

LIBERTY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

CHRISTIAN PREMARITAL TRAINING IN THE LOCAL CHURCH SETTING: A
STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SYMBIS MODEL IN REDUCING
DIVORCE AND PRODUCING STABLE AND SATISFYING MARITAL
RELATIONSHIPS

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Doctor of Ministry

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ABSTRACT

CHRISTIAN PREMARITAL TRAINING IN THE LOCAL CHURCH SETTING: A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SYMBIS MODEL IN REDUCING DIVORCE AND PRODUCING STABLE AND SATISFYING MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Liberty Theological Seminary, 2007

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The state of marriage in the United States of America and inside the four walls of the local church is alarming. Marriages are going by the wayside at record numbers which has led to family breakdown, rise in child delinquency, increased numbers of cohabiting couples and confusion in the church. It is upon this backdrop that the SYMBIS premarital program at Hyland Heights Baptist Church was birthed. The fundamental goals of the program were to virtually eliminate divorce in the church body and to significantly reduce the amount of marital counseling brought by troubled couples. In order to accomplish these goals the premarital program had to be unique, effective and scientifically based. This study presents the SYMBIS program as designed and implemented at Hyland Heights along with solid research statistics to back it up.

Abstract length: 132 words.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Bonnie D. Marks, who is no longer with us. Her belief in me and support of my educational pursuits is largely responsible for this dream coming true. Without her belief in me and gentle persuasion I would not be where I am today.

To my wife, Kimberly K. Marks, who patiently supported me in this project by allowing me to study as needed and afforded me with hours of quiet. I am also grateful to her for her critique and honest feedback along the way.

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

The state of marriage in America today is almost unbelievable. Current research indicates that 40-50% of all first time marriages will end in divorce.¹ In other words about half of all couples getting married in a given year will also experience the pain, loss and grief of divorce sometime in the not-so-distant future. Not only will half of these couples experience divorce but one-fifth of them will divorce within the first five years.² As this pattern continues to unfold Americans are finding themselves dealing with long-term personal and social costs. The effects of divorce touch all aspects of a person's life. Everything gets divided in a divorce.

As this epidemic unfolds in the lives of couples it also unfolds in the lives of children. Children find themselves forced to become "adults" way before their time. They must become the adults when the adults refuse to be. They are also forced to live two lives, one that pleases mom and the other that pleases dad. As time progresses many divorced parents seek to remarry. As they move toward remarriage the children are forced once again to make a choice. Who do they accept and who do they reject? For children of divorced parents this cycle continues into adulthood and many times into their own marriages. The scars of divorce are not simply erased, they remain. Researcher

¹ Scott M. Stanley, What Really is the Divorce Rate? Article taken from the www.PREPInc.com website (2003); Accessed on 9 May 2006.

² Gail S. Risch, Lisa A. Riley & Michael G. Lawler, "Problematic Issues in the Early Years of Marriage" Journal of Psychology & Theology. (2003) Vol. 31, No.3. 253.

Elizabeth Marquardt in her new book entitled, Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce, claims loudly in her research that there is no such thing as an amicable divorce.¹ According to Marquardt divorce has longer lasting and more serious outcomes than we are aware of or initially thought.

The negative consequences of divorce don't stop there. The truth is that divorce has a negative impact on a person's physical well-being also. Research has shown us that, "adults and children are at an increased risk for mental and physical problems due to marital distress."² Research has also documented that work productivity goes down for individuals going through a divorce, especially men.³ As these factors compound the social structure of America begins to erode. The social effects are mind-boggling as this can be seen as one generation of divorcee's struggles to raise their children and produce a different outcome. On the other hand this country's financial structure gets burdened beyond its ability to perform. The fall out of marriage has led to children and mothers becoming wards of the government. All their basic necessities are shouldered predominantly by a failing U.S. economy. This predominantly because fathers are chronically late with child and spousal support, if it is even collected at all. These facts alone have caused the U.S. government to take a look at marriage outcomes and prevention, prevention that would lead to less expense out of a failing economy's pocket. Professor Robert F Stahmann of Brigham University explained it this way. He said, "The political hope is that this would lead to decrease in the amount of government funds

¹ Elizabeth Marquardt, Between Two Worlds; The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005), 16.

² Scott M. Stanley & Howard J. Markman, "Acting on What We Know the Hope of Prevention" Web article taking from www.Prepare.com; Internet; Accessed 27 March 2006.

³ Ibid.

currently used for treating individuals and families and coping with the social consequences of marital breakdown.”⁴ Hence, the government over the last several years has begun Marriage Initiative projects that fund agencies and faith-based groups which aim to provide services designed to prepare couples to get married, keep struggling marriages afloat and help teach skills and provide resources.

