.

¹²⁰ Ibid., vi.

Effective Listening

Listening is a difficult skill to develop. The reason this skill is so difficult is due to the distractions that everyone faces daily. These distractions are sometimes difficult to avoid, causing a person to not be in tune attentively while not fully listening to a person. The distractions that cause people to get lost in the world that they are in are technology, work, life, people, and obligations that pull people in different directions. These distractions make settling down and listening to one another extremely difficult. Not having the skill to listen effectively can cause major issues in a relationship. Ximena Vengoechea stated ineffective listening is common and happens every day. We often stop listening because we think we know what the other person will say.¹²¹ A couple married for five years prepares to celebrate the milestone anniversary. The wife had planned the trip with explicit details. The wife provided the itinerary to the husband and explained the trip's details. The husband is a businessman who is easily distracted by emails and phone calls. As the wife explained the trip details, the husband did not actively listen to the details. The airport details were unique since the two would not fly together due to the husband's business commitments. The details that were explained got clouded in the busyness of work, and the husband missed the flight to their anniversary location. Vengoechea explains that when we stop paying attention to what the conversation partner has to say, we miss learning what the conversation partner has to say.¹²² In the example provided, one can see that lacking the skill to listen effectively can cause someone to miss out on momentous moments.

¹²¹ Ximena Vengoechea, *Listen Like You Mean It* (New York, NY: Penguin Publishing Group, 2021), 17.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 18.

The authors of the book entitled, *Marriage and the Culture of Peace*, define listening as a nonverbal communication process where the body sends constant messages, conveying as a result the creation of an atmosphere of interest or disinterest in the cycle of communication and daily coexistence.¹²³ The research that Vazquez and Tijerina completed, reveals that human beings spend more time listening than speaking; of the total time spent on communication, 22 percent is spent on reading and writing, 23 percent on speaking and 55 percent on listening. This does not mean that there is more willingness to listen than to speak, but rather that there is greater exposure to receiving information than to transmitting it.¹²⁴ People will talk about their opinions, different topics, feelings, and thoughts; however, when it comes to listening to others, there is a reduced willingness. The researchers Vazquez and Tijerina concluded that, when it comes to the skill of listening, it is not only about the interpersonal relationship but about a larger dimension, the ability to see the mind–body connection to listen to analyze the deepest feelings and emotions.¹²⁵ Effective listening is critical in a relationship because it assists in reaching an understanding and resolving conflict.

Oneness

The first marriage noted in the Bible between Adam and Eve is the first example of oneness or unity. This is because of God’s nature and how it comprises oneness, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Scripture points out the importance of oneness in Matthew 12:25, “Every kingdom divided against itself is headed for destruction, and no city or

¹²³ Cecilia Sarahi de la Rosa Vazquez and Paris A. Cabello-Tijerina, *Marriage and the Culture of Peace Communication Skills for Families, Therapists, and Society* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 104.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 104.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 104.

house divided against itself will stand.” This scripture means that even Satan would not work against himself to divide himself. However, the goal of Satan is to bring discord and disharmony into marriages. Couples must understand the principle of oneness. When man and woman are joined together, they become one. When couples stay in the mindset of being separate individuals while God desires to create unity and oneness, couples are inadvertently working against the purpose God has set forth. Dr. Tony Evans stated, “The area of unity is critical.”¹²⁶ Not only is unity or oneness critical, but this principle is also extremely important because Jesus emphasized the concept of “oneness.” Tim Cameron gave a beautiful illustration of the unity of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, he stated,

“Picture Adam and Eve walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day. The gentle wind blows their hair. The smell of majestic gardenias fills the air, their swaying petals wafting a dreamlike odor that engulfs everything. The two of them pick ripe blueberries, dates, figs, and kiwi. Can you taste them—the sweet figs, hearty and full of flavor? Nothing comes between Adam and Eve—not even clothes. They have been made in the image of God. And there He is! They hear the voice of the Lord, walking in the garden. He’s humming and singing with pleasure over all that’s been created. Let your imagination go wild picturing this. What do you suppose stood between Adam, Eve, and God? I’ll tell you what: nothing. They experienced unity like God experiences unity within the Trinity.”¹²⁷

The quote by Cameron provides a vivid picture of oneness and what it should look like in marriage. Nothing should stand between husband and wife. In the book of Ephesians 4: 1-6 Paul’s letter to the church of Ephesus explains the principle of oneness by stating, “Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as

¹²⁶ Tony Evans, *Kingdom Marriage*, 50.

¹²⁷ Tim Cameron, *The Forty-Day Word Fast for Couples* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2020), 14.

you were called to one hope at your calling— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” Tony Evans begins breaking down this scripture by defining unity, he states, “In the Greek *unity* is the variation of the word *one*, unity is any group of people who are characterized by “oneness” a shared purpose, vision or direction.”¹²⁸ Once a couple gets married, a covenant is made with God. This covenant is binding and cannot be broken except for what God has deemed powerful enough to break: death and infidelity. Marriage is serious in the eyes of God.

How are couples able to achieve this unity that has been described? Dr. Evans stated that to achieve this, is by conserving the marriage by protecting the environment from threats that would erode the natural habitat.¹²⁹ Dr. Evans explains to married couples that they must understand their marriage atmosphere. To understand the atmosphere of the marriage, the couple must look at four virtues and see how these virtues are cultivated in the marriage. The four virtues are humility, gentleness, patience, and tolerance in love.¹³⁰

1. Humility

- a. In the interest of unity, are you willing to submit your desires, no matter how good, to God’s purpose in your marriage?¹³¹

¹²⁸Tony Evans, Kingdom Marriage, 51.

¹²⁹ Tony Evans, Kingdom Marriage, 57.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

- b. Are you willing to serve your mate, looking out for his or her interests above your own?¹³²
- 2. Gentleness
 - a. Are you argumentative with your mate?¹³³
 - b. Do you find yourself responding with anger when your agenda is challenged?¹³⁴
 - c. What is your first, unfiltered response when your mate wrongs you? ¹³⁵
- 3. Patience
 - a. Are you willing to wait on God's work through His Spirit in the life of your mate?¹³⁶
 - b. Do you find yourself impatient with the slowness of change in your mate's life?¹³⁷
 - c. Can you wait on the Spirit and the discernment of your marriage partner before making a change or starting a new interest? ¹³⁸
- 4. Tolerance in love
 - a. Do you insist on things being done your way? ¹³⁹

¹³² Tony Evans, Kingdom Marriage, 57

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 58

- b. Can you allow for the diversity of ways and means that the Spirit works through other people?¹⁴⁰
- c. Do you work well when your mate's preferences conflict with your own? ¹⁴¹

When couples cultivate these virtues in their marriage, they are ready to submit to the reality of the work of God through His Spirit. Applying these virtues and allowing the Spirit of God to work within the marriage will cultivate the oneness described.

Virtues are not the only components needed to cultivate oneness; some foundational components must be implemented into the relationship for the union to merge into complete oneness. Developing oneness does take time. It takes a lifetime; it's a daily journey of work. This process completely relies on God and forges a lasting relationship according to God's plan and design. Michael Todd and Eric Stanford identified some foundational components needed in relationships. The first component discussed was community. These authors pointed out that relationships need a godly community. "A couple's Christlike oneness doesn't exist all by itself, it exists inside the community Christ created-the church."¹⁴² Couples need to surround themselves with believers within the church community. Marriages will struggle and have high and low moments, and that is when community will be critical because the body of believers can pray and support during those moments of difficulty. Todd and Stanford conclude by quoting Genesis 2:18, "It's not good for man to be alone." It is not good for a couple to be alone, either.

¹⁴⁰ Tony Evans, *Kingdom Marriage*, 58

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Michael Todd and Eric Stanford, *Relationship goals challenge: 30 days from Good to Great* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2020), 85.

These authors stated, don't be so wrapped up in each other that you forget your need for other people because every couple needs community.¹⁴³

Couples must embed honesty, openness, and transparency in their relationship. Todd and Stanford focus on these components in great detail. The two authors stated that couples must be open and honest with one another and with their godly community.¹⁴⁴ In the book of Ecclesiastes 4:9 the author writes, "Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts." There is success in having a godly community. Scriptures provide great detail about support from one another. Ecclesiastes 4:10 says, "For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up." Couples should not live in isolation; a godly community is a great support to couples. Many couples were able to survive the obstacles in marriage because of the support system of community that were able to be listening sound boards and being able to pray collectively and individually for one another. Todd and Stanford concluded this section: "It's about standing back-to-back. The people we share our stuff with might not always see it the same way, but we can still fight together. This is the kind of unity the closest relationships need."¹⁴⁵

Commitment

The expectation that God has put forth for married couples is to live as one flesh. To live out this expectation, commitment is an integral part of fulfilling it. Commitment is key to the

¹⁴³ Ibid., 87.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 89.

¹⁴⁵ Michael Todd and Eric Stanford, *Relationship goals challenge: 30 days from Good to Great* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2020), 92.

success of any relationship. There will be moments in the relationship where the waters will be tested. However, the commitment made in the covenant relationship will be needed to wade through the tested waters. Marriages, whether newlyweds or seasoned couples, will encounter the adjustments that come with marriage: physical illness, job loss, raising children, finances, etc. Marriage pressures will challenge the relationship; however, commitment is the glue that holds couples together during difficult times. It is a commitment that enables couples to stand firm and weather the storms of life together.

Lee Williams stated, “Commitment is the decision to remain together as a couple, even in the face of difficulties. Commitment is important for at least two reasons. First, it can help a couple survive the inevitable challenges that all intimate relationships face. Second, commitment creates a sense of safety in the relationship, encouraging individuals to show their true selves to one another.”¹⁴⁶ Commitment in relationships requires both people to want to work and improve this critical area. Couples must understand that it will take time and a willingness to put in the effort.

The increasing divorce rates that are seen in the Western world give speculation that the meaning of commitment in a marriage has changed and suggests that it is no longer necessary to have a lifelong commitment. Ohlsson, Branden and Duvander have compiled findings from coordinated focus group studies regarding norms on cohabitation and marriage in Australia and nine countries in different regions of Europe. Commitment stood out as a critical difference between the two types of unions but was manifested somewhat differently across countries.

¹⁴⁶ Lee Williams, *Assessment in Couple Therapy: Navigating the 7 C's of Relationships* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 75.

Generally, commitment was related to romance, emotional security, and stability.¹⁴⁷

Commitment is the foundation upon which trust, mutual respect, and love are built.

Commitment is vital in relationships. It takes continuous effort and requires work and attention. It has been stated before; however, it must be understood that it is a marathon, not a sprint. It requires patience and dedication. Fostering commitment in relationships can be achieved by setting goals. Couples should sit down and set goals with one another. This is because “research has shown that it is not simply about achieving goals: it is more about setting and pursuing the right goals.”¹⁴⁸ Setting these goals together can strengthen the relationship, strengthen the bond, and allow the couple to feel more connected. Fostering commitment can also occur by being on the same page with one another when making decisions. Couples must have deep and honest conversations about goals, values, and belief systems, ensuring these attributes are aligned. In doing this, it can prevent conflict and misunderstandings down the road.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is significant in marriage. Ephesians 4:31-32 reads, “Let all bitterness, anger, and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.” Husbands and wives should allow this scripture to be a part of their daily meditation; couples should treat one another with love and compassion. Dave Harvey stated that forgiveness is a

¹⁴⁷ S. Ohlsson-Wijk, M. Brandén, and A. Duvander . “Getting married in a highly individualized context: Commitment and gender equality matter”. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 84, no.4, (2022): 1085.

¹⁴⁸Christian Ehrlich and Sashenka Milston, *Happiness Through Goal Setting a Practical Guide to Reflect on and Change the Reasons why You Pursue your most Important Goals in Life* (London: Routledge, 2021), 13.

powerful tool that repairs marriage relationships.¹⁴⁹ Forgiveness is such a powerful tool in marriage that if it is not present, it could lead to its demise. When couples consciously decide not to forgive, it harbors hate which turns into bitterness. Being incapable of forgiving takes a physical toll on the mind and the body. This negative energy chips away at the relationship that God has ordained. Nancy Wolgemuth wrote, “When we fail to deal with hurt God’s way, when we harbor resentment in our hearts, that bitterness— like an infection— will fester and work its way into our system, until ultimately we start viewing everything through the eyes of hurt— everything others do, everything that happens to us.”¹⁵⁰

Forgiveness is critical because if it turns into bitterness, it is now soiled in your heart. This bitterness will find its way into your speech and tone. In the book of Colossians 3:19, “Paul contrasts love with bitterness and warns against letting bitterness infect the marriage relationship: “Husbands, love your wives,” he instructs, “and do not be bitter toward them.” Other translations say, “Do not be harsh with them.”¹⁵¹ This bitterness destroys marriages. Unforgiveness, which leads to bitterness, is detrimental; it grieves the Spirit of God, it makes spouses and partners hard and cold, it turns people into negative and critical people, makes the person resistant to God’s plan and His love for us, and eventually, it destroys the person and the relationship.¹⁵²

As stated previously, marriage is a covenant relationship ordained by God. He designed this union to last. Satan and his tactics creep into covenant relationships because his goal and job

¹⁴⁹ Harvey, *When Sinners Say I Do*, 113.

¹⁵⁰ Nancy Wolgemuth, *Choosing Forgiveness* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2022), 36.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

are to destroy what God put together. One of his tactics is unforgiveness. Relationships are made up of imperfect people who will make mistakes because it is human nature. It must be understood that forgiveness should always be at the forefront of the minds of those in a relationship. In the book of Matthew 18:21-22, it states, “Then Peter approached him and asked, ‘Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?’ As many as seven times?” “I tell you, not as many as seven,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven.” Dr. Tony Evans explained that Jewish rabbis taught that forgiveness need only be extended three times. So, Peter may have thought he was being generous by suggesting that he forgive his brother or sister seven times. By saying seventy times seven, though, Jesus insisted that forgiveness has no limits.¹⁵³ The same is true for spouses, forgiveness has no limits. “Forgiveness is a race of spiritual endurance.”¹⁵⁴

Wolgemuth used an illustration that will take you back a little in time. When word processors first came out, there was a button with the letters DEL on it. These letters are meant to delete, erase, and make it go away. Back in those days, once it was deleted, it could not come back, it was not automatically saved like the processors do today, it was gone forever. Wolgemuth stated, “What happens when we trash a computer document is a vivid picture of what takes place when we truly forgive someone for an offense they’ve thrust upon us. We eliminate it.”¹⁵⁵ This is what must be done daily in marriages: eliminate the offense and clear the record. Wolgemuth goes further to say, “We treat it as if the sin never occurred in the first place.”¹⁵⁶ This is exactly what God does for us, he wipes it clean, never to bring it back up again. God tells us in Colossians 3:13,

¹⁵³ Tony Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2019), 898-899.

¹⁵⁴ Hayley Satrom, *Forgiveness: Reflecting God’s Mercy* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 80.

¹⁵⁵ Nancy Wolgemuth, *Choosing Forgiveness* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2022), 53.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

“Bearing with one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a grievance against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive.” Believers must know that God forgives, and it must be apparent in the lives of believers that forgiveness happens daily. Colossians 2:13-14 states, “And when you were dead in trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made you alive with him and forgave us all our trespasses. He erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and has taken it away by nailing it to the cross”. Wolgemuth sums this up by saying, “With one press of the delete key, our holy, merciful God erased the whole thing. Nothing was saved on cloud storage. Nothing printed out in hard copy. Nothing stored in a separate folder or filing cabinet in case it proved useful to whip it out again someday. All of it, deleted. Forever.”¹⁵⁷ When Christ went to Calvary’s Hill, He laid it all out for us, His life was sacrificed so His children could receive, salvation, righteousness and forgiveness and so much more. “Christ’s death on the cross— in our place. Debt canceled. This was God’s way of dealing with what we had done to Him. And that is what He asks us to do with others’ sins against us.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Nancy Wolgemuth, *Choosing Forgiveness* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2022), 53.

Theological Foundations

Pre-marital counseling is a term one will not see verbatim in the Bible. However, it is understood that this type of counseling provides a healthy and biblical view of marriage. Understanding what the Bible says about marriage is essential to have a solid foundation within this relationship. Marriage is an institution that can be traced back to the Garden of Eden. The Bible informs the reader that God created the first marriage between Adam and Eve on the sixth day. The foundation of marriage begins in the first chapter of the book of Genesis. God created, male and female, to live depending on Him alone and for His glory. In His glory, He called His children to “be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it.” (Gen.1:28, CSB). Dr. Tony Evans stated that the commission of humankind is to bear this Trinitarian image of God.¹⁵⁹ The creation of humanity includes body, soul, and spirit to mirror God. This divine creation serves as the divine institution called family to reproduce his image.

God ordained the covenant relationship. Ben Faber describes a covenant relationship as a relationship between the Creator and human beings.¹⁶⁰ This relationship is voluntary; both parties consciously decide to enter the relationship. Faber further explains the covenant relationship in three phases: first, the divine decree before creation; second, the calling into being of that which was not during the six days of creation; and third, the continuous providence over creation.¹⁶¹ God created this covenant relationship because it is critical to His redemptive plan. The first articulation of the covenant of creation is among equals within the triune Godhead; the second is between the Creator and that which he created; and the third is the ongoing call and

¹⁵⁹ Tony Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2019), 3.

¹⁶⁰ Ben Faber. “Covenant and pedagogy.” *International Journal of Christianity and Education* 24, no. 3 (2020): 256.

¹⁶¹ Faber, *Covenant and Pedagogy*, 258.

answer between Creator and created, as well as among all created things, until the eschaton.¹⁶² The relationships developed to drive the narrative until it reaches its climax, which is the return of Jesus Christ.

Vazquez and Tijerina did intense research on marriage by reviewing the Western culture of marriage, the philosophical view of marriage, and the biblical view of marriage. From the biblical view, these researchers concluded that marriage begins in the book of Genesis. These two researchers concluded that at “the beginning of the creation of the universe, a higher being is described as creating man and then creating a companion for man, similar to him so that he would not be alone.”¹⁶³ As the two continued with the research, the findings were, in various books of the Bible, what the Higher Self indicates should be marriage is described. For example, in Ephesians 5:33 every man is invited to love his wife as himself, and wives to respect their husband. In another book, 1 Peter 3:8 indicates that the wisdom of the spouses lies in that they must be merciful and friendly.¹⁶⁴

When God made Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed life into his nostrils (Gen. 2:7, CSB), He saw that Adam was alone and deemed his being alone not good (Gen. 2:18, CSB). God created a counterpart for Adam so he would not be alone. God addressed the need by creating Eve from his rib (Gen. 2:21-22, CSB). Howard Vos pinpointed that creating Eve from Adam’s rib is significant in the marriage relationship; this act signifies that the woman was not to lord it over him nor grovel at his feet but to walk by his side as his complementary partner.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Ibid., 258.

¹⁶³ Cecilia Sarahi de la Rosa Vazquez and Paris A. Cabello-Tijerina, *Marriage and the Culture of Peace Communication Skills for Families, Therapists, and Society* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 7.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶⁵ Howard F. Vos, *Genesis-Everyday Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2019), 27.

Creating Eve is integral because it visualizes the relationship God desires in marriage. God wants the relationship to be complementary, “This at last is bone of my bones”; the Hebrew for “bone” signifies not only body but “essence” or “self.”¹⁶⁶ God had created a helper for Adam and named her woman (Gen. 2:23, CSB). In Matthew 19:4-5 God made it clear regarding the expectation of this relationship, which also introduces elements needed in a successful marriage: (1) a necessary degree of severance from parents so the couple can work out their problems without interference, (2) an attachment to one another, and (3) a God-sealed bond.¹⁶⁷ If couples are unaware or fail to understand these clear expectations, expectations set by God, problems will become apparent in the relationship. Lacking this knowledge that will be provided during pre-marital counseling will cause cracks in the foundation of marriage before it even begins.

It is understood that God initiated the first marriage between Adam and Eve, meaning marriage comes from God. The union He created illustrates His ideal for marriage, one man and one woman joining together until death. Once sin entered this union, this is when things began to change. Issues began to come between Adam and Eve, that remain prevalent today. Examples of issues that became rampant and exist today are disobedience and rebellion. These two factors caused Adam and Eve “to believe the word of Satan rather than the word of God and the will of man above the will of God.”¹⁶⁸ A once-perfect union is aware of evil, which brings guilt, sorrow, shame, and misery.¹⁶⁹ Although problems exist between Adam and Eve, those same problems exist today among those who are married. Marriage is still considered to be blessed by God. He

¹⁶⁶ Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary*, 3.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶⁸ Vos, *Genesis-Everyday Bible*, 28.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

intended for marriage to be blessed. Scriptures tell the reader in Hebrews 13:4 that “marriage is to be honored.” The word honored means “of exceptional value.”¹⁷⁰ The institution should be respected and honored because marriage is God’s creation. Marriage is a good thing. It is good because God gave us this gift from the beginning.

God has a plan for the union of marriage, His plan will go forward just as it did in the Garden of Eden. Once Adam was formed, God knew Adam would need a helper. “Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding to him.” (Gen. 2:18, CSB). Kuldip Gangar stated that the word helper refers to a function.¹⁷¹ This function is not one of interiority. It is a function that corresponds to the man. Even in understanding this function, because of sin, this matter has been perverted to the point where the woman has been downgraded into a position of virtual slavery.¹⁷² Here lies an issue within the union of marriage: the role of the woman in the marriage has been infiltrated by Satan, causing many not to understand the woman's actual role in the marriage. Pre-marital counseling can assist those desiring to be married and provide a complete understanding of the godly roles that should be implemented.

God is the reason marriage exists; marriage belongs to God; marriage is not about the man or the woman; marriage exists for God.¹⁷³ The most essential person in marriage is God. A vital point that all must remember is that marriage is for our good, but it is for God’s glory.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ David G. Peterson, Eckhard J. Schnabel, and Nicholas Perrin, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 316.

¹⁷¹ Kuldip S. Gangar, *Foundations of the Gospel* (Kentwood, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 28.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Dave Harvey, *When Sinners Say I Do* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2007), 25.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 25.

The great Apostle Paul spends much time talking to married people in the fifth chapter of Ephesians. Within this chapter, these details directed toward marriages have Christ at the reference point of each detail. “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord” (Eph. 5:22, CSB). This means that the wives must place themselves under the authority of their husbands. Bock, Schnabel, and Perrin focused on the term submit. This term was paired with love, and it was described as the wife being responsive to the husband who cares for her as Christ cared for the church.¹⁷⁵ If married couples do not understand this concept of marriage, there is no question about how this could become a problem, leading to tension and frustration if knowledge is not provided on this topic. Incorporating tools from pre-marital counseling will help address the biblical directives of these roles that have been given. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church.” (Ephesians 5:25, CSB). This point of reference entails that the husband is a governing authority; the husband leads the family to advance God’s kingdom.¹⁷⁶ As the husband leads the wife, there should be visible attributes shown by the husband, such as care, compassion, and support towards the wife because the husband is modeling what Christ did for the church.

The union of man and woman expresses who God truly is. It is the most pivotal manifestation of His image. The expectation should be that married couples not only mirror who God is but also transfer this image of perfection to the children who are born of the union. Dr. Tony Evans stated that this mission is to manifest and replicate the image of God in history and

¹⁷⁵ Darrell L. Bock, Eckhard Schnabel, and Nicholas Perrin, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 171.

¹⁷⁶ Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary*, 1400.

carry out His divinely mandated dominion.¹⁷⁷ Ultimately, God created this creation for man and woman to reflect Him, glorify Him, and advance His kingdom.

Understanding marriage and its foundational pieces is important in why pre-marital counseling is so meaningful today. Sin is the root of relationship issues and has existed since the beginning. Adam and Eve are the faces of marriage. However, others in the Bible experienced such trials in their marriages; some overcame the obstacles as others did not. Abraham and Sarah are examples of faith biblically; however, the issue of being barren was a problem for Sarah and Abraham. What is seen between Abraham and Sarah is a role issue. Sarah devised a plan that would cause conflict. She concocted a plan that changed the trajectory of generations due to her not having patience and not trusting God (Gen. 16, CSB). This conflict could have caused the marriage's demise. Conflict resolution is a skill set that must be taught and explained before marriage. This infertility issue that Abraham and Sarah experienced can lead to and often does lead to divorce. These are two main issues in a marriage; one can easily see how preparing for marriage through counseling could have been utilized even in the Bible days.

Another example of a biblical couple who could have used pre-marital counseling is Hosea and Gomer (Hosea 1, 2, CSB). Berteau and Franklin described the relationship between Hosea and Gomer as one in which Gomer may have thought her marriage to Hosea would take away her past life of prostitution.¹⁷⁸ If these two had had the opportunity to attend pre-marital counseling, their session would have included all three focal points of communication, conflict, problem-solving, and an added session of forgiveness. Dr. Evans said forgiveness is a critical

¹⁷⁷ Evans, *Kingdom Marriage* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 12.

¹⁷⁸ Micah Berteau and Jentezen Franklin, *Love Changes Everything: Finding What's Real in a World Full of Fake* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2019), 36.

element of a healthy marriage.¹⁷⁹ Gomer was an unfaithful wife, and infidelity is an issue in marriages today. How does one handle such a hurtful act? No one wants their spouse to cheat, but it does happen. Mistakes will occur, and forgiveness must be precedent in the marriage; Matthew 18:21 says forgiveness must happen seventy times seven, meaning forgiveness has no limits. Forgiveness is a powerful tool that must be exercised in relationships. Forgiveness that is humbly sought and humbly given profoundly expresses the glory of God.¹⁸⁰

Samson and his Philistine wife is another example of a couple that could have used pre-marital counseling. The story of these two is found in Judges 14. The problem that stands out in this marriage is that they were unequally yoked. Samson was an Israelite, and his unnamed wife was a Philistine from a pagan nation. Second Corinthians 6:14-15 states, “Do not be yoked together with those who do not believe. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” Being unequally yoked affects your intimacy with God. When yoked with someone not of the same belief system, there will be distance between you and God.

The story of Ahab and Jezebel found in 1 Kings shows that this couple should most definitely seek help. This couple could have used pre-marital counseling from the beginning. Based on their story, these two would not have sought counseling. The issues that were present in their relationship needed more than counseling. The couple needed God. Ahab was a notorious evil king, and his wife Jezebel incited him. The two of them together actively did evil deeds together. If the two had received counseling, the counselor would see that their spirits were not

¹⁷⁹ Evans, *Kingdom Marriage*, 107.

¹⁸⁰ Harvey, *When Sinners Say, “I Do”*, 113.

of God and acceptance of Jesus Christ must occur. Counseling unbelievers would be an opportunity to bring lost souls to Christ. Jezebel and Ahab were extreme, and the two prided themselves on doing evil. This would be an absolute transformative opportunity to counsel unbelievers who actively serve and worship other gods. This is a reality that could possibly occur; it is key to be open and willing to serve those who are lost so they can know who the True and Divine God truly is.

The story of King Solomon, who had many wives. Topics for Solomon would have been obedience and allegiance to God. The purpose of marriage is to glorify God. Solomon married many women, and those women caused him to turn away from God. Pre-marital counseling for Solomon could have been centered around being equally yoked, obedience, fidelity, and the list could go on. Solomon, being the wisest man that ever lived, was not wise enough to hold the commandments of God to his heart. Flesh ruled in a major way. This is a real- life situation that couples will experience. Pre-marital counseling will allow dialogue about a topic such as this. If either person has an issue to being faithful it needs to be addressed. It must be discussed if either person is wavering in their faith and can be easily converted to another belief. These two issues are seen in Solomon's story. The issues are crucial and critical and pre-marital counseling is the gateway to lay these issues on the table.

In conclusion, God's partnership is one of loyalty between man and woman (Mark 10:6, CSB). This foundation is set forth to glorify Him (1 Corinthians 10:31, CSB) and build a family. Although this is a good thing, Satan had his way and attempted to stain the beauty of what God created. Due to his infiltration in this union, there will be problems. Ephesians 6:10-20 tells the reader to "put on the whole armor of God to stand against the schemes of the devil." Knowing the devil desires to destroy Christian marriages because of his hate towards the institution, it is

more evident than ever before for couples to take the initiative to prepare for the wages of war that will come about in this union. Whether couples choose to have pre-marital counseling, the issues will be present. Choosing to receive pre-marital counseling will be beneficial because implementing what is learned will result in a positive outcome.

Theoretical Foundations

The lack of an effective and established pre-marital counseling program in the Victory Tabernacle ministry is astonishing. Marriage is significant in the kingdom; lacking such a vital ministry does not add up. While reading and looking at different pre-marital counseling programs within various churches, the reality is that this program is lacking in many ministries. People are doing more to prepare for the wedding than preparing for the marriage. Somewhere down the line, it lost its focus on preparing couples because the support needed is lacking or non-existent.

While researching models within different ministries, some are similar and focus on the same topics, but there are also some differences. For this research, four church models and a non-ministry model (secular) were reviewed. The first model to be addressed is the CORE model, developed by John Howard and his colleagues. Howard and his team have extensive experience in couples therapy, relationship health research, and pre-marital counseling services delivery to couples over the years. The research completed allowed this team of researchers to thoughtfully compile the approaches developed for pre-marital counseling and combine the topics to cover with couples of the greatest significance.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ “Core Pre-Marital Counseling,” Core Pre-Marital Counseling, <http://pre-marital.org/core-premarital-counseling-model/>.

The model that has been developed has ten components that are implemented, which include connection, communication, intimacy, health, family, money, work, home, self, and learning. In addition to these components, the framework embedded in this counseling consists of three dimensions that focus on studying relationship health, practicing the concepts to build fundamental skills and secure habits, and further learning. This model implements CORE values that include no discrimination against any couple regardless of sexual orientation, relationship lifestyle, religion, or culture. The program is science-based and affordable. The CORE model has been deemed affordable, but this researcher could not find the program's cost.

Some components within this program are foundational and can be used in the counseling program for Victory Tabernacle. For example, the communication piece can be embedded in the program for the ministry, and one of the dimensions being used can also be a takeaway focusing on practicing the concepts. These two highlights are integral to a pre-marital counseling program. Since this pre-marital counseling program is secular, the pre-marital program offered has values that are not Bible-based. The overall concept is great; however, only some components can be highlighted or pulled from secular counseling. The reason is the institution of marriage is between a man and a woman, and offering same-sex counseling in the ministry is not an option. The program is also science-based; the principles used in ministry-based counseling will be centered around biblical principles.

The CORE counseling program is also a virtual program. The way the program is built, couples register for the sessions online, and the program is completed from the comfort of the couple's home. The sessions are two hours and completed with a counselor virtually. This concept is great because it provides flexibility for busy couples. The takeaway would be to offer

some sessions virtually but not all. Having face-to-face time with the counselor is important while learning different components of a marriage.

The next pre-marital counseling programs are within a church ministry. While comparing the four, the components amongst each are very similar; however, the major differences were the duration of the counseling sessions, the cost, and whether the sessions were virtual or in-person. The pre-marital counseling program within Lighthouse Community Church is based in Torrence, CA, under the leader of Pastor Kim Kira. This ministry uses Rob Green's "Tying the Knot" as a guide for pre-marital counseling. The topics addressed are Jesus as the Center of Life and Marriage, biblical love, conflict resolution, roles and expectations, communication, finances, community, and intimacy. These topics are centered around this ministry of why pre-marital counseling is needed. This ministry focuses on building a marriage that has a solid biblical foundation. Using this curriculum helps engaged couples or those serious about getting married learn tools to have effective dialogue. One of this ministry's most essential focal points is that it prepares the couple for marriage not just the wedding day.

This ministry has a set of requirements that must be fulfilled before the wedding day; the couple must commit to six months of pre-marital counseling. The topics previously outlined will be discussed monthly, along with different readings and heart work assignments (this ministry uses the term heart work instead of homework or assignments). To receive this counseling, at least one person must be a ministry member. Lastly, this ministry offers pre-marital counseling for free. This ministry views counseling as a vital part of discipleship.

Several elements can be taken away from this structured counseling program. The service will be offered for free in the Victory Tabernacle program. The timeline is lengthy, but the listed components take time, allowing the couple to dig deep. The program at Victory Tabernacle will

be a minimum of twelve weeks. This ministry covers all the topics that will be included in the ministry at Victory. Some other topics offered at the Lighthouse can be embedded within the topics incorporated into the counseling program at Victory. The pre-marital counseling program at Lighthouse is deeply rooted in the biblical principles of the Bible, which will be a model that Victory Tabernacle will incorporate. Another takeaway from Lighthouse is the usage of a curriculum. Using a curriculum as a guide will also be beneficial because it helps guide discussion and ensure topics and focal points are not missed. In most curriculums, there is a workbook, and the workbook will be a tool that allows couples to reference different topics and apply the skills learned.

The next ministry focused on is the Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship Church in Dallas, Texas. This ministry is deeply rooted in biblical principles. Dr. Tony Evans, the Senior Pastor of this ministry, has many books in circulation regarding marriage and relationships. Much of the literature surrounding marriage focuses on the kingdom concepts of marriage to fulfill God's design and purpose. The design at Oak Cliff focuses on past relationships, expectations, challenging questions, biblical truths, God's marriage principles, roles, responsibilities, spiritual discipline, and strengths and weaknesses. Again, there is a common theme in the discussion topics between Oak Cliff and Lighthouse. The difference is there is an online registration and a cost. Oak Cliff charges \$100.00 per couple and \$125.00 per non-member. The idea for Victory Tabernacle is not to charge members for counseling. However, a fee for non-members will be considered.

The noted difference in the structure of Oak Cliff's model compared to Lighthouse is that Lighthouse requires the couple to allot six months for counseling while Oak Cliff does not appear to make it a requirement. It is requested to have at least six months before the wedding

date. The sessions offered at Oak Cliff range between ten and twelve weeks. Each session is two hours a week. Although the structures are similar, a few differences make each different.

Second Baptist Church, a ministry in the Houston, Texas area under the leadership of Dr. Ed Young with multiple campuses throughout the city, implements Marriage Prep as its program for pre-marital counseling. Second Baptist has a policy that must be accepted before beginning counseling. The policy is the engagement policy. Within this policy, the couple must believe marriage is a holy and sacred gift from God between a biologically born male and female. The couple must believe in the biblical standards of marriage according to the Bible. If the couple believes in these principles, the next phase is accepting an engagement covenant. Within this covenant, the couple will agree to the Covenant of Belief (II Chronicles 6:14-16; Romans 10:9-10, New King James Version), the Covenant of Purity (I Corinthians 6:9-11; I Corinthians 8:1-13, NKJV), and the Covenant of Faithfulness (Hebrews 10:19-25, NKJV).

After accepting the engagement policy, the next step is to attend the pre-marriage workshop. This workshop is offered three times a year for \$75.00 per person, and the workshop is from 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. The next step is to meet with the counselor or minister as regularly as advised by the one counseling. These sessions will be structured around the results of the Symbis Assessment and should be taken no later than four months before the wedding date. This process is specifically for members of this ministry who will use one of the campuses as a venue for the wedding. Other than the workshop, there is no fee for pre-marital counseling.

The structure and expectations are extremely clear regarding pre-marital counseling. The structure exemplified within this ministry leaves no person guessing what needs to be done if this ministry is chosen to be wed in. Their structure alone is one to model after. The engagement

policy is an amazing tool that can be implemented and will be implemented in the structure of pre-marital counseling at Victory Tabernacle.

The last and final model looked upon was the Church Without Walls ministry in Houston, Texas, under the leadership of Dr. Ralph West. The structure that is in place is for those seeking to be married must pay a fee for marriage guidance which is \$200 for members and \$250 for non-members. The sessions that are offered are mandatory. The couple must attend four private sessions with a staff minister. The topics discussed were not listed because the couples will address personal concerns within their sessions, which will last forty-five minutes to one hour. The structure seen here is simplistic and straight to the point. As a researcher seeking information on the different programs available, having a more structured topic of discussion would appear to be more beneficial.

After reviewing the structures of different models used in the secular world and within ministries, each structure provides great takeaways to build upon. Although there are great ideals to build upon, some operative ideals cause this researcher to reflect upon and ensure those components are not embedded in the program at Victory. The desire for Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church is to have an effective pre-marital counseling program that will have components of success for couples. The goal is to have a minimum of eight to twelve weeks of biblical content sessions structured around kingdom marriage, communication, conflict resolution, and problem-solving. After looking at the different models, forgiveness must also be added to the core content. Counseling at Victory will follow the Lighthouse model by not charging members for this service. This service will be available for all members who are preparing for marriage. There is a possibility of considering a charge for non-members. Although the content suggestion of communication, conflict resolution, problem-solving, and forgiveness will be foundational,

the idea of incorporating an assessment similar to the Symbis Assessment will be added. Incorporating an assessment will assist with those personal issues the couples would like to discuss within the sessions. This will also lead to embedding the 5 Love Languages profile into the development of the program. Understanding each other's love language will help improve communication, which is a critical component in the program, as well as helping with connection, appreciation, and intimacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the basic foundation of pre-marital counseling stems from understanding what the Bible says about marriage. Christ must be the center of kingdom marriages. When God joins man and woman together, it begins a new and lifelong model of the relationship between Christ.¹⁸² As couples begin to grow and understand the building blocks of marriage, couples will soon understand that marriage is all about giving God the glory. Not only having an understanding but realizing the need for counseling is simply due to sin entering the union from the beginning. Processing the theological concepts of marriage and embedding those concepts into a pre-marital counseling program within Victory Tabernacle will ultimately benefit those desiring to be married. Having the opportunity to review different models in other ministries, this researcher can conclude most concepts counseled upon with each ministry are biblically sound. This biblical structure rooted in this specific type of counseling will ensure that those getting married have a solid marriage foundation that will last for years.

¹⁸² Harvey, *When Sinners Say, "I Do"*, 27.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This intervention aims to develop and implement an effective pre-marital counseling program that will help couples understand the foundation of a godly marriage and assist couples in building a healthy and solid foundation leading to long-term commitment. The pre-marital counseling program will be an intentional and essential process that helps couples learn the truth about one another regarding sensitive and vital topics such as expectations, roles, and belief systems. The program's goal is to help couples identify areas of weakness already seen in the relationship and provide these couples with tools to apply to those areas to prevent couples from having severe issues in the future.

Intervention Design

The means of this intervention is to address the problem at Victory Tabernacle; the ministry lacks a pre-marital program. This ministry has been established for over 100 years and lacks a pre-marital counseling program. Over the years, there have been many couples that got engaged, married, and divorced. The lack of pre-marital counseling in this ministry creates a serious problem in the kingdom. Concepts such as understanding that the purpose of marriage is to reflect God, fulfill His purpose, and give Him glory must be taught because these are not concepts that couples naturally possess. A pre-marital counseling program is critical to the ministry at Victory Tabernacle. The program's goal is to prepare couples for the future as they begin to journey together as one. The church is the best entity to receive this help and support for couples. The development and implementation of this ministry and program will benefit this

ministry and the community. After researching pre-marital programs within the African American community churches in this area, not one has a pre-marital counseling program, creating a problem within the community.

The goals of a pre-marriage counseling program are to share the importance and underscore the critical need for such a ministry. Only when couples understand the biblical responsibilities of marriage will the kingdom continue to see dysfunction in these relationships. Implementing an effective pre-marital counseling program is an investment worthy of couples' time to build a solid foundation for marriage. Providing this program will allow couples to understand the true realities of marriage. Couples must understand that God is joining two sinners saved by grace together, merging into one. Couples neither realize the task that is set before them nor do they realize the difficulties that they will face. In pre-marital counseling, couples develop blueprints to assist them when faced with problems. Within this blueprint, couples learn how to make solving problems biblically a part of daily living.

The pre-marriage counseling program that has been developed will provide sessions and activities to help couples in their new beginning as husband and wife. The development of this intervention will offer an adequate and effective pre-marital program to strengthen couples with the tools to keep the relationship intact and reduce divorce. Additionally, couples will gain confidence in knowing no matter what obstacles they may face, counseling offers hope.

Beginning the journey towards this intervention, permission must be granted by the Institutional Review Board and the leadership at Victory Tabernacle. The researcher will schedule a meeting with the leadership team at Victory Tabernacle, present the scope of the research, and present a letter requesting permission as well as a visual presentation of the project outlining what is entailed to conduct the research within the ministry. Within the presentation,

the researcher will focus on the main objectives of the research to provide a clear and precise picture of how the process will go (Appendix A).



Better-2-Gether
Pre-Marital Counseling Ministry
Outline

**Proposed Ministry for Victory Tabernacle Church*

Objectives

- The listener will understand what pre-marital counseling is.
- The listener will understand the importance of having this ministry available within the local church.
- The listener will understand the purpose of this research.
- The listener will understand how participants will be recruited.
- The listener will understand the component of the Better-2-Gether ministry.
- The listener will understand how each pre-marital counseling session will be implemented.
- **Pre-Marital Counseling Defined**
 - Premarital counseling equips couples to build a God-centered marriage by fostering understanding and establishing realistic expectations for each other and married life.
 - To have serious conversations about marriage.
 - To explore each other's faith and belief systems.
 - To understand biblical marriage.
 - To explore expectations, convictions, and responsibilities.
- **Why this program is needed?**
- **The Purpose of this research.**
- **Recruitment Process**
 - The researcher will target engaged and married couples within the church.
 - The researcher will provide recruitment flyers providing details about the research.
 - Interested parties will then attend an information session.
- **Research Begins**
- *Couples who choose to participate in this research will complete initial surveys to gather their perspectives. Once this data is collected, counseling sessions will begin.*
- **Components of the Pre-Marital Counseling Program**
- **Implementation of the counseling sessions**
- **Questions**
- **Closing Prayer**

Figure 1- Leadership Outline

During the presentation, the researcher will focus on the main objectives of the research to provide a clear and precise picture of the process. Ministry leadership comprises the Pastor, Associate Pastor, Deacons, and the Board. The researcher will present the information in person.

Once permission is granted, the researcher will begin recruiting married members of Victory Tabernacle. The target is to invite twenty-five to thirty couples in hopes of having a participant pool of twelve to fifteen. The researcher will meet with married couples who actively participate in the marriage ministry to obtain a specific pool of participants. The ministry is a social outlet for those married in the church. The pre-marital counseling program will be a component of the marriage ministry. The vision for connecting these two ministries allows a transition from pre-marital counseling to the wedding to the marriage ministry. The marriage ministry will allow married couples to be a part of a community of believers who have experience and wisdom regarding marriage. The researcher will address the marriage ministry at the monthly meet-up and speak to the group about the research project, including the purpose behind the research, and request support during the research trial. After speaking to the group, those interested will receive a recruitment flyer with a QR code; the interested participants will scan the QR code and provide the researcher with their contact information (Appendix B).

The participants will receive an email that thanks them for being willing to participate and provides more details about the research (Appendix C). The researcher intends to develop and implement a pre-marital counseling program; however, the chosen participants will be couples who are at least eighteen years of age, engaged or already married, and members of the ministry. Because many of the members at Victory Tabernacle are married, there is a small pool of engaged couples. Selected couples will have been married for zero to twenty-plus years. The research will use married couples to seek their perspectives on pre-marital counseling, including whether they received counseling. Both perspectives will be critical to the research because it is essential to understand how couples view counseling. Centering the focus on couples that have been married, their perspectives, and thoughts on counseling will be beneficial to the research.

Their thoughts will help shape what the program should look like for Victory. Customization for the community served by Victory Tabernacle is significant because the program being developed will evolve to make the program effective for this ministry. After retrieval of the contact information from couples interested in participating in the research, the next step will be to set a date immediately with the participant pool to review the consent form. Once the date is scheduled, the researcher will meet with the couples in a classroom at Victory Tabernacle to review the consent and obtain signatures (Appendix D).

During this time, the researcher will review the consent form, explain the research thoroughly, and discuss the plan to implement the counseling program at Victory. The researcher will provide details on the topic of the intervention and will open the floor for any questions the participants may have. The researcher will also express the importance of commitment to the research. The objective is for all participants to remain in the study for the duration of the research process. Also, during this time, the researcher will explain to the group that some sessions will be recorded with audio only and the audio file will be uploaded to Microsoft editor to be transcribed. The researcher will use a mobile device such as an iPad or iPhone to capture only the voices of the sessions. Once the parties understand the research process, the participants will sign the consent forms. After the couples consent and sign the forms, the next phase will be to send digital questionnaires to the participants embedded in an encrypted email with a Google link.

The first digital questionnaire the couples will receive will include a series of seven to ten questions; these will be sent via a Google document encrypted in an email, an electronic questionnaire (Appendix E). The questions will be essential to the research and may include these examples: Did you receive pre-marital counseling? How long have you been married?