It is at this point in the cycle of devastation that the question becomes one of how to turn back this tide in America. The answer appears to be in the saying, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” The answer to unhappy marriages and ultimately divorce is solid premarital training aimed at teaching good skills in communication and conflict resolution as well as emphasizing the permanence of marriage. It involves much more than an exchange of information; it involves skills-based training that enables couples to know how to and be able to work through difficulties that come with married life. Research shows that the three most helpful topics are communication, commitment and conflict resolution.⁵

It is at this point that premarital training becomes vitally important. If marriages are healthy then children are healthy. If families are healthy then society becomes healthy. If society becomes healthy then America becomes healthy. It all hinges on the health and well-being of the couples who are getting married in America. If premarital couples can be taught and trained on how to “do” marriage well then this tide of devastation can and will be turned back.

⁴ Robert F. Stahmann, “Premarital Counseling: A Focus for Family Therapy” Journal of Family Therapy. (2000, Vol. 28, No.1): 105.

⁵ Scott M. Stanley, “Making a Case for Premarital Education” Family Relations. (July 2001) Vol. 50 Issue 3:1

All of this leads back to the front door of the local churches in this land. Since marriages are folding and families are quickly following behind, it now becomes the job of the group that is ultimately responsible for marriage. It is the responsibility of the church – not the government – to provide the basics and training necessary for healthy marriages and families. According to statistics about 75% of all marriages are performed by clergy in a local church setting.⁶ Yet we are still faced with roughly a 50% divorce rate that is about the same inside the church as it is outside.⁷ It is now up to clergy in local churches to take seriously the estate of marriage and to develop adequate programs to do effective premarital training.

It is upon this basis that the SYMBIS premarital training program was put into place. In August of 2002 SYMBIS came into being at Hyland Heights Baptist Church as a means of preparing couples to build strong marriages and to curb the tide of divorce inside the church. SYMBIS was also accompanied by a church policy which required all couples getting married by one of the pastors to complete the SYMBIS program before the wedding would be performed. Over the last four years ninety couples have completed the SYMBIS program. It now becomes the focus and goal of this project to assess the effectiveness of the SYMBIS program at Hyland Heights by surveying those ninety couples to see if they are still married and how their marriages are doing.

⁶ Michael J. McManus, “Veil of Tears: Churches are a Part of the Divorce Problem and Solution” *Pastoral Counseling*, (Winter 1994): 53-54.

⁷ George Barna Jr. “Born Again Christians Just as Likely to Divorce as are Non-Christians” 8 September 2004; available from www.barna.org/flexpage; Internet; Accessed 9 September 2006.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this project is to evaluate the effectiveness of the SYMBIS premarital program at equipping couples for marital satisfaction and success. The means of evaluation will be through the use of a survey composed of thirty questions covering the major components of the SYMBIS program as well as the couple relationship. The components of the SYMBIS program are the materials, the format, the leader and the premarital inventory. As the survey results are collected and examined in each of these areas the effectiveness of the SYMBIS program will be determined.

There are also some additional goals of this project. One of those goals is to answer the question of whether or not the SYMBIS program is worthy of replication in other churches across the United States. Does SYMBIS show itself to be worthy of the time and effort needed to train pastors and lay workers on how to implement this program at their church?

A second additional goal of this project is to determine if conjoint or group counseling was more effective for the couples and what feedback they had as to the different formats used. Did they learn more through group dynamics or through conjoint interaction? Research indicates that there is controversy over which method is more helpful.⁸ Is conjoint most beneficial or is group? One of the unique characteristics of SYMBIS is that it has incorporated both of these formats – group and conjoint.

A final additional goal of this project is to see if SYMBIS has reached its primary intended goal. That goal was to develop a program that would virtually eliminate divorce in first time marriages at Hyland Heights which in turn would stop the tide of divorce

⁸ Christine.R. McGeorge & Thomas S. Carlson, “Premarital Education: An Assessment of Program Efficacy” Contemporary Family Therapy (2006) Vol. 28, No.1:166.

from ravaging more couples and families in the church body, begin to build momentum with happy couples who were excited about their marriages and to see marriages grow and produce healthy children. After collecting and analyzing these results it should be obvious as to whether or not the program has reached its intended goal. Hopefully, SYMBIS will prove to be worthy and therefore be poised to be replicated in other churches. Clear analysis of the data collected from the questionnaires will either support or detract from its credibility.

Statement of Limitations

The purpose of this project has been to develop and implement a premarital program that would significantly reduce the number of couples getting divorced at our church. Along with this purpose are some limitations.

The first limitation deals with the length of time involved. Research indicates that one-fifth of couples getting married for the first time will end up divorced within the first five years and one-third more within ten years.⁹ With this fact in mind the evaluation period for the SYMBIS program ranges from two years for some couples to a maximum of four years. Many of the couples have been married on average for two to three years. Although time is somewhat of a limitation it does provide at least an initial basis for the effectiveness of the SYMBIS program. It should also be noted that staying married is not the only goal for the SYMBIS program.

A second limitation is the type of population being trained in the SYMBIS program. Except for one or two couples that have completed the program, all other

⁹ Gail Risch, Lisa Riley & David Lawler. "Problematic Issues in the Early Years of Marriage: Content for Premarital" Journal of Psychology & Theology (Fall 2003) Vol. 31 Issue 3: 253.

couples were European American middle class couples. The effectiveness of the SYMBIS program with this population does not automatically mean that the same results would be obtained with groups of another socioeconomic or cultural group.

A third limitation is that this project is not designed to end the debate over premarital training and its impact on relational longevity. Research indicates that there are differing opinions and positions about the link between premarital training and the divorce rate.¹⁰ This project is not designed to answer the problem but rather to collect data and demonstrate marital satisfaction and short-term relationship stability. If these dynamics report positively then the worth of the program is demonstrated.

A fourth limitation is in relation to the SYMBIS course materials themselves. This project is not designed to study the SYMBIS materials to determine if they are the best materials for premarital training. Studies have already been completed on the SYMBIS materials proving their accuracy and reliability.¹¹

The last limitation is that no control group was used with the SYMBIS program. Therefore, the data gathered will be compared to current statistics and findings of other premarital programs.

Theoretical Basis

The SYMBIS premarital program has direct relation to theology, psychology, sociology, government policy and finances.

¹⁰ George Schumm & Robert Silliman, "Changes in Premarital Counseling as related to Older Cohorts of Married Couples" Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy (1997, Vol. 23): 98-102.

¹¹ Les Parrott, "The SYMBIS Approach to Marriage Education" Journal of Psychology and Theology (Fall 2003, Vol.31. No. 3): 208.

The relation to theology is probably the most foundational one. Because God (the God-head) is in relationship with itself; it can be directly inferred that relationships of harmony, respect and selfless love are of importance to Him. Theology in reference to marriage goes all the way back to the time of Genesis. A time when God saw that man was alone by himself and that aloneness was not good because it disabled him from giving and receiving in a marital context..¹² In light of Adam's aloneness God moved to make a help meet for him that would enable him to learn how to give and receive. God then joined them, blessed them and commanded them to fill the earth. God not only began marriage as an institution but holds it in high favor.

If the Genesis account is not enough to prove a theological tie to healthy marriages then maybe the concept and teaching of marriage as taught in Ephesians would prove the tie. In Ephesians chapter five, marriage is held up as the model of Christ's love for the church. His love for the church is paralleled with the love a man should have for his wife. In fact, chapter five of Ephesians goes on to describe the nature of that relationship and the awesome role of the husband to lead, love and provide an example to his wife. If God cares that much about how marriage is to look and function then it can be assumed that premarital training is close the heart of God as well.

A second related field to this topic is psychology. The whole of psychology revolves around the behavior of mankind. When it comes to marriage there is much about behavior involved. Marriage is strengthened through effective premarital training which teaches couples how to "behave" in a way that fortifies and preserves their relationships. Researchers talk about the five Cs of effective premarital training. These

¹² Dan Allandar, Intimate Allies (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2003), 147.

are communication, conflict resolution, teaching on commitment, children and church.¹³ Most, if not all of these Cs, touch on the area of psychology.

Psychology also deals with the well-being of the individual in any relationship. Individual well-being is enhanced in marriages that are satisfactory to those involved in them. Research indicates that the well-being of a man on the job is directly related to his marital condition. Research has also gone on to prove that men who have marriages that are failing also suffer from decreased work productivity.¹⁴ Marriages that are suffering not only hurt the adults and have negative impacts on their psychological well-being but children as well suffer from marriages that are conflict laden. Recent research has shown that divorce has long-term detrimental consequences for children¹⁵ It has been shown that the psychological well-being of children is directly tied to the stability of the parental relationship.

A third field this topic touches is sociology. Sociology has to do with how people act in a given social environment. Failed marriages have a detrimental impact on the social structure of the society they exist in. The Bible says that “God hates divorce” in the Old Testament book of Malachi. When one examines the sociological impact of divorce it becomes easy to understand why God would make such a statement. Individuals who go through a failing marriage or a divorce find themselves alienated from the mainstream of society. Similarly, children feel the same way about their parent’s divorce. This becomes extremely clear as one examines the social context of most churches today.

¹³ Lee Williams, Lisa Riley, Gail Risch & David T. Van Dyke, “An Empirical Approach to Designing Marriage Preparation Programs” The American Journal of Family Therapy (1999) Vol. 27: 277.

¹⁴ Linda J. Waite & Maggie Gallagher, The Case for Marriage (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 5.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Marquardt, Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce. (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005), 21.

Divorced persons and their children begin to be viewed in negative ways. The social structure and mindset of most of the conservative churches is one of omission when it comes to dealing with divorced persons. Few churches are willing to minister to divorced persons much less embrace them and help to integrate them into the mainstream of the church body.