What is your love language? Is counseling beneficial? What area in your marriage would you like to work on? The questions are essential because they allow the researcher to see how the couples respond and reflect on areas within the relationship. Hypothetical results are displayed below based on a participant pool of twenty-five:

Marital Topics	Percent
Received Pre-Marital Counseling	28%
Couples Married for more than ten years	16%
Couples that are aware of their love language	17%
Couples that believe counseling is beneficial	20%
Communication is the highest area to work on in marriage	19%

Figure 2- Results from Introductory Questionnaire

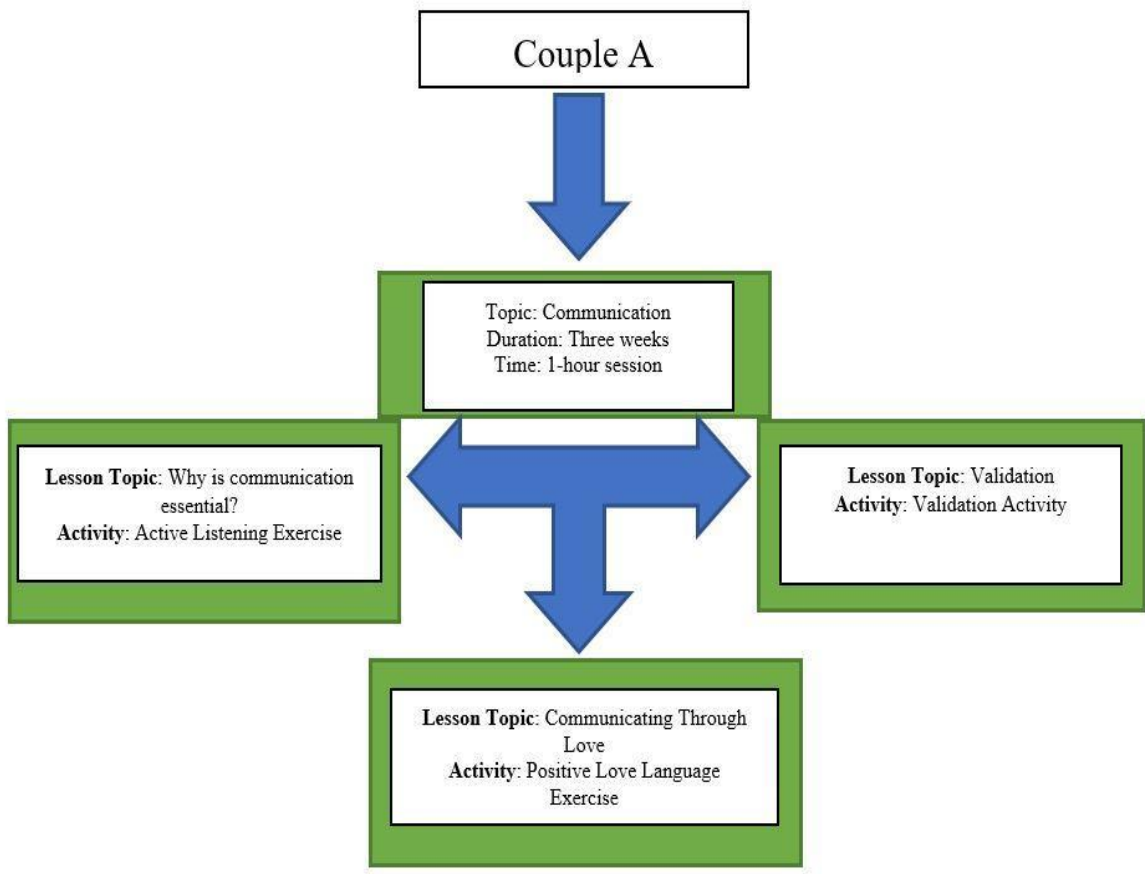
The initial results from this questionnaire will be significant because it allows for dialogue to begin between the researcher and couples regarding aspects of their relationships. Each spouse will complete an initial questionnaire separately. The researcher will take the results and pair them with each spouse. After this task, the researcher will set up individual conferences face-to-face at the church in a classroom or via Google Meet for flexibility and begin a dialogue with the couples individually and collectively. The questionnaire responses will also guide the conferences as the basis of conversation. The conferences with the couples will be audio recorded. For data collection, the researcher will ensure that all details are captured. During the conference, the review of results will allow the individual and the researcher to discuss perspectives from personal experiences with pre-marital counseling, if it was received, as well as thoughts on counseling. The sole purpose of the first interaction will be to review the questions from the questionnaire. The questions will provide insight into who the couple is. The initial

meeting has no bearing on the data collection or impact on results. After the initial face-to-face, the researcher will schedule the first official session with the couple. The couple will receive a homework assignment on effective communication to prepare for the session. The objective of this activity is for the couple to identify weak spots in communication, which can help the couple address potential conflict, identify underlying communication issues, and realize communication styles. The worksheet will be a tool the couple can refer to always and use as a conversation piece to help improve communication skills. The expectation will be for the couple to ask each other the question and write the response down either in a journal, on the actual paper, or by typing the response on an electronic device (Appendix F). The couple will return to the first session with the completed assignment.

Once the couple returns for the communication session, the hour will be spent as follows: the researcher will present biblically sound content on what the Bible says about effective communication with each other. Afterward, the researcher will ask for the homework assignment to see if the activity was completed. If the couples complete the assignment, the responses will be discussed. The discussion offers couples an opportunity to discuss any concerns, provide grows and glows, and set goals to work towards being more effective in communicating. In the last part of the session, the couple will participate in an activity where both must listen to each other's thoughts and feelings without interrupting and repeating what was said. This activity will not only help the couple express their feelings and practice active listening but also give the couple a skill set to help the relationship grow and remain healthy.

The remaining sessions will follow the same sequence: the couples will receive a homework assignment that must be completed and brought back, the researcher will provide biblical content on the topic, the assignment will be reviewed and discussed, and the couple will

participate in an activity. Both the assignment and the activity will become tools that the couples can reference during times of difficulty. The flowchart below represents how sessions will be



structured. The flowchart below is a hypothetical representation:

Figure 3- Counseling Session Flow Chart

Agenda	Duration
Biblical Content on Topic of Discussion	15 Minutes
Review Assignment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Discuss concerns ● Feedback ● Develop a plan for effectiveness 	20 Minutes
Topical Activity	20 Minutes
Prayer	5 Minutes

Figure 4- Counseling Agenda

The illustration above shows the flow of how the sessions will continue through the duration of the twelve weeks. Each topic will be three weeks. Every three weeks, the couples will experience an opportunity to learn from one another, grow in their relationship, and gain tools that can be implemented. The couples will add tools to the toolbox to help them learn how to communicate effectively, resolve conflict, solve problems, and forgive. The table below outlines the agenda for each session. The agenda will be consistent throughout each unit of the program.

The follow-up will determine the effectiveness of this program in the consecutive sessions. Revisiting the activities in the sessions will be one method of tracking progress. If the couples complete the activities together, these activities will be tools that the couples can always revisit and implement in the relationship. Another way to identify the effectiveness of this program is through attendance; the couples will have to participate actively, and the couples must be committed to the work provided to achieve the results and to develop in the areas where couples struggle. Sessions will be recorded and transcribed through Microsoft Editor.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

After approval was given by both the IRB in November 2023 and the leadership of Victory Tabernacle, the process immediately began. The opportunity to present the plan to the leadership was an amazing experience. The leadership that attended the informational presentation included the Pastor, six of the ten deacons, and all seven board members. What was observed during this presentation was mere shock. Some of the leaders believed the marriage ministry was equal to pre-marital counseling. As a result, the researcher was provided an opportunity to clarify the difference. The researcher shared the PowerPoint presentation and explained the differences between a marriage ministry and a pre-marital counseling program and how the two were components of each other. The leadership asked very good questions on who, what, when, and how related to the research study. One of the first questions asked was, who would do the counseling? Victory Tabernacle has the Pastor, an Associate Pastor, and deacons. The researcher explained to the team that through the research, the researcher would initially begin the process. Once the program is implemented, there would be a conversation between the Pastor and the researcher on who would be a part of the team. The researcher explained to the leadership that the ministry could not fall on one person alone and it would take a team to be effective. The researcher suggested the team be comprised of those who are interested in serving in such a capacity, as well as those whom God called to be an example and make a difference in the lives of those desiring to be married, those whom have a desire to help prepare couples for marriage and enrich the marriage, and those whom are experienced and have the maturity to guide those who wish to marry. Those interested in serving in this ministry would complete an interest form. Once the form is received, those interested parties would be scheduled interview.

The next observable question that stood out was the how. The team was interested in how the ministry would look. The researcher explained to them that those couples who are members of the ministry, looking to marry, and desire for the Pastor to marry them, would be required to go through the twelve-week pre-marital counseling program. The researcher also explained that the program would be in person and, if necessary, virtual. The researcher provided the team with an example of how the counseling sessions would flow for the participants. Concerning the research, the researcher further explained that married couples would be targeted because the ministry had few engaged couples.

The meeting lasted about ninety minutes, and the questions asked were thought-provoking. The team grasped an understanding of the research's purpose and the importance of having a ministry focused on preparing couples for marriage. The researcher further explained that no ministry within the African American churches in the surrounding area provided a pre-marital counseling program, demonstrating that this ministry should provide this program for the community. The leadership was receptive and excited about the new opportunity that was presented and granted the researcher full support. Several of the leaders mentioned the desire to be a part of the research to gain insight into how the program would work. After presenting the information to the leadership, the researcher felt confident to begin the research. Having the support of the leadership team was a milestone accomplished. The next step was to attend the monthly marriage ministry meeting to present the information to the group, from which to recruit participants.

The marriage ministry at Victory Tabernacle has been established for some years. A break in the ministry caused inactivity that lasted for some time. The ministry is now active and has been for the last three years, and the leaders have been doing an amazing job growing the

ministry since the break. The new ministry leaders set ministry goals so those who are a part of the ministry would understand its purpose. The goal setting is great because as couples transition from pre-marital counseling to the marriage ministry, they will understand that support still exists for them to continue to thrive in their marriage. The marriage ministry focuses on cultivating connections that will continue to help couples build on communicating with one another. The next goal this ministry will implement is growing, focusing on couples spending time in God's word, praying together, attending church, and continuing to build upon what it takes to have a godly marriage. The goal of a godly marriage is imperative in pre-marital counseling and the wedding because marriages must be built on faith. The next goal of the marriage ministry is to create and develop a community amongst the couples in the ministry. The purpose of this community is to create transparency, accountability, and lasting relationships. These relationships will help newly married couples know they are surrounded by those who have been on the journey. The last goal is to support and guide the couples. This marriage ministry will be a safe place for new couples to continue to learn, grow, and flourish. As stated earlier, the marriage ministry will be a component of the pre-marital counseling program because both ministries work hand in hand to provide a smooth transition for newly married couples after counseling is complete and the wedding has taken place.

The marriage ministry is comprised of about thirty-five couples. Each couple in the ministry has been married for zero to twenty-five or more years. Within this ministry, three couples are engaged to be married. The engaged couples are a part of this ministry because currently there is no official place for this group to join. The researcher attended the monthly ministry meet-up. During this time, the researcher explained why their meet-up was interrupted. The researcher presented the information to the group as it was presented to the leadership. The

observation from this group was extremely positive. Conversations immediately started amongst the crowd. The researcher had to refocus the group; there was much excitement about what would come. The researcher explained to the group that the research must occur before the ministry program is officially initiated. At that time, the researcher began to explain that support and volunteers were needed for the research. Based on the observation of the room, it appeared that all couples were extremely interested in participating. After the presentation, the researcher immediately distributed the recruitment flyer and explained that any couple interested in the research should scan the QR code and complete the interest form. Couples immediately began filling out the form. It appeared that there would be a great turnout participating in the research.

After the presentation was complete and the couples completed the interest form, there were several questions asked. The first question was, will this program be for married couples since the focus is on pre-marital counseling? The researcher explained, that although the intent of the research is for pre-marital counseling, once the program is implemented into the ministry, the program will evolve to many sectors of counseling such as; marital counseling, family counseling, crisis intervention, etc... The observable response to this was positive, it opened the door to conversation topics that are needed to happen in the ministry. Conversations erupted on mental health, divorce rates, issues being seen among teenagers, mid-life crises, etc... The researcher had to refocus the group even though the conversations were great. The next question that came up was, who would be doing the counseling, and would they be licensed? The researcher explained to the group that those leading the pre-marital counseling team, would not be licensed, but they would have a curriculum to follow for the sessions being taught to each couple. Regarding the evolvement of the program, those interested in counseling in the other areas of concern would need specific training such as the Certified Christian Counselors

program. The researcher explained additional counseling programs that would come after the implementation of the marriage counseling program. The next question that was asked was cost. The researcher explained that this ministry would not charge ministry members to receive pre-marital counseling. The researcher added that, after the research and implementation of the program, it would be further discussed with leadership whether non-members of the ministry would be charged. The next question asked was, how much would it be? The response to that question was, that it has not been determined. Another question that was asked was from one of the engaged couples. Their question was, if they participated in the research, would it count for them to have Pastor marry them? The response was “no” if the couple had not already spoken to the Pastor. The researcher informed the couple that this research is for implementation and to begin the ministry. The ministry is not yet in effect. The researcher advised them speak with the Pastor about marrying them and that participating in the research would be impactful and foundational for them as they begin their journey to married life. The informational meeting with the marriage ministry lasted longer than the leadership's, two hours and thirty minutes. The meeting was positive, informative, and extremely supportive of the research. Judging the responses from those in the meeting, the researcher expected to see all the couples complete the interest form. After the meeting, the researcher checked the response count, and out of the thirty-five couples in attendance at the monthly meet-up, nineteen couples responded to the interest meeting.

The next action step was to reach out to the nineteen couples who responded to schedule a meeting with each of them to review consent and obtain signatures. The researcher wanted to make the meeting convenient for all nineteen couples, so the meeting was scheduled immediately after church services. All nineteen couples attended the scheduled consent meeting. At the

meeting, all couples signed their consent. At that time, the researcher explained the importance of commitment to the research. Each couple stated that they were committed and would fully participate, the researcher explained that life happens and time constraints along with family and work would be factors, but there would be flexibility when needed to ensure all parties participating could effectively get through the research process. After collecting the consent forms, the researcher explained to the couples that they would receive two questionnaires, one is to be completed together and the second questionnaire be completed individually.

The researcher emailed each couple instructions on how to proceed in the research process by completing the two questionnaires. The two questionnaires represent one method to collect data. The questionnaire aims to qualitatively measure the couple's responses to questions about their partner, their relationship, and their views on pre-marital and marital counseling. The researcher emailed the questionnaires to the couples and provided a deadline for getting the information back from each couple. Each of the nineteen couples returned the questionnaires within the allotted time. After receiving the couples' questionnaires, the researcher reviewed the couples' responses. The initial questionnaire was developed to receive basic demographic information on each couple. This questionnaire provides a baseline of information for each couple and allows the researcher to know the basic information on each couple's relationship.

Couple	Years Married	Age	Level of Education	Current City
A	4	Him: 42 Her: 42	Him: Undergrad Her Graduate	Conroe, Texas
B	Engaged	Him:38 Her:36	Him: Undergrad Her: Some College	Conroe, Texas
C	10	Him: 38 Her: 32	Him: High School Her: High School	Willis, Texas
D	5	Him:38 Her: 37	Him: Undergrad Her: Undergrad	Spring, Texas
E	22	Him:55 Her: 52	Him: Undergrad Her: Undergrad	The Woodlands, Texas

Couple	Years Married	Age	Level of Education	Current City
F	11	Him: 40 Her: 35	Him: Graduate Her: Graduate	Humble, Texas
G	35	Him: 65 Her: 64	Him: Undergrad Her: Graduate	New Caney, Texas
H	27	Him: 40 Her: 44	Him: High School Her: Some College	Willis, Texas
I	Engaged	Him: 39 Her: 36	Him: Trade School Her: Trade School	New Caney, Texas

Couple	Years Married	Age	Level of Education	Current City
J	21	Him: 49 Her: 42	Him: Undergrad Her: Undergrad	New Caney, Texas
K	Engaged	Him: 40 Her: 36	Him: Graduate Her: Undergrad	Splendora, Texas
L	8	Him: 44 Her: 33	Him: Trade School Her: High School	Porter, Texas
M	Engaged	Him: 28 Her: 28	Him: Undergrad Her: High School	Conroe, Texas
N	Engaged	Him: 26 Her: 24	Him: High School Her: High School	Spring, Texas

Couple	Years Married	Age	Level of Education	Current City
O	36	Him: 59 Her: 57	Him: High School Her: Undergrad	Humble, Texas
P	5	Him: 45 Her: 41	Him: Trade School Her: Undergrad	Cypress, Texas
Q	15	Him: 51 Her: 44	Him: High School Her: Undergrad	Cypress, Texas
R	45	Him: 72 Her: 71	Him: High School Her: Graduate	Conroe, Texas
S	Engaged	Him: 32 Her: 32	Him: Undergrad Her: Undergrad	Spring, Texas

Table 3.1: Initial Questionnaire Responses

Secondly, the participants in this research had personal interviews with the researcher over the individual responses from the questionnaire. The interviews will be captured through audio recording, along with the researcher taking notes in a journal. These interviews will give the researcher more insight into each person individually. Also, the interviews will help the

researcher understand how each participant views counseling. After meeting with each participant individually, the researcher will meet with each participant as a couple and review the questionnaire that was answered together. In doing this, the researcher will be able to see patterns in communication with one another, see the body language of the couples, and see which topics cause tension or frustration between the participants.

The researcher provided each couple with the date and time of their personal and couple interviews. During these interviews, the researcher noted observations that stood out. Examples of observations included: Couple A, when interviewed individually, each was more open to sharing how they felt about counseling and both were extremely open about discussing issues that have arisen in their marriage; however, when they came together to discuss the questionnaire, they did together, they both were more reserved and not as open as they were individually. The researcher noted that this topic should be discussed when they were scheduled for their first communication session. The interview with Couple D was another observation that stood out. The interviews between these two were very hostile, and the two seemed to be angry. Their communication with one another appeared to be ineffective. The researcher took detailed notes on their communication with one another. In note taking, the researcher wrote out the phrases used by the couples, paraphrased what was heard along with creating headings, subheadings, and lists, and used highlighters to color code essential information. The interview was also audio recorded, and the researcher would use Microsoft Editor to transcribe the audio and compare the transcription to the notes taken. The researcher also observed the non-verbal communication cues. As the remaining interviews took place, the researcher realized that communication was going to be a common theme amongst each couple, so it became critical to

keep accurate notes on each couple, focusing on how they communicated individually and together.

Body language was another focus that the researcher paid close attention to because these nonverbal signals play a significant role in couples communicating with one another.

Lubienetzki and Lubienetzki stated, “Communication takes place through behavior. How you behave is interpreted by other people. However, the result of the interpretation is very subjective and depends on many factors. The factors are the ones the person themselves and the relationship between the communicating people.”¹⁸³ The researcher cued in on facial expressions, gestures, postures, and body movements when each couple responded to certain questions and topics. The researcher noted that during the counseling session on communication, body language was embedded into the curriculum. Nonverbal communication leads to miscommunication in some areas, and it would be vital for couples to understand their spouses better based on their nonverbal cues. Focusing on this type of communication can help couples understand how each person feels in any situation. This researcher realized that adding this component to the counseling sessions will be critical because understanding body language is crucial, and these cues are compelling for couples to understand and know how to interpret.

Lastly, after completing the questionnaires and the interviews, the couples will be scheduled to begin receiving the counseling sessions. The program that will be implemented in the church ministry will have a duration of twelve weeks with each topic being covered for three weeks. However, during this research trial, the intervention plan will be initiated for four weeks, covering a new topic each week. The three tables below outline how each week will be covered

¹⁸³ Ulf Lubienetzki and Heidrun Lubienetzki, *How We Talk To Each Other: The Messages We Send With Our Words and Body Language: Psychology of Human Communication* (Berlin: Springer, 2022), 10.

regarding each topic: a schedule of when the couples will attend their sessions and whether the sessions will be in person or virtual; the last table will provide an agenda of how the flow of the sessions will run. All three tables will be shared with each couple via email so they are aware of the topics covered, have a copy of their scheduled days for their counseling sessions, and know how each minute of their time will be used during each session.

Week	Topic
1	Biblical Understanding of Marriage
2	Communication
3	Forgiveness
4	Finances

Table 3.2: Weekly Plan

Couple	Day	Time
A	Monday Virtual	3:00pm-4:00pm
B	Monday Virtual	4:00pm-5:00pm
C	Monday Virtual	5:00pm-6:00pm
D	Monday Virtual	7:00pm-8:00pm
E	Tuesday Virtual	11:00am-12:00pm
F	Tuesday Virtual	2:00pm-3:00pm
G	Tuesday In-Person Church Campus	4:00pm-5:00pm
H	Tuesday In-Person Church Campus	5:00pm-6:00pm
I	Tuesday In-Person Church Campus	6:00pm-7:00pm
J	Wednesday Virtual	8:00am-9:00am
K	Wednesday Virtual	9:30am-10:30am

L	Wednesday In-Person Church Campus	3:00pm-4:00pm
M	Wednesday In-Person Church Campus	4:00pm-5:00pm
N	Wednesday In-Person Church Campus	5:00pm-6:00pm
O	Friday In-Person Church Campus	3:00pm-4:00pm
P	Friday Virtual	4:00pm-5:00pm
Q	Friday Virtual	5:00pm-6:00pm
R	Saturday In Person Church Campus	9:00am-10:00am
S	Saturday Virtual	11:30am-12:30pm

Table 3.3: Counseling Session Schedule

Activity	Time Limit
Biblical Content	15 minutes
Review Assignment, Discussions, Develop Plans and Feedback	20 minutes
Activity related to the topic	20 minutes
Prayer	5 minutes

Table 3.3: Counseling Session Agenda

As the counseling sessions began, the researcher understood that helping these couples would be essential and kept very detailed notes on what happened during each session. The researcher understood that identifying different themes, disparities, and silences during each session would be critical to help refine the counseling program once it fully emerges into the ministry. Couples A through D met on a Monday night; all four couples met virtually; the researcher observed that all couples were prepared and ready to proceed with the first session.

The next set of couples met on a Tuesday with a mix of in-person and virtual sessions. The researcher's observation from the in-person session was that the couples seemed more comfortable. The researcher could sense and feel the intimacy between the couples more than

online. Although virtual sessions are convenient, intimacy was absent during the online sessions. During the session with all five couples, the researcher focused on body language and how attentive the couples were to one another. The researcher recognized a common pattern among these five couples: during the in-person session, each couple listened to one another without cutting each other off. When the researcher made a point they both understood, each couple took time to explain their understanding of the content. The researcher could easily see the differences between in-person and virtual sessions. Considering the potential drawbacks of the online sessions, the researcher began to reflect on preparation for the remaining couples that had virtual sessions:

- Possible distractions if the couples have young children, other people living in the home, or even pets. The researcher made a note to inform the remaining couples who had virtual sessions to ensure that the allotted time would be distraction-free.
- Challenges if the researcher was unable to make the necessary connection needed. The researcher does not want the couples to feel disconnected or not feel present when in deep and emotionally charged conversation.
- The researcher was able to pick up on the obvious body language with the first group of couples who met virtually; however, the researcher wondered whether something was missing during the virtual session. It is possible that this language could be missed while online.