One final related field to this topic of premarital training is that of governmental programs and the enormous amount of finances involved. For a long time the United States government has chosen to take a neutral position on marriages and families as far as the moral aspects are considered. Marriages have not been the “business” of the government but rather the fallout of marriage has been the government’s business. In the last few years this trend has changed. Government has become keenly interested in the well-being of marriages and families because the cost of marital failure has sky rocketed. The cost to the United States government of divorce, single parenting and the care of fatherless children has become astronomical. Simply put, the government of this land has taken interest in marriage and marriage wellness programs as a means of saving some dollars, not because they care about marriage as an institution.¹⁶ A familiar endeavor that models this “concern” is the marriage Initiative by President George Bush Jr. This initiative made millions of dollars available to non-profit organizations focusing on marriage and family wellness. Research demonstrates that the government spends one cent per child to promote healthy marriage for every five dollars it spends on subsidizing

¹⁶ Robert E. Rector, “TANF Testimonies Hearing” Retrieved from the Smart Marriages website. www.smartmarriage.com; 02/05; Internet; Accessed 18 April 2006.

single parenthood.¹⁷ The American government can no longer afford the cost that divorce and single parenting is producing. Some figures that make it clear how serious a problem this has become can be seen in the following. Each year the government spends \$3.3 billion on child support collection, \$150 billion on welfare programs and benefits to single parents with children, \$6.2 billion on job training and \$1.9 billion on pregnancy prevention and contraceptive promotion.¹⁸ Needless to say this can not continue at the rate it is going. Marital failure is costing this country billions a year. Premarital training that promotes marital satisfaction and longevity could have an incredible impact on the United States economy.

Statement of Methodology

The SYMBIS program at Hyland Heights was birthed to combat the occurrence of divorce in the church body and community, the lack of uniform training based on Christian principle and research, to raise the level of marital importance in the church and community and to produce healthy, satisfying marital relationships that would in turn produce a solid foundation for their future families. With this goal in mind, this researcher set out to draw in the best components of premarital testing, educating and skills-based training that was available at the time. The goal became to standardize the training throughout the church as well as “raise the bar” for couples getting married. With this in mind the SYMBIS training materials were chosen based on their usefulness and acceptance. The book and workbooks by Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott were the materials

¹⁷ Robert, E.Rector, Melissa G.Pardue & Lauren R. Noyes, “Marriage Plus Sabotaging the President’s Efforts to Promote Healthy Marriage” (2003), Internet; www.Smartmarriages.com; Accessed 15 April 2006.

¹⁸ Ibid.

chosen. Their book entitled Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts covered the basics of what premarital research has shown is necessary. After choosing these materials the focus became to find a tested and reliable premarital inventory, one based on solid research and adequate time of use. The PREPARE inventory was chosen because it demonstrated strong testing and validity. This researcher then moved to become trained in the use of the PREPARE instrument.

The SYMBIS program has been in use for four years now at Hyland Heights Baptist Church. In that time period ninety couples have taken the SYMBIS program. These ninety couples have now become the basis from which self-report information will be drawn. Information about the SYMBIS program will be collected through the use of a questionnaire. The questionnaire is composed of thirty questions. Each couple will have the questionnaire sent to them via mail unless otherwise requested. Once the couple has completed the questionnaire they will send it back in the return envelope.

The questionnaire that was designed covered the five main areas of the SYMBIS program. The first area had questions related to the class format. Since there is some discussion and variance of opinion over the value of group verses conjoint premarital training, this section of the questionnaire will examine those areas.¹⁹ There were questions about conjoint experience as well as group experience in this section. It should be noted at this point that SYMBIS was designed to incorporate both conjoint and group training. This was done because this researcher thought that the participants would benefit best from the use of both formats.

¹⁹ Christine R. Mc George & Thomas S. Carlson, "Premarital Education: An Assessment of Program Efficacy" Contemporary Family Therapy (2006) Vol. 28, No. 1:183.

The second area of the questionnaire was designed to ask questions about the materials used for training. The materials being inquired about are the Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts book and accompanying workbooks for men and ladies. Questions in this area focus on the usefulness, thoroughness and overall help they were to the couples. There is also a question comparing the class teaching, book and workbooks to determine which of these ranked most helpful to the couples. It is the position of this researcher that the workbook exercises will probably prove most helpful to the couples because of their ability to “uncover” issues and topics that otherwise may have been overlooked.

The third area of the questionnaire focused on the leader of the class. The SYMBIS class has been taught by three different instructors over the four years. The purpose of this section was to determine the effectiveness of the leaders in their role both conjoint and group. Research raises the question of what person or persons are most effective in premarital training.²⁰ The options ranged from clergy to lay persons to trained counselors. This section of the questionnaire shed some light on which one of those persons was best received. Interestingly enough SYMBIS has been taught by a clergy member, a trained counselor and a lay worker.

The fourth area of the questionnaire focused on the PREPARE premarital inventory. The reason for asking questions about PREPARE was to determine if it was user-friendly as well as comprehensive. It is a well documented inventory but it is not the only one being used in the world of premarital today. There are a handful of other

²⁰ Scott M. Stanley & Howard J. Markman, “Community-Based Premarital Prevention: Clergy and Lay Leaders on the Front Lines” Family Relations (January, 2001) Vol. 50 Issue 1: 67.

inventories that could be used if this one proves in need of replacing. This section of the questionnaire will give the researcher a good indication to the future use of PREPARE.

The last area of the questionnaire dealt specifically with the couple's relationship. Items being checked included whether or not the couple married, how long they have been married, have they divorced and how they would rate their marital satisfaction. There were also questions in this section about their ability to work through conflict, communicate effectively, make use of what they were taught in SYMBIS and whether or not they engage in marital strengthening opportunities like marriage seminars, weekend getaways, or simply referring back to the SYMBIS materials.

Once the questionnaire results were collected the process of analyzing the results began. Special attention was placed on the following topics of question. One, how many of the ninety couples are still married and how does that success rate compare to the divorce rate at Hyland Heights for the four years prior to the SYMBIS program and to the current U.S. rate of divorce? Two, how did the couples who are still married rate their marital satisfaction? Three, was conjoint or group training most helpful? Four, is the SYMBIS program worthy of being reproduced in other churches? Five, what changes or additions should be made to SYMBIS to make it more effective? Six, what person is best poised to lead premarital training in the local church, clergy, lay or trained counselor? Seven, what percentage of couples chose to not marry as a result of taking the SYMBIS program?

Content of Other Chapters

Chapter two

The second chapter will give an overview of premarital training programs. It will begin with an explanation behind the rationale for premarital programs. What is the basis for such programs and why do they exist? Current research will be brought in to substantiate the need for such programs and their value to society as well as marriage. Following an overview of premarital programs will be an examination of their effectiveness. What is known about these types of programs and their ability to curb the divorce rate and produce healthy, stable marital relationships? This chapter will also contain an examination of the literature surrounding premarital effectiveness.

Following the discussion of the effectiveness of premarital training programs there will be a section on the dynamics of effective premarital training. Research spells out rather clearly what the dynamics of effective premarital training are. These dynamics will be listed and explained. Immediately following this section will be a word on the benefits of effective premarital training.

Also in the second chapter there will be a section dealing with the discussion about conjoint and group training. Researchers tend to be at opposite poles about the value of each of these formats. In this section of the second chapter the benefits of both conjoint and group will be explored as well as some potential drawbacks to each format.

The second chapter will conclude with a quick overview of the present role of churches in premarital training. According to current research what are the churches doing in the area of premarital training? This section will conclude with a brief look at the current divorce rate of churches by denomination.

Chapter Three

This chapter will focus on the dynamics of the SYMBIS program as it was designed for Hyland Heights Baptist Church. Special attention will be given to the components of the program. The materials, premarital inventory, format and even the days the class was held will be explained.

Chapter three will also demonstrate the unique aspects of SYMBIS. What is it about SYMBIS that sets it apart from other programs running in other churches? There will be a brief word on the mentoring program that was run in conjunction with SYMBIS.

The third chapter will conclude with an explanation of how the program was implemented as well as a description of the premarital policy employed. The section on implementation will include the tools that were used to make the program known as well as any means of advertising used.

Chapter Four

The fourth chapter will deal with procedure and research design. This chapter will open with an explanation of the project and how it was designed. Special attention will be given to the process of gathering of information about each couple, the questionnaire design and goals, the use of a survey as well as the Access software usage. Following this will be an examination of the method of evaluation along with an overview of the process of evaluation. This chapter will conclude with final thoughts about collecting and recording the data.

Chapter Five

The final chapter will focus on interpreting the results. Both the qualitative and quantitative aspects will be examined. This chapter will also look back to the original

problems outlined and seek the answer those problems based on the results of the study. It is at this point that conclusions will be drawn as to the effectiveness and usefulness of the SYMBIS program at Hyland Heights Baptist Church.

Chapter five will also include the following sections. First, there will be a section on the anticipated improvements and updates to SYMBIS. What changes will need to be made in light of the results of this study? Second, the anticipated role of churches in premarital training will be discussed with key thoughts and goals set forth. Third, there will be suggestions for further study. All of these items are of importance to the future success of the SYMBIS program. Each of these topics will be demonstrated and discussed.

Review of the Literature

The state of marriage in the United States is deplorable. It is also not far behind within the walls of the church. This sentiment is echoed in several ways by a myriad of authors. Popular authors continue to research and write to ascertain the best way to deal with the marriage crisis that America is experiencing. Author Catherine Latimer and Marriage Savers founder Michael J. McManus say that marriage is experiencing a three fold crisis. First, they claim that half of all new marriages end in divorce. Second, they claim that marriage rates have plunged 40.4% while cohabitation has soared eleven fold. And third, they claim that these two factors have reduced the marriage rates in the United States.²¹

²¹ Catherine Latimer & Michael J. McManus, "How to Give Marriage Insurance to Premarital Couples" 2003, Article found on www.MarriageSavers.com; Internet: Accessed 13 of April 2006.