Although there are some drawbacks to virtual pre-marital counseling, the researcher reflected on the positives that were experienced with the first group which included:

- All the couples were on time and prepared because they did not have to leave their home and drive to the church campus.

- The couples seemed to be comfortable in their own space, being virtual allowed them to be in their most comfortable space within their home, one couple chose to be in their bedroom, whereas one couple was at the dining room table and the last couple sat on their couch.

The observations of the couples that had their sessions on campus provided a sense of more engagement in the space used on the church campus. However, the researcher was able to note both drawbacks and positives during these sessions. Some of the drawbacks that were noted are:

- Timeliness, two of the couples were late to their sessions because of traffic they experienced on their way to the church campus. The two couples were apologetic and even discussed that they may need to change over to being virtual.
- Although all the couples were positive and engaged in the counseling session, the researcher considered the fact that the next group of in-person session couples may be reluctant or may not feel comfortable sharing face-to-face. The researcher noted that one or even both individuals could reflect on their relationship and easily bail out or provide excuses on why they couldn't attend the session. The researcher considered that some couples may opt out of in-person and choose virtual sessions.

Providing counseling to willing participants is a positive for the kingdom. Pre-marital counseling at Victory Tabernacle will be a foundation piece to build strong marriages and will last for a lifetime. The observations made within the first set of couples were noted; these observations prepared the researcher for what could arise with the remaining couples. The researcher also observed during the in-person sessions that the couples were more enthused and energetic. The researcher noted being in a different setting allowed these couples to be more

focused and more engaged in the session. The researcher observed the following positives for the in-person sessions:

- Cultivating an environment of calmness and positivity by dimming the lights, having a relaxing and calming candle burning and soft and relaxing instrumental music playing as the couples entered the session set the tone and provided a comfortable environment for couples.
- The researcher also observed being able to see the body language in person versus being online; the researcher was able to see true language because the two were outside of their home environment.
- The last positive note regarding in-person sessions is the regard to connectivity issues. The flow of the session were not disrupted by internet connections. During one of the virtual sessions, the internet dropped causing the need to reconnect. Although not a major issue, it is an observation that was made.

The remaining couples were a mixture of virtual and in-person; going through the sessions with the remaining couples, the researcher was more prepared for any possible experiences that could arise regarding previous observations. Some of the observations among the couples were, that some of their in-person sessions had to be changed to virtual, and time constraints became an issue due to work and children's activities. One of the couples became ill, and the session had to be postponed to the following week. Everything that transpired with some couples were true realities of what could happen when working with couples in counseling sessions. With the obstacles that were faced by the second set of couples, the researcher realized that flexibility and adjustment are a must for such a program as this.

The couples seen in the latter part of the week were also virtual and in-person. They were committed to the sessions in set J-S, but there were some drawbacks. The researcher realized that the observation of non-verbal cues was not as keen because of the enthusiasm and excitement from the couples about going through the sessions. The body language observed was very positive, and there were no red flags regarding this set of non-verbal cues. Each couple that participated virtually was timely. However, some distractions were evident, although they were asked to ensure there were no distractions. The distractions that occurred were children popping into the room. The distractions were minor, and the couples could quickly redirect the children's attention. The couples remained engaged and active in the sessions.

The couples seen in person experienced some of the same issues that the first set experienced to get to the campus, traffic was an issue. The researcher observed that when some of the couples were late, frustration set in, and it caused them not to be as engaged in the session due to being late. These observations helped the researcher see how couples communicated up close and in person when facing obstacles. These challenges or events pushed sessions to move in a direction where issues were discussed head-on.

The first week of the sessions set the tone for the remaining sessions. The couples were more prepared and ready each week and put in the work and energy needed. The researcher observed that each couple in their way began to grow in different areas of their relationship. The researcher observed that body language was changing, tones in voice began to change, and couples were laughing more and showing more affection. What stood out the most to the researcher was that couples were learning the true meaning of a biblical marriage.

One of the last observations made by the researcher was when the couples began to communicate effectively, they realized that this intervention was a positive one. Listening to the

talk about the experience of the intervention, they realized that in four short weeks, their relationship had been enriched and life-changing. Also observed during this time, many of the couples stated that although they were married, they wanted to participate more in the sessions because each session had been impactful.

To analyze the data collected from the triangulation of couple questionnaires, individual and personal interviews, and focused counseling sessions, the researcher will gather responses and observations from each component and compile them according to each couple's assigned letter. All the collected data come from documents that have been securely stored. Every interview, response received, and observation taken has been typed or shared within an encrypted storage space.

The next step is to organize the data that has been received. As stated earlier the couples have been assigned a letter. The data will be organized according to each couple's letter. Each questionnaire that has been given out automatically develops a spreadsheet, which allows the researcher to easily develop themes among each group to analyze the responses of the couples. The data received from the in-person interviews and the notes from the focused counseling sessions will be imported into a spreadsheet and then separated based on the common responses. After analyzing the couples' responses, the researcher will create a spreadsheet with the responses, allowing the researcher to code the data according to the different themes occurring within the research.

The coding process will take an ample amount of time. However, the researcher will take samples of the couple's feedback from each triangulation component, look at the commonalities, and create codes. For example, couples across the board could identify issues in their marriage regarding communication; one of the codes would be lack of effective communication. Another

example could be couples are not aware of each other's love language, so the code would be love language. The researcher will review every response to find the common themes and enter the information into a spreadsheet.

The next step is to analyze the data. The researcher will go back to the initial problem of the research, which is the lack of effective pre-marital counseling in ministry at the Victory Tabernacle Baptist Church in Conroe, Texas. The data analysis will show whether the absence of a pre-marital counseling program is deemed valid? The data will show what couples have experienced in their relationship and how they overcame the issues by either implementing tools from pre-marital counseling if they received it or not. Their responses will be a main factor in analyzing how they resolved the problems they experienced within their marriage. These responses that emerge from each couple will draw meaningful correlations between couples who received pre-marital counseling and those who did not.

The last step will be to report the insights from the analysis. To report the insights, the researcher will begin to tell the story; the researcher will visually communicate the narrative with the findings and insights using visuals such as PowerPoints, graphs if necessary, and words. The hope is that at the end of the four weeks, the couples better understand the meaning of a biblical marriage, a better grasp on communicating with one another, and how to forgive and handle finances effectively by applying each skill to their marriage.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Victory Tabernacle's strong foundation in biblical doctrine and its members' eagerness to learn create a fertile ground for implementing a pre-marital counseling program. This program, designed to help couples grow as Christians within their marriages, aligns perfectly with the church's commitment to deepening members' understanding of God's will. The program's biblical content, combined with engaging activities, complements the ministry's existing strengths and offers couples valuable tools for building successful marriages.

Victory Tabernacle boasts a vibrant community of committed members actively engaged in various ministries and activities. Their enthusiastic response to new programs is a testament to their dedication to personal and spiritual growth within the church. This strong foundation of participation makes them prime candidates for a pre-marital counseling program. Building on their existing commitment, the program offers valuable tools and guidance, fostering stronger marriages and enriching the church community as a whole.

There were some concerns that some couples in the group would drop out or not fully commit. Based upon observations, ministry members would wholeheartedly begin in an area and then slowly slack at times depending on life events; such behaviors could have hurt the outcome of this research. Since these behaviors have been visually observed, there was a high probability that a lack of commitment could impact the researcher's process.

Based on the church's structure, the research proposal, and the plan to implement the pre-marital program, supporting marriages was expected to improve greatly. The pre-marital program would allow ministry members to receive support when needed. The tools and foundational pieces provided to couples would not only help those who desire to be married but

would also be beneficial to married couples. The pre-marital program was designed to help both engaged and married couples, allowing them to rebuild their toolboxes with the means to help the marriage when strife and struggle occur. Overall, the researcher expected great improvement in marriages among married and engaged couples within the ministry. The goal was to have an effective and consistent program in which couples would partake and feel comfortable receiving pre-marital counseling within a church setting.

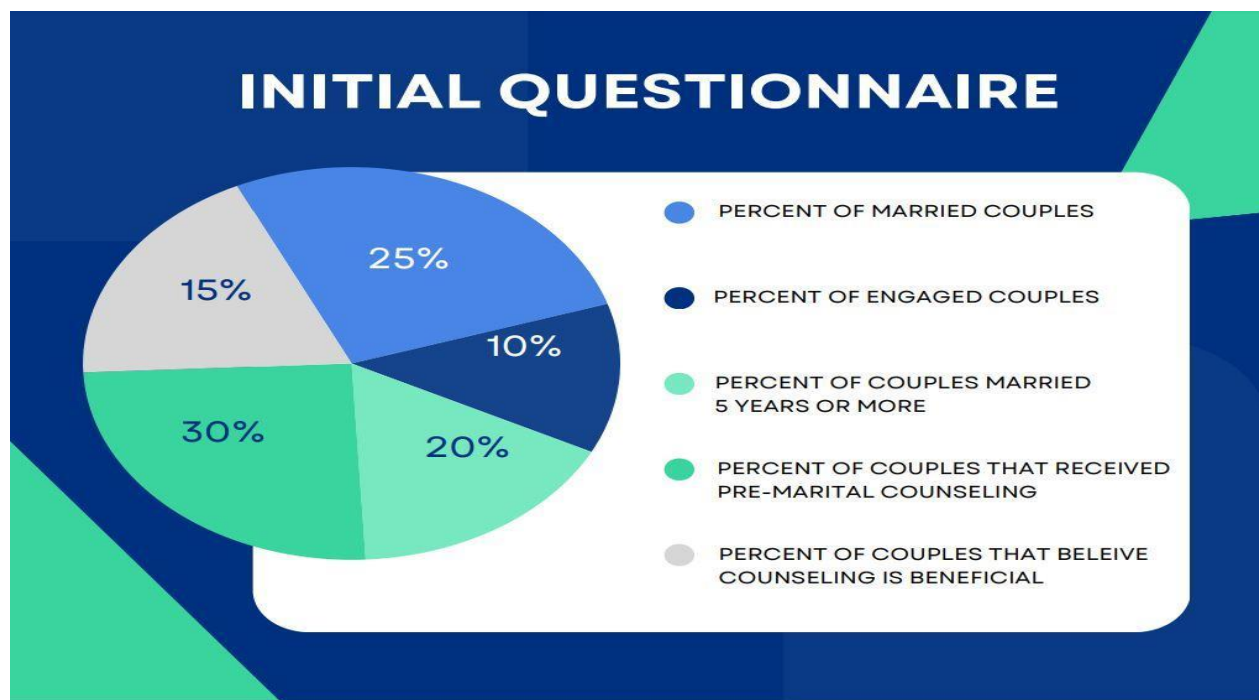
Collective Results

The participants in this research were comprised of 19 couples. Initially, the researcher sought out 35 couples to have 15 to 20 couples participate. Out of the 19 couples, six were currently engaged. The researcher assigned each couple a letter of the alphabet to represent them in the data collection process. The initial start of the research began by getting to know the couple through a questionnaire, which required the couples to respond to the questions together. The questionnaire completed by the participants provided concrete responses for the researcher, who used the responses to understand the couple's desired focus toward pre-marital counseling. The questionnaire aimed to gain basic insight into the couples' marital status, how long they had been married, whether they received pre-marital counseling, and whether they felt counseling was beneficial overall.

The results that were received from participants were ideal based on the set of questions that were asked in the initial questionnaire. From the responses to the questions, the researcher concluded that eight of the 13 married couples received pre-marital counseling and deemed counseling beneficial. The researcher also concluded that of the couples who were engaged, although they had not had pre-marital counseling, 66% of them indicated counseling was beneficial (Figure 4.1). The remaining married couples indicated they did not receive pre-marital

counseling. Additionally, couples' responses to whether or not counseling was beneficial were split among being beneficial, not being beneficial, and may be beneficial. The researcher concluded from the responses that during the counseling session, these couples would be able to make a sound decision on whether pre-marital counseling is effective and impactful.

Couple Questionnaire Result



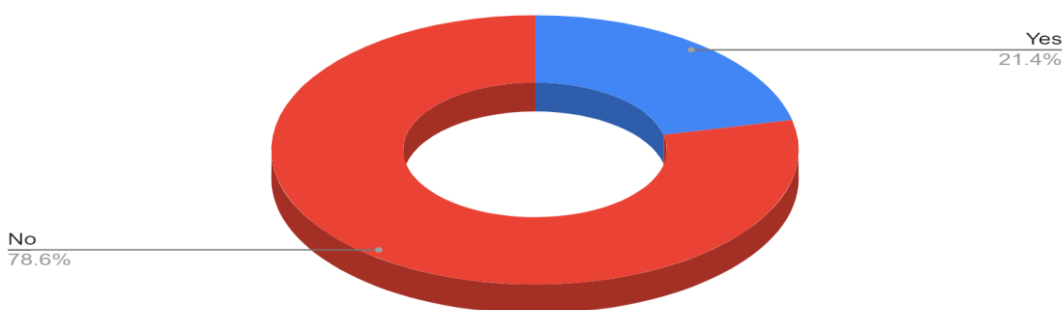
Graph 4.1: Initial Questionnaire Responses

Biblical Marriage

The couples were asked about their understanding of biblical marriage, which was the first session they participated in. The results displayed in Figure 4.1 clearly show why educating couples in the ministry is critical. The results conclude that 80% of the couples participating in this research did not receive pre-marital counseling, were not intentionally taught about God's design for marriage and may lack a foundational understanding of it. Understanding how God

designed marriage and His purpose for marriage is critical. During the time with each couple, helping them to understand why God created marriage would guide couples in having a clear and concrete understanding of a biblical marriage. Throughout the session, the couple would understand that marriage is not about self but about keeping a promise. The couple also learned that God joins the union together, and His expectation is the union would not be broken. The results stemming from this question are displayed below.

Do you have a clear understanding of what biblical marriage is?

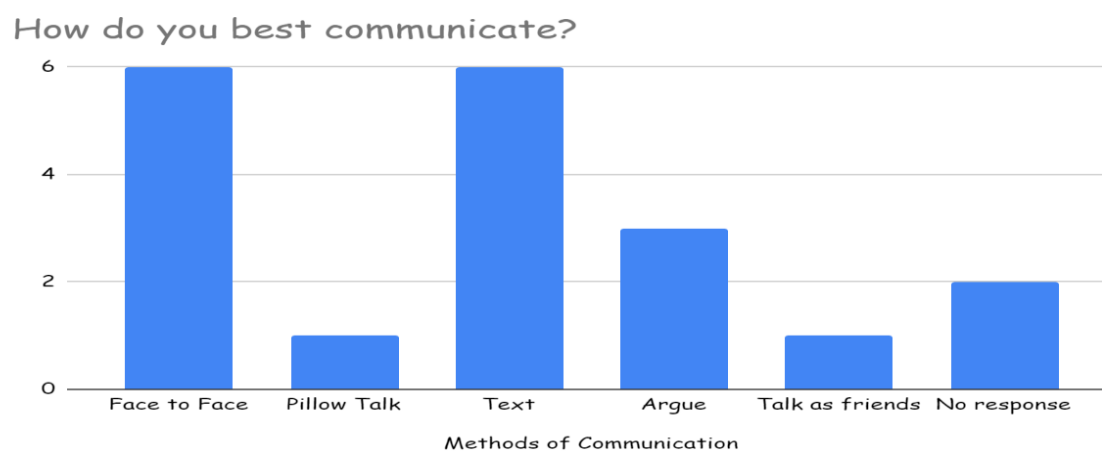


Graph 4.2: Biblical Marriage (This graph shows that almost 80% of couples lack an understanding of what biblical marriage is.)

Methods of Communication

Effective communication was the second session that couples attended. Having a baseline from the questionnaire regarding their methods of communication allowed the researcher to grasp how each couple communicated. The question asked, “How do you best communicate with one another?” Technology currently plays a huge role in relationships. Research by Kilicarslan and Parmaksiz found technology and smartphones “can cause new problems to arise instead of intimacy as a result of our busyness with phone applications in our communications with other

individuals.”¹⁸⁴ Studies by Kilicarslan and Parmaksiz also showed that technology and smartphones negatively affect relationships and especially weaken the quality of romantic relationships. It has been revealed that the constant use of technology in relationships impacts the behavior of spouses. This behavior, frequently seen in romantic relationships, creates conflict between couples, reduces the positive feelings of couples towards each other, and damages relationships.¹⁸⁵ Technology is impacting how couples communicate with one another. The results from the questionnaire allowed couples to discuss more effective methods of communication in their relationship. The baseline presented set the tone for the discussion within the session. The tools provided during the session assisted couples in improving their communication skills. Below are the results from each couple, including details of how they best communicate with one another.



Graph 4.3: Methods of Communication (This bar graph shows how couples communicate with one another.)

¹⁸⁴ Suat Kilicarslan and Izzet Parmaksiz. “The Mediator Role of Effective Communication Skills on the Relationship between Phubbing Tendencies and Marriage Satisfaction in Married Individuals.” *Computers in Human Behavior* 147 (2023), 107863.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

Prayer and Attending Church

The next question presented to each couple was about church and prayer. Even though the couples were attendees of Victory Tabernacle, the results were intriguing. Before the face-to-face interview to clarify the question and understand responses, the results from the questionnaire suggested the data may have been skewed or the question was not clear or the researcher could have left off one part of the question. Clarification of the responses will be discussed in the analysis of results.

During the session on prayer and church attendance, the couples came to understand the importance of attending church together as a married couple. The Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), which is one of the largest television ministries in the world, released a study from Better Together: Religious Attendance Gender and Relationship Quality by the Institute for Family Studies. The findings of the study proposed that couples who attend church together regularly have a higher level of relationship satisfaction than couples who do not.¹⁸⁶ Out of the 1600 adults surveyed, 78% of those couples who attended church together reported they were either very happy or extremely happy with their relationship.¹⁸⁷ The research also found that shared prayer was the strongest predictor of relationship satisfaction.¹⁸⁸ They concluded that the couples who reported that they prayed together frequently were 17% more likely to say they were happy together than those couples who did not pray frequently.¹⁸⁹ Prayer is also an integral part of the covenant relationship. Jung and Ellison stated prayers tend to acknowledge that God

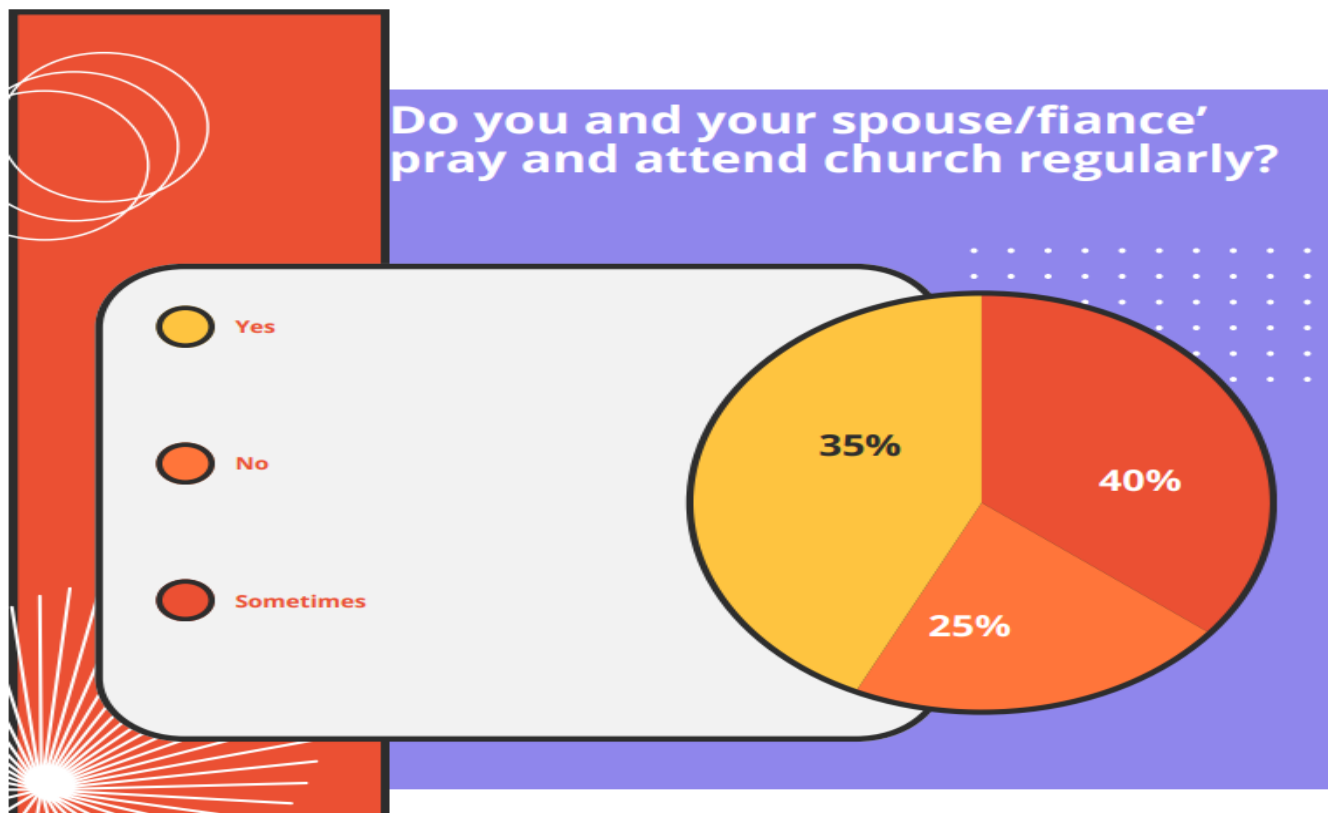
¹⁸⁶ Jim Liebelt, "Marriage Research: Attending Church Together Strengthens Relationship," CBN, February 28, 2024, <https://www2.cbn.com/article/marriage/marriage-research-attending-church-together-strengthens-relationship>.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

graciously meets our basic physical needs. Therefore, frequent prayers may reinforce a sense of divine involvement, an idea that God is involved in one's life for one's well-being.¹⁹⁰ As the couple spends time in this session, the objective is for them to understand that God is extremely important in their relationship. Results below show the responses of praying and attending church regularly.