Taking a look at the current literature indicates the need for programs that can demonstrate marital stability and longevity in the local church setting. Research demonstrates that approximately 75% of first time marriages occur in religious organizations.²² Yet only half of the religious organizations provide any form of premarital training with documented outcomes. Dr. Everett Worthington Jr. in his book on premarital counseling states the following. “Probably the fairest, up-to-date evaluation of the effectiveness of premarital counseling programs is that they are thought to be effective to the extent that they (1) have clear goals, (2) last at least six to twelve weeks, (3) focus on communication and problem solving about issues that the couple considers relevant, and (4) include information, interaction between partners (especially with feedback by video or other people), and discussion. Purely information-oriented approaches and time-constrained conjoint sessions might be effective; but there is no research to support that method.”²³

Marriage preparation programs may exist in the local church but many of them are no more than information dispensing sessions devoid of skills-based training. Mike McManus, in his article entitled *Veil of Tears*, claims that three-fifths of divorces are related to incompatibility.²⁴ Incompatibility comes down to poor communication or conflict resolution skills, skills that should be the by-product of effective premarital training programs in the local church. In other words, the church is not doing all it can to

²² Scott M. Stanley & Howard J. Markman, “Community Based Premarital Prevention” Family Relations. (January 2001) Vol. 50 Issue 1: 67.

²³ Everett Worthington Jr., Premarital Christian Counseling (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 2.

²⁴ Michael J. McManus, “Veil of Tears: Churches are a Part of the Divorce Problem and Solution” Pastoral Counseling (Winter 1994):52.

equip couples with the skills and information necessary to produce healthy, stable and satisfying marriages.

Premarital work can be traced all the way back to the pioneer of Christian premarital training H. Norman Wright. In his book on premarital training Wright sought to educate and equip counselors and pastors to do the work of premarital effectively. For many years his premarital book has been the standard for premarital training in Christian circles. As time and research have progressed other names have come to the front. Names like John Gottman who has studied marital relationships extensively. Because of Gottman's study and time the world of premarital enrichment and prevention has had some solid research to "sink its teeth into." Others in the field have begun to emerge. Men like Howard Markman and Scott Stanley are both respectable conservative researchers who have greatly enhanced our knowledge and passion for marital preparation. In fact, Dr. Scott Stanley is the author of the PREP (Prevention in Relationship Enhancement Program). This program is extensively documented and thoroughly tested.

Other authors and counselors have added to this field. Persons like Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott who are the authors of the Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts materials. These materials aim directly at premarital preparation. Another name in the field is Michael J. McManus who is the founder of Marriage Savers, a group dedicated to saving failing marriages. McManus also trains couples to work as mentors with newlyweds. He states that he believes that Protestant churches have only begun to emulate the premarital prevention work that the Catholic Church has been doing for years.²⁵

²⁵ Ibid.

Professors and researchers have also joined the effort by writing on a plethora of topics related to premarital training. Benjamin Silliman, assistant professor at Louisiana Tech University, writes about topics of interest for couples taking premarital training. David Blankenhorn, president of the Institute for American Values, writes on the social impact that failing marriages have had on the lives of children. Christine George, assistant professor at North Dakota State University, writes on the effectiveness of premarital education. She has also written specifically on conjoint versus group premarital training. Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher have written, The Case for Marriage, a work which has effectively laid out the importance of marriage to societal stability. They have also provided in that work extensive statistical information on related topics to marital success.

A report by the Institute for American Values outlines twenty-six conclusions from the social sciences as to why marriage matters. These family scholars point out that family, economics, physical health, mental health and emotional well-being are all tied to the institution of marriage. They go on to say that strengthening marriage and specifically linking research to those who are doing marital work is a primary future goal.²⁶

There are two final works to be mentioned in this literature review. One is by Dr. Daniel Trathen. Dr. Trathen wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on an examination of two premarital programs in an evangelical church setting. The focus of this study was to compare an information-based program to a skills-based program. His findings and research will be helpful in this research endeavor. The second is a D. Min. thesis done by Dr. Michael Larry Bird. His thesis was entitled “Christian Premarital Counseling and the

²⁶ W. Bradford Wilcox, William Doherty & Linda Waite, “Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-six conclusions from the social sciences” Institute for American Values (2005): 33.

efficacy of group training verses conjoint utilizing the Couple Communication Program: a project and study employing a premarital skills-based program and measuring its effects upon relationship satisfaction, confidence and adjustment with an Evangelical population.” This study will help to guide the thinking of this researcher as it related to the debate over conjoint verses group premarital formats as well as give some insight to the effectiveness of a skills-based program with an Evangelical population.

CHAPTER TWO OVERVIEW OF PREMARITAL TRAINING PROGRAMS

Marriage health and success is of vital importance to this nation and its subsequent success. According to leading marriage experts, “It is central to the nurture and rearing of children. It is the ‘social glue’ that reliably attaches children to fathers. It contributes to the physical, emotional and economic health of men, women and children, and thus the nation as a whole. It is also one of the most highly prized of all human relationships and a central life goal of most Americans.”¹ With this thought being stated premarital preparation comes quickly to mind. Marital preparation or premarital training is the means to ensuring more stable, healthy and longer-lasting marital relationships. Dr. Scott Stanley, marital researcher and author, states, “A society cannot prevent divorce and marital distress in any absolute sense, but it is a worthy goal to attempt to reduce such negative outcomes at cultural and couples levels.”² That is the exact focus of premarital training. Divorce and distress will never be eliminated completely but that does not mean that they cannot be limited significantly. Premarital training, when based on current research and having clear goals and means of training, can be of significance in accomplishing a more stable culture and society in this land.

For many people marriage is both desirable and expected as a part of a fulfilled life. Research indicates that 97% of persons in the United States will marry at some point

¹ David Popenoe & B.D. Whitehead, “The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriages in America” National Marriage Project, Rutgers University (2001): 54.

² Scott M. Stanley, “Making a Case for Premarital Education” Family Relations. (July 2001) Vol. 50 Issue 3: 272.

in their lives.”³ Even as some of those marriages fail, approximately 80% of those who experience divorce will remarry at some point in the near future. Marriage is and will continue to be something that Americans see as an integral part of their lives and future happiness. Because of the importance of marriage in our society and the rate of remarriage for those that experience divorce, premarital training becomes of greater importance. It is extremely necessary for this nation to do all it can to prepare couples for marital permanence and happiness.

Interestingly enough premarital training has not always been in existence in our nation. It began back in the early 1950s when religious organizations, especially the Catholic Church, began to offer premarital or relationship education programs. In the mid-1950s other Western countries and organizations began to offer premarital training programs. As time progressed more and more organizations began to offer premarital training programs. As of the 1990s “...between one quarter and one third of marrying couples in the United States, Australia, and Britain were attending some form of relationship education.”⁴ With the emphasis and preponderance of premarital training programs one would think that the marriages in the United States would be strong, healthy and stable. It appears though that as marriage training and premarital programs have grown that the opposite has happened. With the rise in programs around this nation has also come a rise in the divorce rate. Research indicates that the divorce rate has

³ R.M.Kreider & J.M. Fields, “Number, Timing and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: Fall 1996” Current Population Reports. Washington D.C Census Bureau (2001): 78.

⁴ Kim W. Halford, Howard .J .Markman, Galena H. Kline & Scott M. Stanley, “Best Practice in Couple Relationship Education” Journal of Marital and Family Therapy. (2003) Issue 29:No.3:385.

increased 279% from 1970 to 1992.⁵ Despite many efforts past and present, couples are still experiencing divorce at alarming rates. Research also indicates that from the 1990s to present that the divorce rate has declined somewhat. Much of this decline is attributable to the rise in cohabitation. In spite of the changes in how people view marriage premarital training efforts have had resurgence in the past ten years in the United States with hopes of curbing the divorce trend and helping to heal much of the social fallout it has caused.

One extremely relevant point about the change in mindset that is happening in our country is highlighted by David Popenoe. He makes the point that the people of this nation have begun to view marriage differently. He states, “Once it (marriage) was understood as a social obligation designed to provide for economic security and procreation, but now it is perceived primarily as a path to self-fulfillment.”⁶ In other words one of the biggest challenges that this nation and premarital trainers have to grapple with is the view that our nation has adopted about marriage. Americans in the 1950s saw marriage as a vehicle to family stability and to national strength. Today family stability and national strength have taken a back seat to personal fulfillment, getting what we want and what makes us happy. With this mindset and focus many Americans have found themselves unfulfilled in marriage, isolated by divorce and very unhappy personally. If the divorce rate is going to be slowed or stopped in this nation one of the major tasks of marital and premarital trainers needs to be to challenge people to view marriage the way God intended it to be viewed, as an institution for more than just personal gain.

⁵ Darryl W. Pitts, “The Development of Family Ministry for the Local Church” (D.Min., thesis Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), 21.

⁶ Mary R. Laner & Neil J. Russell, “Marital Expectations and Level of Premarital Involvement: Does Marriage Education Make a Difference?” Teaching Sociology (January 1995) Vol. 23: 28.

If marriage is going to be viewed as more than a vehicle to self-fulfillment, marriage itself must be understood from a biblical perspective. The Bible outlines the purpose and function of marriage. A purpose and function that has been largely lost in the intense individual society of America. This way of thinking and acting has almost evolved into a cult where worship of the self is the highest form of commitment. This type of living and thinking leads to selfishness which in turn leads to marital failure, family failure and societal breakdown.