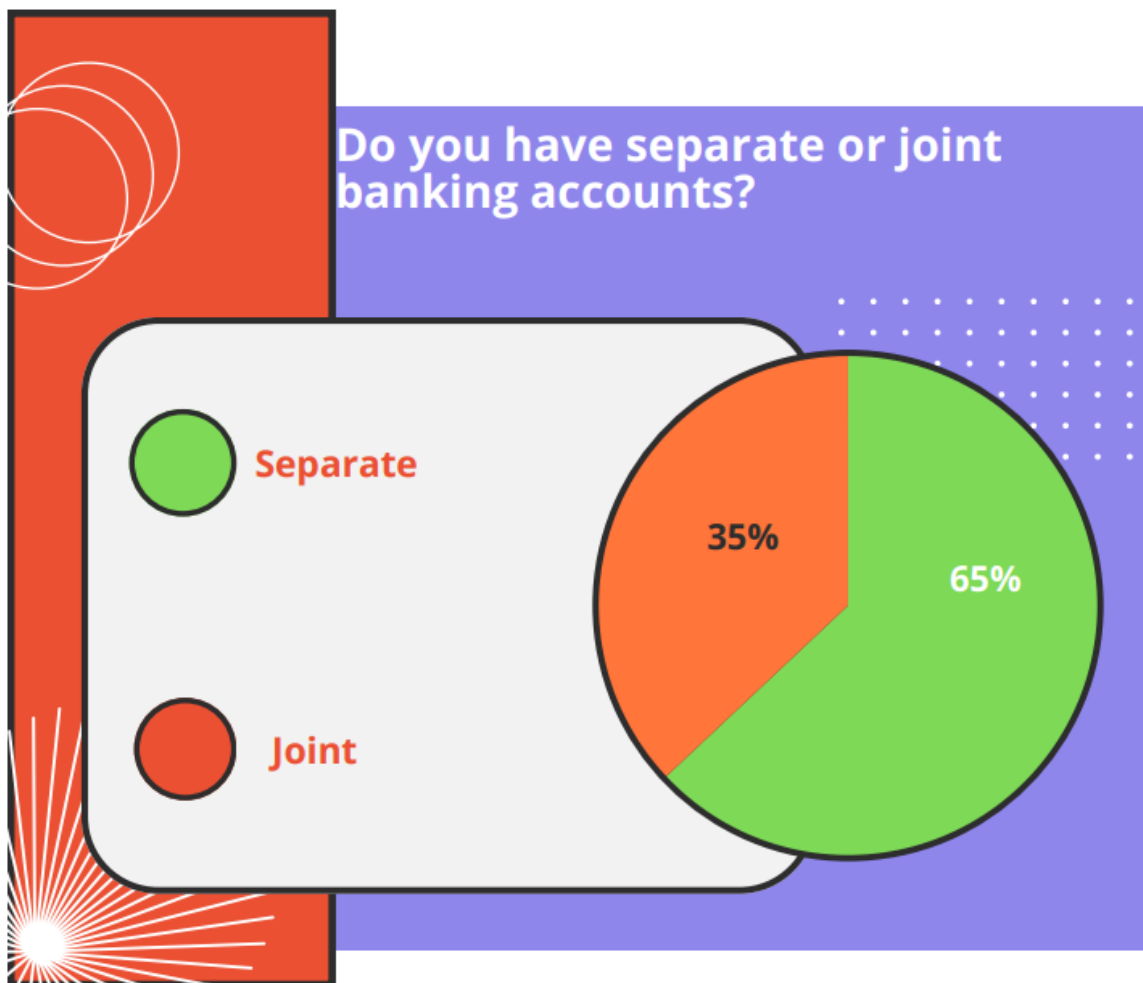
Graph 4.4: Prayer and Attending Church (The graph displays the percentages in which couples pray and attend church together.)

¹⁹⁰ Jong Jung and Christopher Ellison. "Discovering Grace at the Table? Prayers at Mealtime, Marital Status, and Life Satisfaction in Later Life." *Research on Aging*. 44, no. 1 (2022): 44–53.

Finances

Couples were expected to discuss finances using the questionnaire. The question that was asked was, “Do you and your spouse have the same banking account?” Rhoads stated, “Money can be an area of peace and synergy in marriage as you grow and respect each other, love each other, honor God, and use your money wisely.”¹⁹¹ Based upon the responses to the finance question displayed in the graph below, the topic of discussion provided the researcher a great opportunity to teach couples how the kingdom views stewardship as a married couple. During the financial session, the couples would understand that everything they have comes from God. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus advises that we should seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all things will be added. Each couple began to understand that they were only stewards of what God had given them. Each couple should grasp the concept of managing what God has given according to His principles and standards. Couples learned during this session that how they manage what He has given them together determines whether He gives greater things to manage. Matthew 25:23 states, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You were faithful over a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Share your master’s joy.” Each couple began to understand that this concept of stewardship should be done jointly and together as well as they will also be judged by how well the resources given were taken care of.

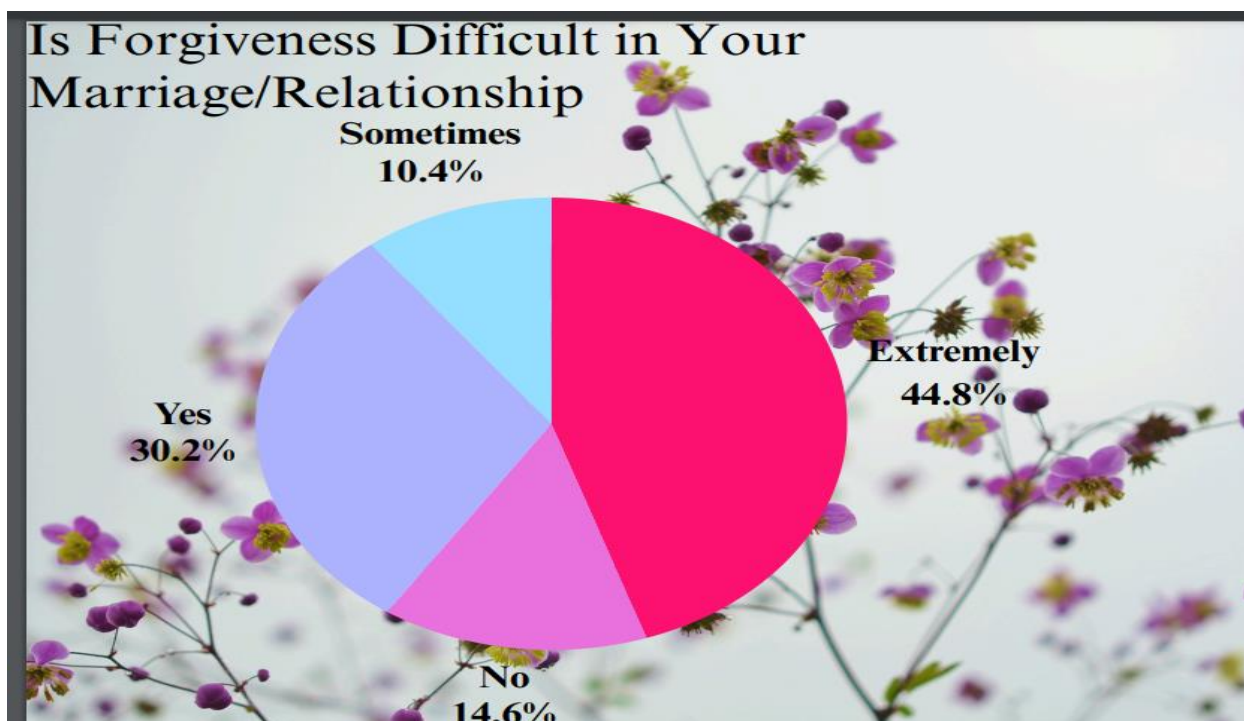
¹⁹¹ Brad Rhoads, *The Grace Marriage: How the Gospel and Intentionality Transform Your Relationship* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2023), 127.



Graph 4.5: Finances (Questionnaire responses show that 12 of the 19 couples maintained separate banking accounts, and 7 of the 19 couples maintained joint bank accounts.)

The last question the couple was asked focused on forgiveness. Forgiveness was one of the sessions provided to couples participating in the research. The question was, “Is forgiveness challenging to give in your marriage/relationship?” The results are displayed below (Figure 4.6). 43 percent of the couples found forgiveness to be difficult amongst one another. During the forgiveness session, each couple learned that based on Rachel Arnold's definition of forgiveness, they have the ability to “identify their desire to lash out, and not. They can act on their desire for

vengeance or internalize the hurt, or they can activate their compassionate self and respond with compassion.”¹⁹² Rachel Arnold emphasizes the importance of effective assertiveness and conflict resolution skills in facilitating forgiveness within close relationships.¹⁹³ Forgiveness isn't about condoning the hurt inflicted but rather a necessary step in repairing the damage caused by conflict. The nature of the relationship becomes crucial in this context, as forgiveness is not a one-size-fits-all concept. Importantly, genuine forgiveness doesn't imply submissiveness to the offender. The forgiveness session was the last topic for the research trial. Once the sessions were complete, the researcher used the results as a comparative tool; the couples revisited the questions to see if a perspective had changed. Below are the results:



Graph 4.6: Forgiveness

¹⁹² Rachel Arnold, *Compassion Focused Therapy Participant Workbook* (New York: NY: Routledge, 2022), 102.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

Individual Questions

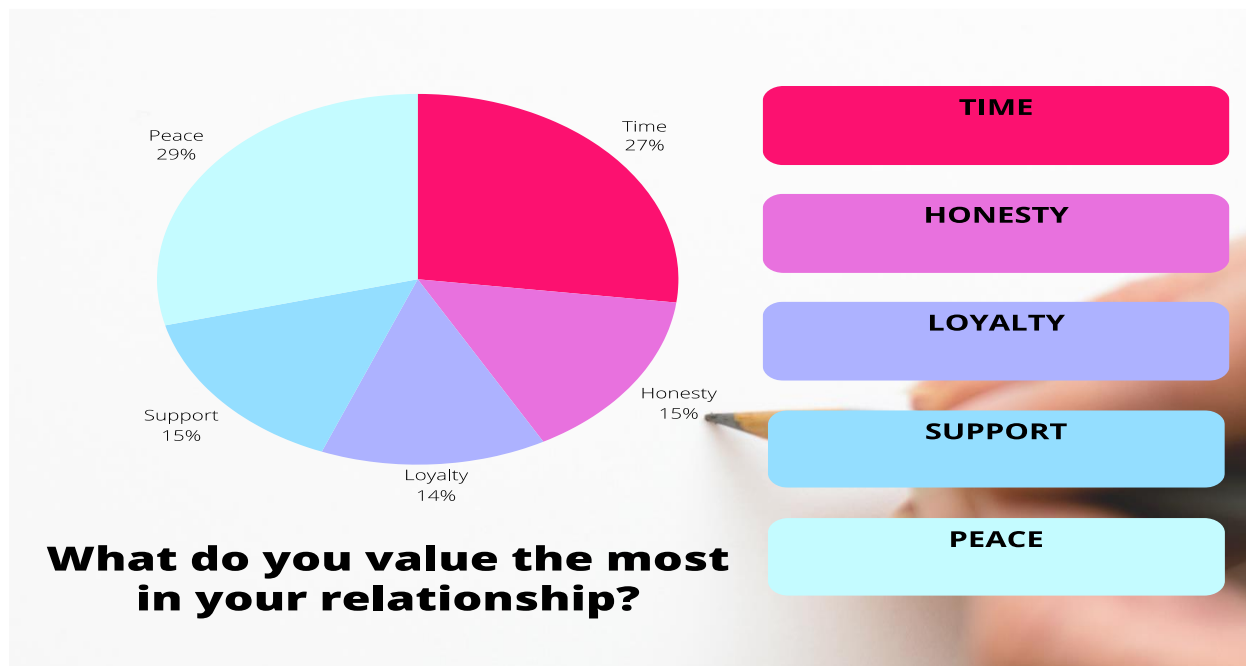
The next set of questions given to each couple required the couples to answer individually. The purpose of answering these questions separately was to determine how the couples felt about one another, their expectations, and how well they knew each other. The couples' responses helped the researcher identify strengths, weaknesses, and potential problem areas and seek “to determine if there are situational or environmental triggers contributing to the couple’s struggles.”¹⁹⁴ The responses to these questions helped facilitate conversations to ensure both the couples and the researcher were on the same page. Collaboration would be key once the couples heard the responses and the conversation sparked. “Collaborative conversation will help them work together and develop approaches that will work best for both.”¹⁹⁵

The first individual question was, “What do you value most about your relationship?” Bean and Bean stated that marriage is the highest thing we can ever do.¹⁹⁶ Marriage is such a significant symbolic relationship that it is critical that spouses see the value in one another. Taking time to understand what each individual views as value was crucial clearly. Each couple responded authentically to what they each valued in their marriage. The graph below displays the results:

¹⁹⁴ Kristin Kellen, *Counseling Women: Biblical Wisdom for Life’s Battles* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2022), 110.

¹⁹⁵ David Treadway, *Treating Couples Well: A Practical Guide to Collaborative Couple Therapy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 20.

¹⁹⁶ Danielle Bean and Dan Bean, *Manual for Marriage* (Ashland: TAN Books, 2020), 19.



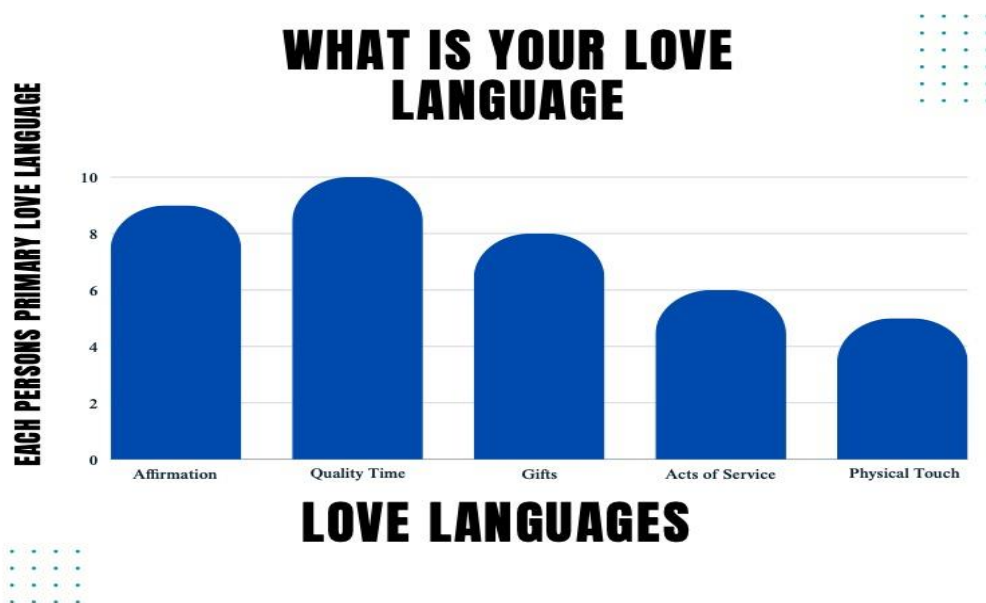
Graph 4.7: What Do You Value the Most?

The next individual question that each member of the couple was asked referred to the individual's love language. Chapman and Mickelborough concluded that marriage is hard work, and stated that simple gestures have either been icing on the cake in good times or created a climate of love and tenderness in the tough times.¹⁹⁷ The impact of implementing love languages in a relationship can multiply joy in one's relationship or it can grow the connection and tenderness. Gary Chapman stated in his research that "love must be more than something we feel. It must be something we do."¹⁹⁸ The demonstration of love must be evident in all relationships: marriage, family, friends, and children. The results of the data collected from the

¹⁹⁷ Gary Chapman and Jen Mickelborough, *You Get Me: Simple, Romantic Ways to Speak the 5 Love Languages* (Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing, 2021), 6.

¹⁹⁸ Gary Chapman and James Bell, *Love is A Choice: 28 extraordinary stories of the 5 love languages in action* (Chicago, IL: Mood Publishers, 2023), 12.

individual question about individual's primary love language was displayed in the graph below.

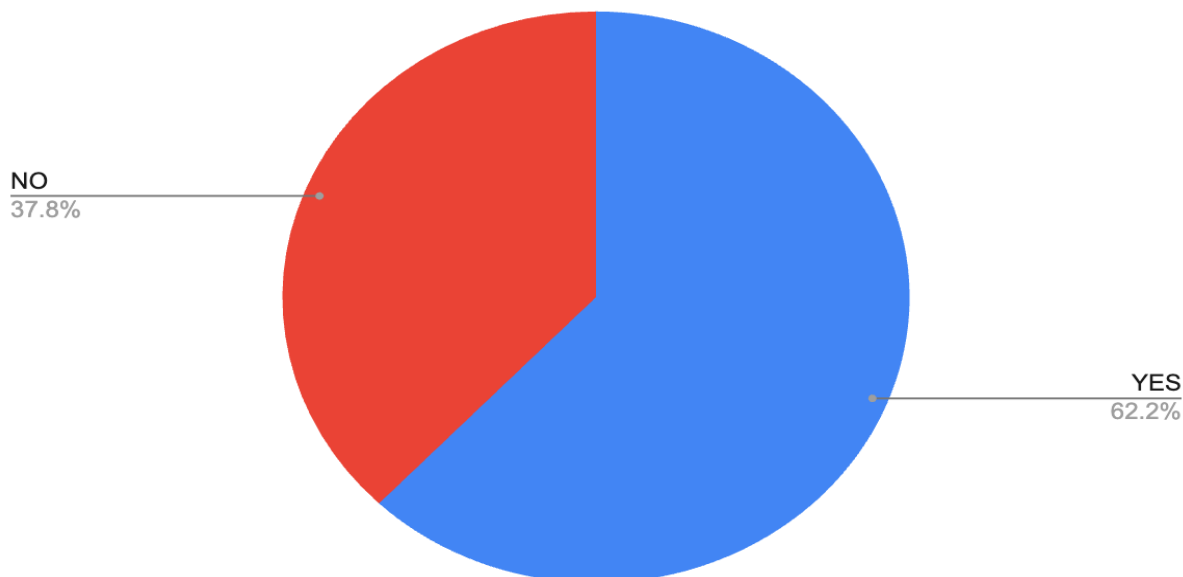


Graph 4.8: Primary Love Language

Identifying one's language of love is great; however, couples may need to learn their partner's language. Understanding a partner's love language can incredibly impact the relationship. The key word is understanding. Knowing a partner's love language will lead to a "better understanding of each other as individuals and a better understanding of what needs to be done to improve and keep your relationship positive."¹⁹⁹ Displayed below are the results of the couples identifying whether they know their partner's love language.

¹⁹⁹ Caity Healy, "Learning Your Love Language," The Western Howl, March 10, 2024, <https://wou.edu/westernhowl/learning-love-language/>

Does your spouse or partner know your love language?



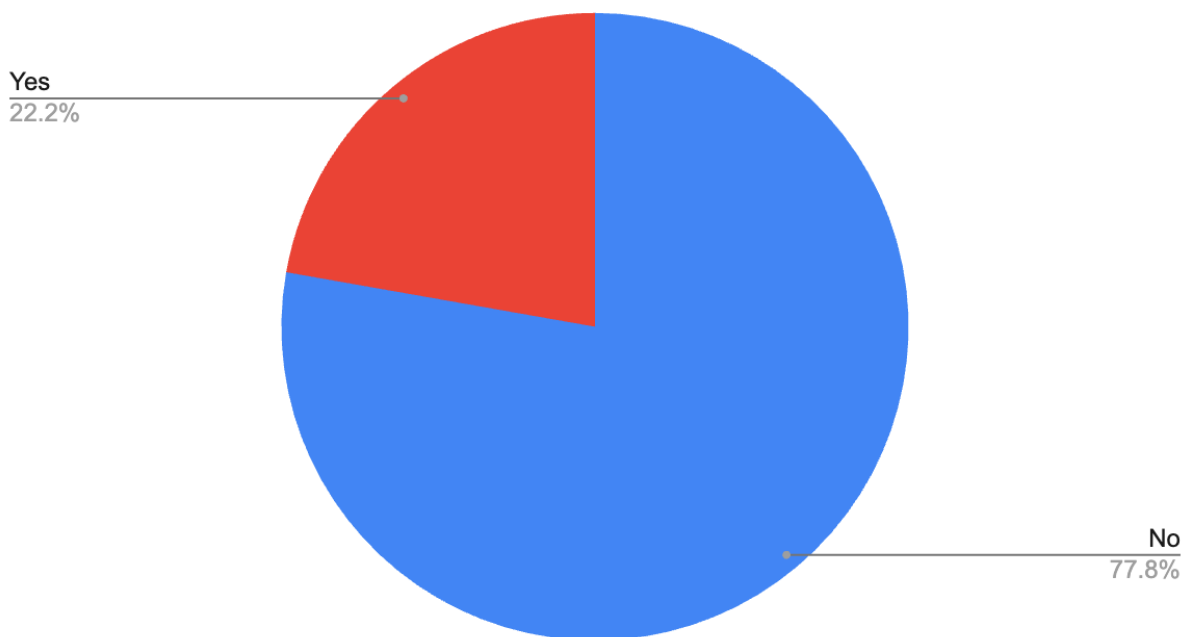
Graph 4.9: Love Language

The research conducted focused on the importance of pre-marital counseling. Knowing whether the couples had received pre-marital counseling before marriage was important. Those couples who have received pre-marital counseling should be able to provide a positive and beneficial outlook on the pre-marital counseling services received. Ultimately, pre-marital counseling should boast benefits and assist in preventing divorce. Lilly and Fitzgerald stated that counseling provides a new perspective: "If you are both willing to risk something new, learn to play different music and create a new dance."²⁰⁰ For those couples who have not had counseling or the counseling they have experienced was ineffective, this is an opportunity to gain new insight and learn something new that can be applied to their daily lives. The graph below displays the results of couples who have had premarital counseling and those who have not. The

²⁰⁰ Veronica Lilly and Jennifer Fitzgerald, *An Emotionally Focused Workbook for Couples: The Two of Us* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 8.

results related to the question concerning pre-marital yielded data showing only 22% of the couples in the study had received pre-marital counseling.