Biblical marriage is about two lives becoming one. Dr. Scott Stanley in his book, The Power of Commitment, states the following, “Marriage is about commingled lives. It’s about sharing and learning to share more. It’s about team work.”⁷ Biblical marriage is anything but selfish. In fact, Biblical marriage encourages both members to move from selfishness, which we obtain at birth, to selflessness. Marriage provides the opportunity for true growth at the deepest levels, growth that can’t come without learning to change ones self.

Biblical marriage is about glorifying God, our creator. Oneness and growth that is achieved through marriage point toward God in His triune nature. It is the intended desire of God to have all mankind glorify him. Marriage is one of the primary institutions of God in which glorifying him is at the very center. The marital relationship is a picture of Christ’s love for the church. It is one of nurturing, purifying and developing into something of great value. It is devoid of selfishness. John Piper says, “Selfishness seeks its own private happiness at the expense of others. Love seeks its happiness in the

⁷ Scott M. Stanley, The Power of Commitment (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 111.

happiness of the beloved.”⁸ Seeing God glorified and one’s spouse grown personally brings true happiness.

Biblical marriage is about modeling the attributes of God. Modeling those attributes in relation between husband and wife as well as parent to child. The parents, married couple, are responsible to model selfless love, honor, and respect for one another and God to their children. This type of marriage can only evolve from a commitment of both members to God and one another. A life worth modeling is one that is fully committed to Christ. Failure in being committed to Christ will inevitably yield self-interest and marital decay.

Biblical marriage is about covenant. Covenant is a higher order of commitment. A marriage covenant is between three parties. The three parties are man, woman and God. Covenant is not to be taken lightly or haphazardly. God models commitment to the world and holds mankind accountable for the covenants he makes to other men. Biblical marriage has covenant written all over it. Covenant is not something we move into and out of without being released by God. Therefore, selfishness and marital self-individualism is ruled out. God is the one who decides what takes place in the lives of his children, whether that is through satisfaction and happiness for self or not.

What is premarital training and who is best poised to provide it to those looking to get married? Premarital training can be best defined as “...a process designed to enhance and enrich premarital relationships leading to more satisfactory and stable marriages with the intended consequence being to prevent divorce.”⁹ True premarital does more than

⁸ John Piper, Desiring God (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1986), 176.

⁹ Robert F. Stahmann, “Premarital Counseling: A Focus for Family Therapy” Journal of Family Therapy (2000) Vol. 22:105.

just educate, it actually teaches skills that enable the couple to build a relationship that is satisfying and therefore they remain in it and work at preserving it. When this type of training is received the couples will produce healthy families which will in turn push back the tide of divorce in this nation.

Who is best poised to provide premarital training? Presently in this nation premarital training is provided by clergy, mental health workers, physicians, lay workers and marriage resource centers. The question of which one of these is best poised to provide premarital training comes down to where the couples are looking first. What is the first place they come to have someone officiate their wedding or to get prepared for marriage? Current research indicates that about 75% of marriages are performed in a religious organization like a church or synagogue. Based on this fact the number one organization for reaching couples with premarital training appears to be religious organizations around the country. This is the place that couples come to with the hopes of having their service performed. It is also the place where they can get much more than just a wedding service. Likewise it is also the first place they come when they are in marital trouble. So any way it is viewed, the religious organizations of this land are the best poised to prepare couples and even to walk with them through their struggles of married life.

In recent times other organizations have joined in premarital training efforts. University counseling departments, treatment centers, community mental health centers, mental health facilities, government family services and persons in private counseling practice are listed in those ranks. Yet religious organizations still rank highest for the number of services performed.

Rationale for Premarital Training

The rationale behind premarital training revolves around the belief that premarital training will help reduce marital distress, enhance relationships, equip couples with skills and knowledge as well as lessen the possibility of divorce. In order of this to take place premarital programs should contain three essential criteria.¹⁰ The first of these criteria is that program content should be based on basic relationship research. In other words the program should be empirically informed. The latest premarital and relationship findings should be incorporated into the program content. The second essential criterion is that the program should undergo testing to determine its effectiveness. If the program is not tested on regular intervals then the quality of the program and its effectiveness can not be supported. The third or last essential criterion is that program content should be regularly updated based on research findings. Once the testing and research results are obtained then the program should be updated to reflect those findings. As marital research is ongoing in this nation there are ample findings that can and should be used to strengthen premarital content and effectiveness.

Another component in the rationale for premarital programs is timing. Couples that are looking toward marriage are many times very positive and excited about their relationship and future life together. If couples can be reached at this transition point in their relationship when they are largely open to premarital training it can be presumed that the potential for success also increases. According to research premarital couples as compared to married couples are in a unique stage of their relationship development. During this stage they are more open to change oriented training. Because this is a new,

¹