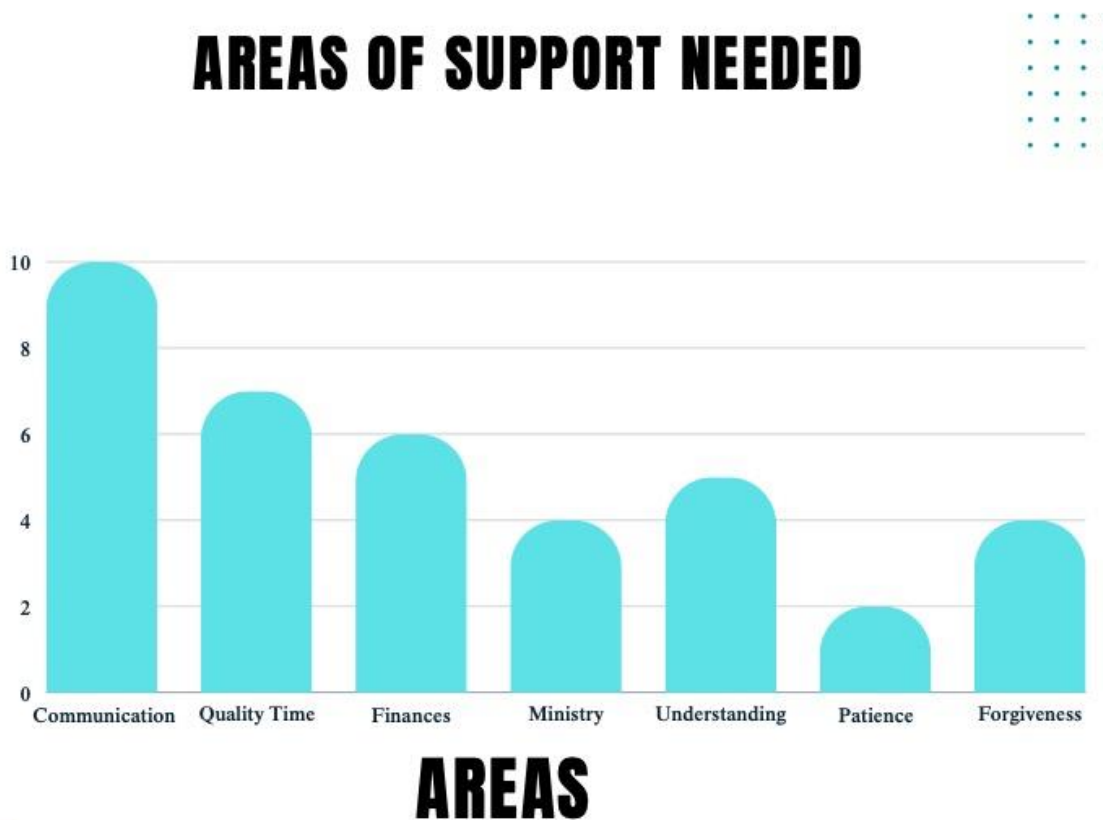
Did you and your spouse receive pre-marital counseling?



Graph 4.9.1: Pre-Marital Counseling Received

The last question each couple was asked individually referenced areas where they would like to seek support. Most of the couples have been married for at least five years. Although a few couples have received counseling, each individually detailed areas where they needed support. Whether or not they had received previous counseling and support within each relationship was detailed. The areas listed circle back to the initial sessions each couple participated in. The information from each couple assisted the researcher in proving that a ministry focused on serving newly engaged and/or newly married is both needed and necessary. Analysis of the individual responses concerning the areas of support identified by the couples showed they needed more support in the areas of communication, quality time, and finances;

below is a graphic representation of the responses from everyone regarding the areas of support needed.



Graph 4.9.2: Areas of Support

Data Analysis

As the researcher reviewed the biblical content of marriage, she also observed the body language of all participants. The researcher noted that couple A appeared at ease about the information taught by observing several nods and agreements, couple B showed some nervousness during the lesson by shaking their legs and doing a lot of fidgeting, and couple C did

not sit as closely together as the other couples did; however, when points were made, the wife would look at her spouse and shake her head and smirk. Couple D was in two different locations—an observation that stood out to the researcher the most because the husband and wife were not in the same room or location. Both stated they were committed to the session, but both had to work late and instead of canceling, they logged into the session from work.

Weekly Sessions

Session 1, Week 1

Each session began with an opening prayer and then the researcher and the couple began to dive into the work. The first fifteen minutes after the opening prayer, the researcher introduced the topic. The first biblical content topic that all couples participated in covered biblical marriage. During this time, the researcher presents a PowerPoint (*Appendix H*) presentation to the couples covering biblical marriage. The topics covered by the presentation are defining marriage, the nature of marriage, and the purpose of marriage. Within this time, the researcher is only introducing the topic, providing biblical content, and allowing for clarity on the topic. The next twenty minutes is time for the researcher and the couples to review the assignment given, discuss concerns, offer feedback, and develop a plan to work on clarity of the topic discussed. At this time, the couples were able to discuss the initial questionnaires that were provided. The researcher selected specific questions from the questionnaire to open discussion with the couples. Couple B received pre-marital counseling.

Couple B: (Married for 7 years)

Researcher: I noticed that both of you have communication concerns.

Wife: Yes, we have always had issues communicating with one another, we were never taught how to communicate, and this leads to talking at each other.

Husband: She always have to have the last say, she don't listen, it's her way all the time.

Wife: That's not true, I listen to you all the time.

Husband: No, you don't, you hear what you want to hear.

Wife: Well, I am listening now, what do you have to say?

Husband: Nothing.

Researcher: Thank you for expressing what you are currently feeling, our next session will be on effective communication. We will work together to improve how we should talk to one another as well as practice how to listen to one another. The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify the areas that could be seen as a struggle in the relationship. Communication is a skill that must be practiced effectively. We will work on it and tools will be provided to you both in your marriage.

Researcher: Were there any questions regarding biblical marriage before we move on to our next activity?

Wife: No

Husband: No

After learning the biblical context of what marriage is according to God's Word, the couples participated in an activity to help them remember why they got together (*Appendix D*). Couple B, sat directly across from each other and asked each other the listed questions. This activity was beneficial in helping them to reminisce over the past. The couple smiled a lot, laughed some, and began to become more in tune with one another during the activity. The purpose of this activity was to help lead the couples into their "why"? Couples need the opportunity to be able to reflect on their relationship, and this activity allowed them to do that. They had an opportunity to focus on their purpose of being together. "Helping couples

understand and appreciate one another endorses the role of autonomy and personal responsibility as keys to healthy functioning in partners.”²⁰¹

Couple F: (Married for 4.5 years)

Couple F also received the presentation covering biblical marriage, but this couple did not receive pre-marital counseling. As the researcher presented the information regarding biblical marriage, *Couple F* had quite a few questions regarding the biblical context of marriage. The wife came from a single-parent home, never attended church, and gained insight on marriage from television and other sources. She had no biblical contextual foundation for their marriage. The husband was raised in the home of his mom and step-father, his step-father is the only father figure he knows, his parents were never legally married, they were common-law. They did not attend church but believed in God. Instead of the researcher asking questions, this couple arrived ready for insightful information. After the presentation, the couple immediately began to ask questions.

Husband: Sis. Brandi, we are so grateful that you are doing this research, this is going to help us learn. We are on a journey, and we want to know. Why does society have a different view of marriage than what the Bible says?

Researcher: Society has a way of trying to transform the minds of people by making them think what occurs in the world is right. A lot of things we see on TV, Netflix, and YouTube are not of God, and it is not aligned with His Word. Society wants to make marriage fit its own needs and agenda and not what God wants.

²⁰¹ Jean Pieniadz, and Polly Young-Eisendrath, *Dialogue Therapy for Couples and Real Dialogue for Opposing Sides: Methods Based on Psychoanalysis and Mindfulness* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 18.

Husband: When my wife and I got married, we just got married because we loved one another, no one talked to us about pre-marital counseling or what the Bible says about marriage.

Researcher: You and your wife are not alone. Many people are married and did not go through pre-marital counseling or have a knowledge base of what the Bible says about marriage.

Wife: How does marriage reflect God; I don't get it.

Researcher: Very good question. Your husband is the head of your household, he is the leader just as Christ is the head. You come from your husband, in Genesis, when God put Adam to sleep and took a rib and created a woman represents the Church which is the bride and the body. Once you two got married, you become one flesh. God's purpose for marriage is to solely reflect Him. Marriage should depict the covenant relationship between Christ and His Bride, the Church.

Researcher: You two have asked some very thought-provoking questions and I love it but for the sake of time, we must move on to the next part of the session.

Researcher: After reviewing your responses from your questionnaires, you both highlighted that finances were tough for both of you. Would you like to elaborate?

Wife: We pay our bills on time but um he does not like to save money.

Husband: I work hard every day and I want to get the things I want to get.

Wife: But every time you get paid, we need to start saving money for a house.

Husband: I told her not to worry about that because I can pull the money from my 401k, I have been on my job for a long time and I have the money there.

Wife: Well, why haven't we moved yet?

Husband: Haven't you seen these interest rates?

Researcher: Thank you for sharing, finances is a session we will have in the coming weeks. I hear that you have financial goals you both want to achieve, saving and purchasing a home together on achieving the financial goals you both have.

Researcher: Our time has been well spent on great discussion and as we wrap up, I have an activity for you both. Please sit directly across from one another, the questions you will ask one another will cause you to reflect on what brought you two together.

Couple F began to ask each other a series of questions. The researcher observed them and saw that they were reflecting on their relationship and more so on why they got together more so than what brought them together. The researcher could see that the two shared a genuine love for one another and wanted to grow together in Christ with their relationship. The session for this couple lasted longer than the allotted hour due to the questions during the first part of the session along with the discussion in the middle part of the lesson.

Couple I have been married for 3.5 months. This couple did not receive pre-marital counseling. As the couples joined the session virtually, the researcher immediately noticed that there was some tension between the two of them. The researcher immediately opened up with prayer. The couple was very quiet. I explained to them that we would be going over what a biblical marriage is. They both sat quietly during the presentation and after the presentation, the researcher asked if there were any questions. The wife began to cry. I asked her what was wrong. She asked if she could speak to me one-on-one without her husband being in the room. I responded that was fine if her husband was ok with it. He immediately got up and left the room.

Wife: I feel so stupid.

Researcher: Why?

Wife: I saw all the red flags but because I wanted to be married so badly, I ignored every single sign.

Researcher: What signs did you see?

Wife: I knew he had no drive; he wouldn't even help around the house. Once I paid off his probation, he quit his job and now he sits at home all day while I am working. He plays his game, and he drinks. He has changed, he has a temper, and he is extremely jealous. I love him and all, but I just can't do this.

Researcher: God ordained marriage to be for better or for worse. It appears to be a rough patch in your marriage. Have you prayed for him? Have you encouraged him? Have you spoken to him about how you feel?

Wife: Yeah, I have done all of that, nothing is going to change, this is who he is. He doesn't want to get better. He is content because I am taking care of everything, he doesn't know how to lead or be the head of anything, he expects me to wait on him and take care of him.

Researcher: Would you like to ask him to come back in the room?

Wife: Yeah

Researcher: How are you feeling?

Husband: I know she is frustrated with me; I am going to get a job. That's all she worried about. It's not like she doesn't have the money.

Wife: That is the problem, you are concerned about my money, I had all of this before you even came into the picture, I was well established. You presented yourself as if you could handle an independent woman. You just want me to take care of you, I am not your mother, I am your wife.

Husband: There you go, I don't expect you to take care of me, I expect you to support me during this transition I am in, I am looking for a job.

Researcher: Some serious issues have been presented within the first twenty minutes of this session. These issues will be addressed in the coming weeks but let's circle back to the presentation of what a biblical marriage is. Before we can move forward, we need to understand the purpose of marriage.

Wife: I can't do this I am sorry; can we try again next week?

Researcher: Yes, we can.

Session 2, Week 2

Week two the focus during the sessions was effective communication. Based on the individual questionnaire, several couples listed communication as an area needed for support. In any relationship effectiveness of communication is critical. Joanna Piekarska stated, "Communication in marriage relates to verbal and nonverbal exchange of information between spouses. Not only words creating the content of the information are important, but also the nonverbal message accompanying the spoken words, like tone of voice, look, facial expression."²⁰² Communication between spouses is a process and a skill that takes time to develop. Piekarska, further states that communication in marriage is a process. Studies showed that this process affects the perception of spouse communication and spouses' responses to each other.²⁰³ During the week two session, the couples were excited about learning how to

²⁰² Joanna, Piekarska. "Perception Of Communication In Marriage: The Role Emotional Intelligence And Gender Schema." *Advances in cognitive psychology* / 18, no. 2 (2022): 156–164.

²⁰³ Joanna, Piekarska. "Perception Of Communication In Marriage: The Role Emotional Intelligence And Gender Schema." *Advances in cognitive psychology* / 18, no. 2 (2022): 156–164.

communicate effectively. The researcher visited Couple *F* first. The researcher followed the agenda and opened with prayer and after prayer, explained to the couple that the topic of the session was effective communication. The couple both stated that this was an area that they needed help in. The researcher asked if they were in a good space to make it through the session and they both agreed that they would. The researcher presented a PowerPoint presentation on effective communication in marriage (Appendix J). After the presentation, the husband began by making a statement.

Husband: I understand communication is hard but at times I feel like my wife does not understand what it is I am saying when we talk.

Researcher: Thank you for being willing to share and open up about how you feel regarding communicating with your wife.

Wife: Most of the time when he communicates, he is rambling and it is not clear what he is saying he is always all over the place with his thoughts.

Researcher: The activity that we will do later in the session, will help the two of you with the current issue that you both have spoken about.

Researcher: At our last session, I was unable to give you all your homework assignments, let me provide you with the activity that you two were supposed to work on and we will discuss it. The activity is called three and three. I would like the two of you to write down three things you love about one another and three things you dislike. They were given about 10 minutes to complete this assignment. The researcher asked the husband to share first.

Husband: Umm the three things that I love about my wife is she has good heart, she is giving and she is determined. Umm the three things that I don't like about my wife is, she does not clean up regularly, she knows it all and she complains a lot.

Researcher: Let's remember to not take offense to anything either of you say, this is an opportunity to listen to what each other is saying and learn and grow from it.

Wife: Can I start with what I don't like?

Researcher: No, you will start with the positive.

Wife: To be honest, it is hard for me to come up with positives right now.

Researcher: What did you love the most about him before you two got married?

Wife: Hmm, well I loved how he wanted to spend time with me, I loved that he would go to work and I loved that he treated my daughter as his own. The things I don't like are he won't find a job, he won't help around the house since he won't go to work and now he is angry and drinks.

Husband: This is what I am talking about, no understanding at all. I look for a job every day. I drink so I can tune out the nagging and complaining.

Researcher: Let's address some of the concerns. It appears that she is frustrated because you are not working at this current time and you are frustrated that you haven't been able to find a job. The situation alone leads to the brewing feelings and emotions you both currently have. Is this statement accurate?

Wife: Yes.

Husband: Yes.

Wife: I told him I had a friend who would offer him a job until he was able to find something he really wanted to do.

Husband: I don't need her to find me a job.

Researcher: In marriage, there is no need to be prideful. She is trying to help. Do you want to work?

Husband: Yes, I want to work.

Researcher: Would you reconsider visiting the offer she presented? You want to work and she has someone willing to offer work.

Husband: Yeah. I guess.

Researcher: Another area of concern is the nagging and complaining. Your choice of words and how you say things impact your spouse's feelings and thoughts. You must think about the words you are choosing. You must watch your tone and your delivery. I know this is a tough situation, bills are due and the load is heavy but going against one another is not the answer.

Wife: You are right, its just frustrating, we just got married and all of this is happening.

Husband: A lot has happened in a short period.

Wife: Maybe we just need to refocus.

Husband: I agree, we need to refocus and maybe write out our plans. I will call your friend about the job, I know it has been a strain financially. I apologize for my actions, losing my job just made me feel less than a man.

Wife: I apologize too, I didn't take the time to understand how you may have been feeling after losing your job.

Researcher: Good work the two of you, you are listening to one another, you are receiving and processing what each other has to say. Continue to do this. Our time is up but I have homework for the two of you. Work on this assignment together and bring it back next week. This activity will help you practice communicating effectively.

The next couple, Couple H, of interest is a couple who have been married for twenty-five years. This couple entered the session excited to learn new information. The researcher and *Couple H* opened in prayer and after prayer, the researcher presented the PowerPoint

presentation. During the presentation, the couple took down notes and wrote out different questions.

Wife: This presentation is a great reminder of how we should communicate with one another.

The communication essentials are great nuggets to hold on to.

Husband: Yeah, we have been on this marriage road for some time now and we hit a lot of bumps in the road early on but with God and counseling, we worked through this communication thing. It was hard in the beginning.

Researcher: How do you two communicate?

Husband and Wife: Chuckles

Wife: Every morning, we start our day with prayer, that is a must. After prayer, we don't talk much; after that, we give ourselves alone time. That alone time is important to us, it's our time to just be alone and get our thoughts together. As our day starts, we call each other on our commute to work and we just talk to one another about our day. During the day we make sure we check in through text or a quick call.

Husband: After the workday, we come home to discuss our day, and just enjoy one another. If there are issues, we need to discuss we just listen to one another and talk it out. We are past the stage of not listening, we are past the stage of arguing, life is too short for all of that.

Researcher: Time brings learning lessons and growth. This is amazing to hear how you worked through the issues and now you have a system of communication that works for you. Thank you for sharing your story. You have led into the homework assignment you both had this past week by sharing how you communicate.

Wife: The activity sparked a great conversation between us, it caused us to reflect on some things. We enjoyed doing the activity. It's just a great reminder.

Researcher: We have about twenty-five minutes left, let's jump into this last activity before we leave. This activity is called three and three. You two will write out three things you love about one another and three things you don't love.

Husband: Allow me to go first, had this activity been done within the first few years of marriage, my response would have been different, on this day, I love everything about my wife, she is my rib that God created just for me.

Researcher and Wife: OMG, that is so sweet.

Wife: The sentiments are the same. We struggled in the beginning, but we realized early on that counseling would be beneficial. We did that, and those tools helped us greatly. It took time, but it was worth it. Being married is a process, and you have to learn from one another and be open to receiving help. It is okay to get help. This is a lifetime commitment. I love my king, everything about him.

Researcher: This is beautiful; I love it. Next week, we will discuss forgiveness. Here is the homework for next week. Let's close out in prayer.

Summary of Results

Over four weeks, nineteen couples received sessions on biblical marriage, effective communication, forgiveness, and finances. Each couple and each session were different. Some couples had received pre-marital counseling along with counseling, which made their sessions flow more easily because these couples had tools that were implemented in their relationship regularly. Whereas for couples who were married and did not have pre-marital counseling, those sessions were more strenuous. Couples who had received counseling could easily interact in the presentations and the activities. Many of the couples stated that this was a refresher that was

needed for them to remind them of those major concerns that arise in relationships. Each couple who had received counseling could share how beneficial it was to go through pre-marital counseling and how it helped them before they even began. All these couples suggested that it is important to have a ministry embedded within the local church to teach new couples the foundational pieces needed to have a thriving and God-centered marriage.

Couples who attended pre-marital counseling recognized its critical role in their marriage. Each couple was able to express the essentials of pre-marital counseling. More than half of the couples stated that premarital counseling helps build and establish effective communication skills. They agreed that the topic of effective communication was necessary within the curriculum. Forty percent of the couples stated that during premarital counseling it was where they learned to handle difficult situations as they came about in their relationship. They were taught how to show grace, how to listen, and how to process what the other person was saying. Each couple who had received pre-marital counseling concluded that it is beneficial, it is needed, and it should be a requirement before getting married.

There was a total of six couples who were engaged and had not begun the process of pre-marital counseling. This group of couples provided a blank canvas on how the pre-marital counseling program would flow within the ministry. All six couples actively participated in each session, had several questions, and returned each week with completed assignments and more questions. These six couples offered a true and clear picture of how the pre-marital counseling program would flow and how it would look for couples seeking to get married. The information given to these couples was new to each of them. Each week, the couples continued to come yearning to learn more.

The couples who either received pre-marital counseling or did not actively participate well. There were some stumbling blocks with a few couples, but one couple, Couple I, a newly married couple, faced some difficulties extremely early on in their marriage. The sessions started off rocky; even though this couple did not receive pre-marital counseling, they were open. The first few sessions started tumultuously, but as the couple progressed through the sessions, the researcher observed how they began applying the information they were given. Other couples in the research also faced some tough issues. Similar to Couple I, these couples, through the biblical context given and the information provided, began to apply the information from the sessions. Each week, these couples returned reflectively. In a short period of four weeks, these couples began to grow, forgive, and heal.

At the end of the four-week trial period, the researcher administered a post-pre-marital counseling survey to determine whether the program was needed in ministry, whether it was beneficial, and whether the information was useful. The results of the survey are displayed:



Graph 4.9.3: Post Pre-Marital Survey

Based on the post-pre-marital counseling survey results, a pre-marital counseling ministry at Victory Tabernacle Church is needed. The nineteen participants were asked if their views about pre-marital counseling had changed. At the start of the study, 13 couples believed pre-marital counseling was a good tool. Their views about pre-marital counseling did not change according to the results of the post-survey. Three of the couples did not have any knowledge of pre-marital counseling in the beginning, but after the research trial, their views changed, and they believed pre-marital counseling was necessary. The remaining three couples remained undecided about how they felt in regard to pre-marital counseling according to the results of the post-survey.

When asked whether the sessions were beneficial, all couples agreed that the sessions were beneficial. The six who received pre-marital counseling stated the information was a great refresher for them. It allowed them to reflect on the topics and revisit some areas in their marriage that could be improved. These couples informed the researcher that the information given in the presentation was beneficial because it allowed them to see how God's Word was centered around each discussed topic. They appreciated the biblical context of each topic.

Aligning God's Word with each topic helped them in those areas, which allowed them to grow closer to God and to one another.

The five engaged couples that went through the process were a blank canvas. They informed the researcher that the information was beneficial and applicable. They stated the information was new knowledge for them, and they were able to learn foundational information that would be needed in their upcoming marriage. These couples gained information and tools they would implement in their relationship and reflect upon during critical times. The five engaged couples shared similar information praising the program's advantages. The pre-marriage counseling program was essential as they prepared to marry. The couples stated that this research trial encouraged them to strive for a strong and healthy relationship. Additionally, they appreciated the topics discussed because they helped prepare them for potential problems. Overall, they felt their experience during this research trial helped them obtain the tools necessary to navigate marriage life.

The couples who were married and did not receive marital counseling shared with the researcher that during their time being married, they had experienced some difficulties. Now, they see the benefits of pre-marital counseling. They stated that had they been able to go through counseling, they would have been able to address those difficult issues before getting married. Experiencing difficulties while in the marriage is hard. Not having the tools needed to navigate through the problems caused stress, frustration, anger, and high emotions. They emphasized that going through the experience of the pre-marital counseling program, they could see the advantages of experiencing a program such as this. These couples listed the advantages as: learning how to effectively communicate, understanding what God says marriage is, dealing with

differences, handling finances together, and learning how to listen and understand one another. Each of the couples who were already married was able to express the same sentiments.

The result of the trial research for pre-marital counseling was beneficial for all nineteen couples. This research helped each couple improve their marriage based on some or all of the topics discussed within each of the four components.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Now that the research has been completed, it is time to take the information gathered and move forward. The research that has been completed proves that pre-marital counseling is needed and effective. Studies show that couples' therapy is most effective when couples actively engage with the tools provided, such as pre-marital counseling and the strategies learned during sessions. Research by Hough and Tassoni suggests that therapy fosters introspection, allowing couples to gain a clearer understanding of their experiences. This newfound clarity equips them to address future difficulties and navigate inevitable complications more successfully.²⁰⁴ Therefore, couples who proactively participate in pre-marital counseling and actively engage in therapy are more likely to reap significant benefits.

Research suggests that pre-marital counseling significantly benefits couples. A study by Khodaparast and Gilani underscores this point, highlighting that "pre-marriage preparation is essential to reduce divorce and support healthy marriage."²⁰⁵ The church can play a crucial role in strengthening marriages by actively helping couples understand marriage and navigate its various stages. This is important because stronger marriages lead to stronger families, which in turn contribute to a more impactful church community and a more solid foundation for society as a whole. The church can play a vital role in fostering a deep understanding of marriage's significance in God's eyes. By equipping couples seeking to marry, the church can illuminate the concept of marriage as a partnership built to weather life's inevitable challenges. In times of

²⁰⁴ Margaret Hough. *Counselling Skills and Theory* (London: Hodder Education, 2021), 5.

²⁰⁵ Ata Khodaparast, Delara Laghousi, Mahasti Alizadeh, and Neda Gilani. "Marriage Expectation and Related Factors among Newlywed Couples in Pre-Marriage Counseling Center in Tabriz." *تبریز پزشکی علوم* 43, no. 6 (2022): 533-542. *دانشگاه پزشکی مجله*

hardship, the church should serve as a source of guidance and support, helping couples navigate towards a stronger union.

The church's role in the lives of those desiring to be married is a duty and responsibility that must be implemented. The research found that the couples did not clearly understand what a biblical and kingdom marriage is. This points back to the church's responsibility of teaching and preparing the congregants for what a Christ-centered marriage is. Without a stronger emphasis on pre-marital counseling within the church, couples will look elsewhere to find the guidance they need. In doing this, churches can become a valuable resource for couples seeking to prepare for marriage, rather than leaving them to find information on their own. In the *Christian Husband's Handbook*, the authors opened up with:

The contrast between culture and Scripture could not be sharper! Society now promotes, or at least tacitly approves, a pathetic view of marriage. This once-exalted social institution is now consistently characterized by either decades of passionless mediocrity or vow-destroying sexual flings (and eventual destruction). Movie and television plots thrive on marital unfaithfulness and selfishly shattered covenants. Young adults, if they marry at all, often enter marriage pessimistic about its future. Many of their age mates (and their parents, too) have “crashed and burned” in highly destructive relationships. Such pessimism is, unfortunately, often grounded in reality.²⁰⁶

As faith leaders, we hold a significant responsibility: preparing couples for marriage, a cornerstone of the church. Our commitment to marriage preparation should be unwavering. Informed by research, ministries should establish a well-defined plan to implement a powerful pre-marital counseling program, fostering stronger unions within our community.

²⁰⁶ Marvin Gilbert, and Amy George. *The Christian Husband's Handbook : Constantly Pursuing the Treasure You Hold*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 17.

Once the church realizes how important it is for their presence to be involved in believers seeking marriage, the trajectory of kingdom marriages and how long they will last will change. Adrian Reynolds discussed in his article, “*The Church and Healthy Marriages*,” that there are four founding principles that the church must embrace to help cultivate healthy and godly kingdom marriages. The first principle he discussed was that marriage is not everything; he explained that marriages are more likely to be godly and healthy when we ensure we don’t make them into everything; his point is that marriage is not the New Testament building block; the local church is.²⁰⁷ The next principle he focused on is that the church must let those seeking marriage know that marriage is a grace gift, marriage is a gift to the church to benefit the church.²⁰⁸ Reynolds further points out within his principles that the church is responsible for guiding new couples to the understanding that godly marriage is intimately connected with godly lives and that perseverance in marriage can’t be taken for granted.²⁰⁹ This research strongly suggests that incorporating discussions on these four core principles into pre-marital counseling could significantly benefit engaged couples. In fact, the study participants themselves could have likely gained substantial advantages from such conversations.

Embracing these principles will be a game changer in the church for couples desiring to get married in the kingdom. These principles are a guide that leads to wisdom for the church body. When the church begins to take the step and provide the flock with what they need to be successful in the kingdom, especially in marriage, there will be a

²⁰⁷ Adrian Reynolds, “The Church and Healthy Marriages,” *TableTalk*, (2021).

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

major shift within the church's relationships regarding marriage. The church needs to renew its emphasis on marriage as a sacred covenant established by God and uphold God's vision for marriage by prioritizing its sanctity and offering robust support to couples.

The answer to the question, “Where does the research go from here?” Unless leaders listen and recognize the issues plaguing the kingdom, regarding the institution of marriage its future is at risk. The problem is that marriages are falling apart, and the church has not fully assimilated itself into the lives of those desiring to get married. It is time to implement programs such as pre-marital counseling into the ministry. The program should be implemented with fidelity. The church should put forth an effort and ensure that leaders in the church are properly equipped to do the work needed to impact those who desire to marry effectively. Johnson wrote that it is time to reclaim the church because the church is God’s agent to care for the souls of His people.²¹⁰ This includes investing in their lives, seeking to be married and continuing forward, and being a source to help them remain married.

This research was driven, in part, by personal experiences. The author, having been married for four years and four months (as of November 3rd, approaching five years), encountered significant challenges during the first three years of the marriage. Pre-marital counseling was sought from the pastor, but it lacked structure, personal conversation, and a strong biblical foundation. This experience highlighted the crucial need for proper pre-marital

²¹⁰ T. Dale Johnson. *The Church as a Culture of Care: Finding Hope in Biblical Community*. (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021), 12.

preparation. While the pastor officiated the wedding, the church ultimately failed to provide adequate support when marital struggles arose. The initial three years proved devastating, with thoughts of divorce resurfacing annually due to stress, frustration, and the overwhelming nature of married life. Interestingly, the research findings mirrored the authors' early marital experiences. Many participants described the first few years as a significant hurdle. Notably, several couples referenced faith and prayer as sources of strength that helped them navigate these difficulties.

It should be expected that during pre-marital counseling, one would learn more about married life. Booth wrote in an article about expectations for pre-marital counseling that couples should answer a lot of questions on a variety of topics, the counselor should ask questions that the couple has not thought about, assist in making expectations known to each other, and develop a plan on how to address difficulties in the relationship.²¹¹ Examples should be given, and the leader should discuss the warfare against the covenant. The relationship faced significant challenges, which stemmed from external forces. Through persistent prayer, they found a powerful tool to navigate these difficulties. This experience underscores the importance of prayer as a cornerstone of a strong marriage. Ashton and Pierce stated, "Warfare prayer is praying in the midst of our spiritual battles."²¹² Prayer was needed because the warfare experienced in the first years of marriage was difficult, and it would cause anyone to want to walk away. The research

²¹¹ Jessica Booth, "What is Pre-Marital Counseling? What to Expect," *Forbes Health*, <https://www.forbes.com/health/mind/premarital-counseling/>.

²¹² Venner Alston and Chuck Pierce, Alston, *Next-Level Spiritual Warfare : Advanced Strategies for Defeating the Enemy*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2019), 12.

highlights the shortcomings of the pre-marital counseling received by the author.

Comparing the experience as a counselee with the findings from this study, it becomes clear that effective pre-marital counseling can yield significant benefits. This realization has ignited a passion within the author to serve couples seeking marriage preparation and equip them for a successful future together. Couples must understand that marriage will require balance because attempting to prioritize marriage, career, and other aspirations in life can become a struggle.²¹³

Pre-marital counseling should be embedded within church ministry as a preventative to strengthen relationships before getting married proactively. Implementing this preventative tool within the church ministry will contribute to marriages that will last longer, be healthier, and be happier over a long duration of time. Moving forward, the church must understand that pre-marital counseling is an investment because the impact will help save marriages in the long term.

Research Implications

Previous research in the literature review details multiple facets of why pre-marital counseling is essential to couples wanting to marry. The focus of the research completed by the researcher was to focus on the effects of pre-marital counseling. The ultimate goal was to determine if pre-marital counseling is beneficial. According to the research previously completed, the answer is yes. Jessen stated that 80% of couples who attended pre-marital counseling were better off than those who decided against pre-marital counseling.²¹⁴ The reviewed literature consistently highlighted critical points and topics that should be addressed in

²¹³ Brian Willoughby, *The Millennial Marriage*. (New York: NY Routledge, 2021), 154.

²¹⁴ Bre Jessen, "Is Pre-Marital Counseling Worth It?", Colorado State University College News, April 26, 2024, <https://chhs.source.colostate.edu/>.

pre-marital counseling. These studies not only identified key areas for discussion, like effective communication, financial planning, and forgiveness, but also provided compelling arguments for why pre-marital counseling is a necessary step before marriage. By delving into these topics beforehand, couples gain valuable tools and a deeper understanding of one another, ultimately strengthening the foundation for a successful marriage.

Within this research, it was critical to review pre-marital programs within church ministries to have an objective perspective on how the pre-marital programs were structured, how they were implemented, the duration of the program, and whether costs were associated with the service. Research revealed a surprising gap in pre-marital counseling services offered by local ministries. While several ministries prioritized this service in principle, none were actively providing such programs within the immediate research area. This observation extended beyond the authors' own church, suggesting a broader issue across the local Black church community. The question then arises: why is this crucial service seemingly absent?

There is a stigma in the black community when it comes to therapy. The reasoning behind blacks not trusting therapy or desiring to attend therapy is an issue that has been present for many years. When it comes to any type of therapy, the black community is hesitant. Research shows, “African Americans seem to face unique barriers in the help-seeking process—such as concerns about therapists having a lack of understanding of cultural differences. Race and experiences with racism are critical factors to consider. Researchers have found that a significant barrier to African American help-seeking in general is the perception that Black culture, values, and practices are considered inferior or not normal.”²¹⁵ The thought process regarding counseling must change; the black community must begin to accept therapy/counseling across all

²¹⁵ Aimee Hubbard et al., “Understanding African American help-seeking for Romantic Relationships: Advocacy, Barriers, and Considerations,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 50, no. 2 (2024): 348.

facets because it is needed. This stigma that is placed upon the African American community has existed for so long, Adekson wrote, “that once an individual received mental health treatment, their social standing would forever be changed, and fear of this change could be identified as a mental health stigma. Even as African American people are more likely to report presenting concerns that are indicative of a mental health need, they are less likely to seek help.”²¹⁶ It is especially needed in marriages because marriages are the cornerstone of the family institution. It is necessary to have the tools needed to be able to navigate through marriages effectively and godly. It is time to throw away the thoughts that only crazy people are going to counseling, or counselors will try to talk you out of your belief system, trying to talk to a friend. The time has come for issues to be addressed within the black community/church when it comes to marriage; the time has come for black marriages to be successful by taking a holistic approach towards pre-marital counseling and receiving the beautiful benefits.

Working with nineteen diverse married and engaged couples proved to be a rewarding experience. This research offered a unique window into the deeply personal aspects of their lives. Notably, all participants demonstrated a crucial element: trust in the researcher. This trust is essential for successful pre-marital counseling.

²¹⁶Mary Olufunmilayo Adekson, *African Americans and Mental Health: Practical and Strategic Solutions to Barriers, Needs, and Challenges*, (Cham: Springer, 2021), 16.

“Trust has become such a natural part of our environment that we only realize it was there when it erodes, dries up, or turns into distrust. It seems to be a paradox: only the disappearance brings trust to the fore. We apparently become more conscious of trust when trust itself becomes less present. An analogy between trust and the air: the true value of air is only revealed when it becomes too thin, too dirty, and too scarce. Following this analogy, it should then also be possible to measure trust in the way air density and air quality can be measured. Thus, trust becomes an empirical quantity—if not directly visible, then at least describable.”²¹⁷

This statement by Blöbaum is pivotal because the couples I worked with varied in age, experience, and years of marriage, so trust is vital to have someone come in and probe into your personal life. This was extremely eye-opening, and because it is so personal, I understand why people tend to navigate away from counseling because of how personal it gets.

Working with these couples, I realized that although they are active in the church at this time, some of them were not raised or reared in the church. This realization led me to the conclusion that most of the couples had no biblically sound understanding of what God says marriage is. This further leads to the importance of why pre-marital and post-marital counseling is needed in the church. It is truly the responsibility of the ministry leaders in the church to accomplish this task. “Christian premarital counseling is a powerful opportunity to ensure that each person and their relationship is rooted in God. It can inspire them to follow His plan for their lives.”²¹⁸ The implementation of pre-marital counseling is necessary.

²¹⁷ Bernd Blöbaum, *Trust and Communication : Findings and Implications of Trust Research*. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), 4.

²¹⁸ Grace College, “Christian Pre-marital Counseling: The Essentials for Pastoral Counselors, last modified March 10, 2021, <https://online.grace.edu/news/christian-premarital-counseling/>

Within the previous research through the literature, communication is a topic that was covered essentially. The research provided valuable insights into communication patterns among the couples. The researcher observed how couples interacted, their preferred communication styles, and their overall level of communication effectiveness. As expected, communication emerged as a critical factor in marital success. Some couples demonstrated strong communication skills, while others faced significant challenges in this area. This observation underscores the extensive research on effective communication in marriage. Unsurprisingly, communication breakdowns can significantly strain relationships.

Nicole McDermott wrote in Forbes Health that communication is the foundation of any relationship; it is “The extent to which each partner is skilled at expressing themselves, their needs and preferences, and this is the greatest indicator of the health and fulfillment of the relationship.”²¹⁹ Communication is such a critical point in relationships that helps keep couples on the same page and gives them a sense of teamwork when solving problems. Interesting generational differences were revealed in communication styles. Couples younger than 47 were more likely to utilize text messaging, while those over 47 primarily relied on face-to-face communication. While texting is a valid communication tool, some couples in the study relied on it almost exclusively. The researcher observed that these couples often struggled with face-to-face communication during counseling sessions. This highlights the importance of developing strong in-person communication skills alongside the use of texting, for a well-rounded approach to marital communication.

²¹⁹ Nicole McDermott, “How to Communicate in a Relationship, According to Experts,” Forbes Health, January 12, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/health/wellness/how-to-communicate-in-a-relationship/>

Hearing your partner's voice; sometimes, you need voice-to-voice communication to communicate properly.²²⁰

The overall learning experience proved that several married couples lacked pre-marital counseling prior to marriage. It was observed that couples who lacked this service realized the importance of pre-marital counseling; they opened up their minds to continue to receive counseling, and they expressed that the experience was positive. The couples who had gone through pre-marital counseling appreciated receiving the information because it gave them a refresher on what they had been taught. Pre-marital counseling is beneficial, critical, and needed for those seeking to get married in the future.

Research Applications

When reviewing the needs of the church, implementing pre-marital counseling is only one sector that the church needs. This research opens doors for churches to explore new avenues in providing counseling services. Many congregants face a variety of challenges in their lives. The church, ideally positioned to support its members' growth and development, could benefit from a robust counseling sector. This would allow the church to directly address these needs and provide a safe space for congregants to receive the services they require to flourish in all aspects of life.

The implementation of a pre-marital counseling program will lead the church into offering marital counseling. Both components should go hand and hand. Understanding what is needed before getting married is critical, but it is also important to continue to have the support

²²⁰ Rachel Pace, "Texting in Relationships: Texting Types, Affects and Mistakes to Avoid," Married Life, March 9, 2023, <https://www.marriage.com/advice/communication/>

needed while in the marriage. Couples must have the understanding that counseling does not mean that there are problems, counseling at any stage in the relationship is always beneficial. As couples begin to talk about their experiences and/or issues within the marriage, the door becomes open to many things that may require individual counseling, family counseling, kids counseling, and the list. Executing pre-marital counseling in the church will be a huge benefit to the ministry because it will allow service in many ways to help the congregation.

It is critical that leadership and I determine which counseling model or approach will be best for our ministry. Whichever approach is chosen, it will be important that the model used will be a foundational piece on which to continue building and offering services for other areas of need. Time and more research will be needed to conclude which model best represents the ministry's needs. Therefore, a prompt decision is crucial to integrate counseling services into the church ministry.

Research Limitations

While this research strives to offer valuable insights for couples seeking guidance, it acknowledges the inherent complexity of marriage. Each couple brings unique challenges, histories, and experiences to the table. A critical consideration for the church's counseling team is their ability to navigate couples grappling with deep-seated issues within their relationships. When people are given an opportunity to express what they have been holding in and now have a safe space to release, “this discovery produces thoughts, emotions and perspectives.”²²¹ During

²²¹ Keith E. Webb, *COACH MODEL FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS: Powerful Leadership Skills for Solving Problems, Reaching Goals, and Developing Others*, (Morgan James Faith, 2019), 78.

these sessions, they will need someone to handle not only what is expressed but also be a guide and a source to help coach and lead them through what they are experiencing. Although the focus is pre-marital counseling, there will be problems that will arise and must be addressed. This will take someone who has walked the path and understands the needs of the couple. When offering a service, those helping must be equipped to serve. This leads to developing a team of willing leaders who have a desire to tap into this arena of counseling.

Pre-marital counseling hinges on three crucial pillars: openness, transparency, and trust. For a successful experience, couples must be willing to be open and transparent with each other. Equally important, the counselor must be a trustworthy and nonjudgmental guide. During this time, couples can and will experience the breakthroughs they need and reveal the truth to themselves.²²² If these components don't work together like a well-oiled machine, this will cause a huge problem. The question is, how does one ensure that this happens on both spectrums? This question is posed because trust is necessary when working with people regarding sensitive and personal topics.

The development and training of those willing to be part of the counseling ministry will be crucial. All those willing to be part of this ministry must complete a Certified Christian Counseling program. Completing such a program will equip those desiring to serve and provide them with what they need to help those who are part of any entity regarding counseling that the ministry will offer.

²²² Dave Donaldson, Wendell Vinson, and Tommy Barnett, *CityServe : Your Guide to Church-Based Compassion*. (Ashland: Gospel Publishing House, 2019), 178.

Further Research

Continuing research on this topic of counseling will always be continual and evolving. As stated previously, people are experiencing so much and need a safe space to release what they are bottling up. It will be extremely important to go outside the church walls and begin to reach the masses who need help. The focal point of this research is pre-marital counseling, but as you dive deeper into people's needs, the scope becomes much larger. As kingdom builders, it is the responsibility of the believer to go forth, serve, and help.

Lacking such a service in the church presents a danger to the kingdom. The kingdom needs multiple facets of counseling, such as relationship, premarital, and marital, and the list can continue. The need is present and clear, and it will take preparation and readiness to move forward to implement this sector of the church with fidelity. Again, those seeking marriage are foundational to the church because this is where families began. It will take a team to ensure that this is effectively done, and it can't fall only on the pastor; this shift will take time to be done with fidelity. If this process is not done correctly, it could be detrimental to the kingdom.

Staying on top of current research will be critical in this process. Current research in this field of study will ensure that the information gathered continues to fit into the larger context of knowledge. One area I would continue to dive into is the stigma of counseling amongst African American people. It is important to have a complete understanding of why the stigma is there and learn how the stigma can be reversed. Cooper wrote:

Considering the unique experiences of African Americans and the documented impacts of those experiences on marital and relational dynamics, the development of a premarital curriculum to foster healthy relational connections and improve later marital satisfaction must be rooted within the sociocultural, ecological context in which they live. The proposed premarital curriculum uses this sociocultural contextual history as a foundation upon which to build a framework that thoroughly and systematically identifies essential focus areas. Historically, premarital education objectively examined the impact of values, beliefs, and family history on relational functioning. However, there is a dearth of literature that addresses how cultural histories, such as experiences of racism, oppression, and inequality, affect coupling and overall relational behaviors. As highlighted throughout previous sections in this chapter, the impact of these systematic and institutional abuses of power are inextricably linked to the evolution of the African in America. As such, it is imperative that premarital education and counseling designed for African American couples not only remediate potential deficits and challenges but also fortify inherent relational strengths and adaptations developed in response to these adverse social conditions.²²³

Continuing to research this topic further will help the African American community understand why they tend to shy away from counseling regardless of the setting. This information is vital because pinpointing the root cause and sharing it will open the community up to understanding and then begin leading the community down a path of acceptance to a much-needed model of help in all areas of life.

In conclusion, based on the literature review and research, pre-marital counseling is effective and necessary. Implementing pre-marital counseling in the church will decrease divorce and enhance the likelihood of couples participating in counseling in the future. Pre-marital counseling empowers couples to prepare for their upcoming marriage and discover a

²²³ Yamonte Cooper and Erica Holmes, eds. *Black Couples Therapy: Clinical Theory and Practice*. (Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2023), 112-113 .

wealth of resources that can strengthen their relationship and future family. Research demonstrates the effectiveness of these resources, highlighting their lasting impact and utility within couples' lives.

This research has broken down barriers for a community hesitant about counseling. Exposing them to valuable resources empowers them to address weaknesses and foster growth. The research's success in strengthening marriages extends beyond. It paves the way for those who embrace pre-marital counseling to consider seeking help in other areas of life when needed.

APPENDIX A

Permission Request Template

September 2023



Dear [REDACTED],

As a graduate student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctorate of Ministry degree. The title of my research project is The Effects of Pre-Marital Counseling, and the purpose of my research is to develop and implement a pre-marital counseling program at Victory Tabernacle to help couples develop a solid foundation within their marriage as well as provide them tools to use within their marriage when obstacles arise.

I request your permission to conduct my research at Victory Tabernacle Church. I want to ask your permission to invite church members to participate in my research.

Participants will be asked to complete surveys and questionnaires during this research. Participants will also participate in counseling sessions with the researcher during this research. Participants will be presented with informed consent information before participating. Participating in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to [REDACTED]. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Brandi Rhymes
Doctoral Candidate



Presented by:
Brandi Rhymes

Pre-Marital Counseling (Better - 2- Gether)



Proposed ministry for Victory Tabernacle
Church

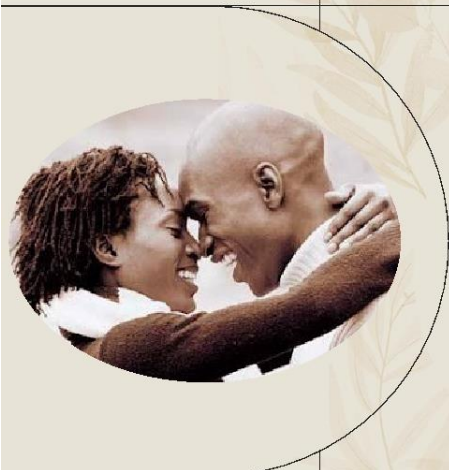


Better - 2- Gether

Objectives

- The listener will understand what pre-marital counseling is.
- The listener will understand the importance of having this ministry available within the local church.
- The listener will understand the purpose of this research
- The listener will understand how participants will be recruited.
- The listener will understand the components of Better- 2-Gether
- The listener will understand how each pre-marital counseling session will be implemented





Pre-Marital Counseling Defined



Pre-Marital Counseling

Premarital counseling helps couples understand and plan for marriages that will glorify God. It also helps couples set reasonable expectations for each other and for married life.

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for us. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not easily broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 rsv



NOT EASILY BROKEN!

www.factlighting.com



Better 2 Gether will help couples...



1.

It will help build a solid biblical foundation for marriage.



2.

Couples will learn to have a dialogue on complex topics such as finances, beliefs, children, communication, etc....



3.

Couples will have a safe place to address any concerns they may have.



4.

Couples will prepare for marriage and not just the wedding day.



Why is this program needed in ministry?

1

It allows couples to have serious conversations about marriage.

2

It allows couples to explore each other's faith and belief systems.

3

It allows couples to explore expectations, convictions and responsibilities

4

It allows couples to have an understanding of what a biblical marriage is.





The purpose of this research

1.

To implement an effective pre-marital counseling program at Victory Tabernacle.

3.

To help couples understand God's purpose for their marriage



2.

To help couples desiring to be married have a solid, biblical understanding of marriage.

4.

To ensure that each person and their relationship is rooted in God.

Recruitment Process

- The researcher will target engaged couples and married couples within the ministry.
- The researcher will provide a recruitment flyer to all parties
- Those interested in the research will attend an informational session with the researcher.

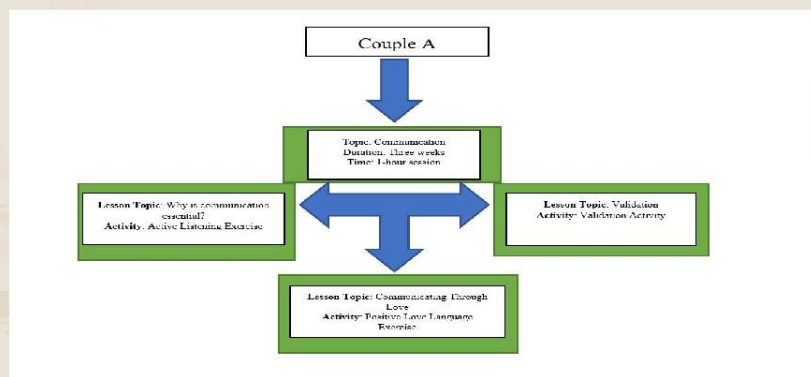


Research Begins

Couples who consent to be a part of the research will begin to receive different surveys and questionnaires from the researcher. Once the data is collected, the implementation of the counseling sessions will begin.

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Components of the Pre-Marital Program (Better-2-Gether)





Implementation of Counseling Sessions

Agenda	Duration
Biblical Content on Topic of Discussion	15 Minutes
Review Assignment: ∨ Discuss concerns ∨ Feedback ∨ Develop a plan for effectiveness	20 Minutes
Topical Activity	20 Minutes
Prayer	5 Minutes



APPENDIX B

Recruitment Flyer and QR Code

Research Participants Needed

"The Effects of Pre-Marital Counseling"

Purpose of the Research

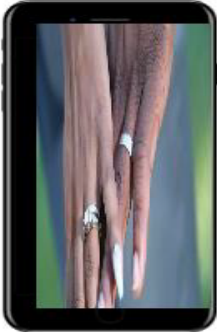

1. To develop a pre-marital counseling program at Victory Tabernacle Church
2. To provide tools of support for people seeking to marry.


Criteria to Participate



- * 18 years and older
- * Engaged or Married
- * Member of Victory Tabernacle Church

***Participants will interact with the researcher by completing surveys, questionnaires, attending counseling sessions, interacting in activities and discussions ***

If you are interested please scan the QR Code

 Brandi Rhymes a doctoral candidate in the Doctorate of Ministry Program, School of Divinity at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

 Contact Information


A consent document will be provided at the time of the initial meeting.

APPENDIX C

Participant Email

Dear (married couples name),

I hope this email finds that you are doing well. I appreciate your interest in participating in the research I will be conducting. Your time, participation, and effort will be greatly appreciated. The purpose of this research is to identify the effects of pre-marital counseling. Being a married couple, you are in an ideal position to give me first-hand information from your perspective. I invite you and your spouse to participate in my research, including surveys, questionnaires, interviews, counseling sessions, and activities. All responses will be kept confidential; no personal identifiers will be revealed during the analysis and findings. I am simply trying to collect information on whether you received pre-marital counseling and developing a pre-marital counseling program within my church ministry. You are vital to this research because this will allow me to implement the desired program and see the implementation outcome with fidelity. Your participation will be greatly valued. I prayerfully hope you will consider accepting my invitation to participate in this research that will significantly impact those looking to marry in the future and couples currently married.

If you are willing to participate in this research, please reply back to this email stating, you and your spouse will participate.

Peace and Blessings,

Brandi Rhymes

APPENDIX D

Consent

Title of the Project: Effects of Pre-Marital Counseling

Principal Investigator: Brandi Rhymes, Doctoral Candidate. Doctorate of Ministry, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study
--

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age, engaged or currently married, and a member of Victory Tabernacle Church. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to participate in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?
--

The study aims to develop and implement a pre-marital program at Victory Tabernacle Church.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Researcher will speak to the marriage ministry group to recruit participants for research.
2. The researcher will provide a recruitment letter to interested participants.
3. Interested parties will be asked to read the flyer and scan the QR code to provide contact information and availability.
4. Researcher will email interested parties
5. Interested parties will receive a date to meet with the researcher to discuss the research.
6. Couples will receive a digital questionnaire; these questions will help the researcher get to know the couples better.
7. Couples will be scheduled to review the questionnaire face-to-face or virtually.
8. Couples will receive the first activity.
9. Couples will receive a calendar with weekly appointment dates.
10. In The next scheduled session, the couples will follow the listed agenda:
 - a. Biblical Content Over Topic: 15 minutes
 - b. Review Assignment, Discussion, Develop Plan, Feedback: 20 minutes
 - c. Activity related to topic of discussion: 20 minutes
 - d. Prayer: 5 minutes
 - Each session will be one hour
 - Each topic will be for one week
 - There will be four major topics
 - Duration of the program will be 4 weeks

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should expect direct benefits from participating in this study, including growth in their marriage, tools to help build upon their foundation of marriage, and skills to help overcome obstacles in their marriage. This intervention program will benefit society by molding and shaping godly couples to represent the Kingdom of God by modeling godly behaviors regarding our actions toward their spouses.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher[s] will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored [on a password-locked computer. After seven years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer/etc. for seven years/until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. The researcher/the researcher and members of [his/her] doctoral committee/the study team/etc. will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher[s] at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher[s] conducting this study Brandi Rhymes. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact **Brandi Rhymes** at [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, [name], at [email].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher[s], **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher[s] will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to [audio-record/video-record/photograph] me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX E

Couple Questionnaire

1. What is your age?
2. In which city do you live?
3. What is your highest level of education?
4. How long have you been married?
5. How did the two of you meet?
6. Do you understand what a biblical marriage is?
7. How do you best communicate?
8. Do you pray and attend church regularly?
9. Is forgiveness difficult to extend?
10. Do you have separate or joint banking accounts?

APPENDIX F

Individual Questionnaire

1. What do you value most about your relationship?
2. What do you appreciate most about your spouse?
3. What is your love language?
4. Did you and your spouse receive pre-marital counseling?
5. If you answered yes, what was your experience? How many weeks were you in counseling?
6. Do you incorporate the tools provided in your marriage?
7. What are the benefits of pre-marital counseling if you received it?
8. What are your thoughts on receiving counseling on present issues in your marriage?
9. What areas would you like to receive support in?

APPENDIX G

Effective Communication Activity

Directions: Healthy communication is important in your marriage. Take some to listen to your partner in this activity.

Partner 1: Ask your partner the first question; as your partner responds, listen carefully, pay attention, and write down your partner's response. It is important to listen in this activity and not think about how you will respond or react to your partner's response. This activity will help you develop the skill of active listening and help you communicate better and understand your partner on a deeper level.

*Go through all the questions first and then switch to the next partner, following the same expectations that are listed above.

1. How do you communicate your wants and needs?

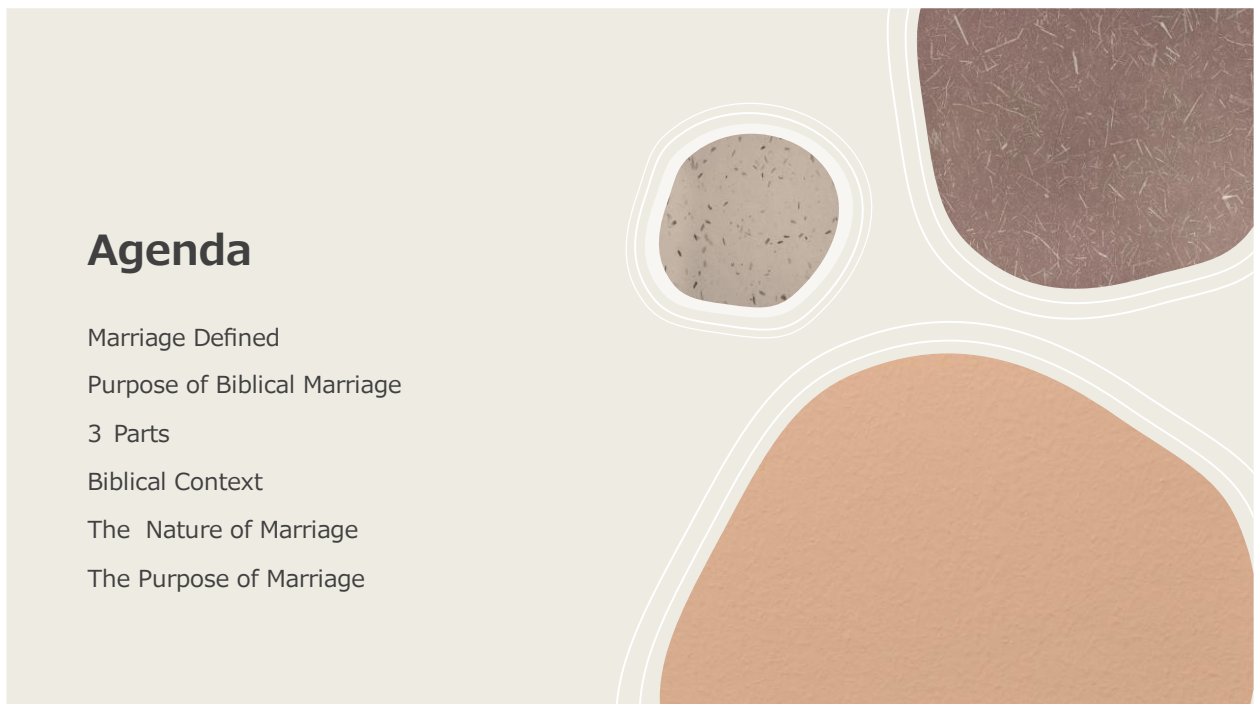
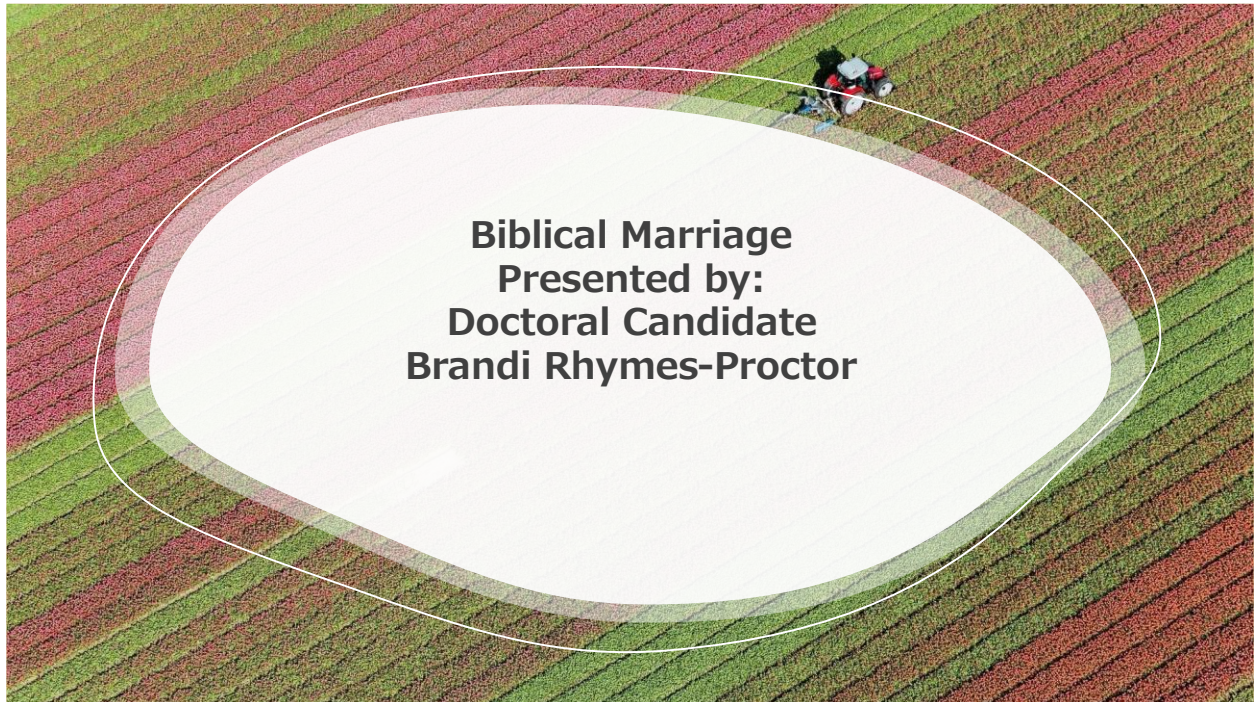
2. How do you respond to your spouse?

3. What communication habits would you like to change?

4. Tell me about your day.

APPENDIX H

Biblical Marriage Presentation



3 Parts

- Decide to marry - this includes: love, comfort, honor, and protection
- Make vows of marital commitment
 - Promises of love
 - Care and Fidelity

Vows sealed by giving and receiving rings

- Rings pledge honor to each other

Biblical Context

- Genesis 2:24
- Matthew 19:6
- 1 Corinthians 11:10 -11

The Nature of Marriage

Marriage is an Institution of God's Creation Order

- Genesis 1:27
- Genesis 2:18
- Matthew 19:4 -5

Purpose of Marriage

- Commission: Reproduce after God's image. (Gen. 1:26 and 2 Corinthians 3:18)
 - *God's intention for marriage is for the Savior's glorification, not for self institution of marriage. Your marriage should paint a picture of spiritual truth that points to Jesus you do is for God's glorification, you will have great gratification.* - gratification. Don't allow secular values to seep i nto the sacred —this is your commissioning . If everything
- Crucifixion: Genesis 2:21 -22
- The Hebrew word used here for "deep sleep" means a supernatural sleep. It is translated in other passages as death. Adam "died" a supernatural death to give life to his bride just like Jesus died to give life to His Bride, the Church.
- God gave us marriage for our sanctification more than He did for our satisfaction. Sanctification means to be gradually conformed to the image of Christ. If we only love when our spouses are lovely, this does nothing for our sanctification. Therefore, let us love our spouses with long -suffering love.
- First Corinthians 15:45 says, "And so it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being.' The last Adam became a life giving spirit."
- ** In a marriage ceremony, the moment we say, "I do," we also say, "I die." In marriage, we are to die to self (put away the old self) to give life to another. If we choose to live selfishly, the marriage dies, but if we choose to live sacrificially, marriage thrives. the

APPENDIX I

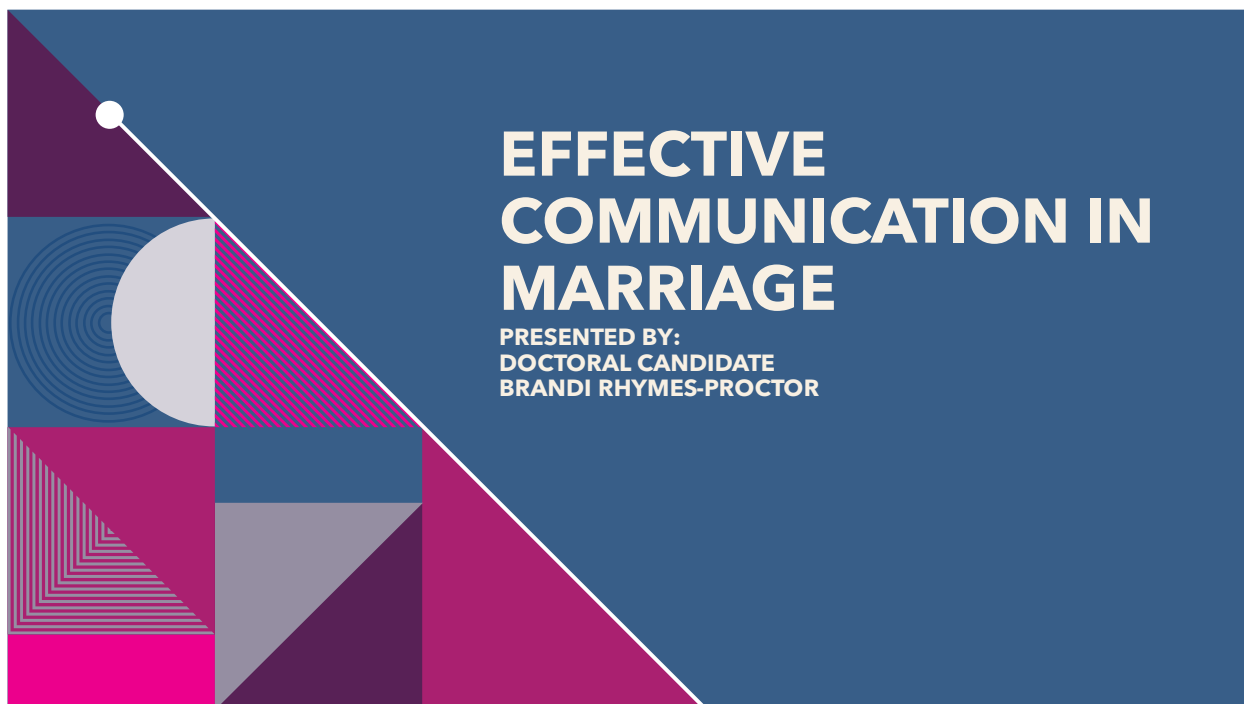
What Brought You Together?

Write down what brought you both together in the first place. Many couples tend to forget this. It's important to remember that everyone changes so expecting things to always be the same is unrealistic. Therefore, going back to what connected you and your partner in the first place can be so helpful.

- Answer a few questions with your fiance'/spouse:
 1. Interests that we both have in common are:
 2. Our future plans include:
 3. Our hopes and dreams for the future include:
 4. Our fears for marriage are:
 5. That one thing that brings us back together is:

APPENDIX J

Effective Communication





EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Effective communication is the process of exchanging information, thoughts, ideas, or feelings in a way that is clear, concise, and easily understood by the intended audience. It involves not only the transmission of a message but also ensuring that the message is accurately received and interpreted by the receiver.

4

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

- As Christians, we see communication differently. Communication helps us treat our spouses better because through it, we can forgive, listen, and put God at the very heart of our marriages and glorify Him.

5

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

- Is important to intimate relationships.
- It allows individuals to share their thoughts and feelings.
- Effective communication is needed to discuss inevitable problems that arise.
- Poor communication can lead to increased conflict. (Lee Williams, 2022)

6

COMMUNICATION ESSENTIALS

- Treating each other better: Matthew 7:12 and 1 Peter 2:17
- Showing forgiveness: Ephesians 4:32 and 1 Corinthians 2:5
- Listening to each other is critical: James 1:19-20
- Keep God at the Center of your heart: 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Proverbs 3:5-6, and 1 John 2: 15-17

7

CENTERING GOD

- Better communication leads to God being at the center of your marriage.
- A God-centered marriage will be filled with selflessness, sacrifice, forgiveness, patience, joy, and perseverance. (Bailey and Bailey, 2020).
- Prayer is critical in marriage. Prayer keeps you connected to God and brings you closer to Him.
- When we communicate effectively it helps us to treat our spouses better and in this, we can forgive more, listen more and remain confident that God is at the Center of our marriages.

9

APPENDIX K

Forgiveness Activity

Think of an act or an offense you have committed towards your spouse. It could be as simple as forgetting to take the trash out or forgetting an important date or more serious such as an ongoing issue in your relationship that you need forgiveness for because you are working hard to change the behavior. Hand-write an apology letter asking for forgiveness. Handwrite the letter and express your emotions and disappointment. Writing this letter not using technology should touch your spouses heart and it will show the willingness of the person trying to put forth change and it should also show that your spouse is truly sorry for their actions.

APPENDIX L

Forgiveness Session Activity

Forgiveness and Acceptance Worksheet

Forgiveness is the decision to release the negative emotions connected to a past event that has hurt us.

It is an emotional tool that helps us commit to moving forward and feeling better.

We may choose to forget the transgression or end our relationship with the wrongdoer, or we may not. Either way, forgiveness is a decision that allows us to let go of the resentment, bitterness, and anger that hold us back from personal growth and well-being.

This *Forgiveness and Acceptance Worksheet* can help you understand your negative feelings about a past transgression and make the conscious decision to forgive.

What are you struggling to let go of?

Describe the thoughts or past actions associated with your negative emotions. What was said or done, specifically?

Take ownership of the consequences.

Accept that the painful outcomes are now yours to deal with. Any suffering and pain that you feel now lies in your hands.

Who is responsible?

Decide where the accountability lies for the past event. You may feel that someone else is at fault, that you played a role, or that nobody at all is accountable.

How will you address the consequences?

What do you choose to do about the outcomes you described above? How might you correct or amend your current situation? If that's not possible, how might you make it better?

Commit to forgiving.

Make a conscious decision to forgive whomever you feel is responsible. If someone else is responsible for your hurt, try seeing things from their perspective. This step is about taking ownership of your decision to harbor a grudge, or let go of the hurt and move forward.

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IRB APPROVAL LETTER

November 28, 2023

Brandi Rhymes

Mario Garcia

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY23-24-881 The Effects of Pre-Marital Counseling

Dear Brandi Rhymes and 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 that your study does not meet the definition of human subjects research. This means you may begin your project with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your project is not considered human subjects research because it will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not "designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" according to 45 CFR 46. 102(l).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current application. Any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

For a PDF of your IRB letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study Details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates, you are not required to do so. If you choose to use our documents, please replace the word research with the word project throughout both documents.

If you have any questions about this determination or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your application's status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu. Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

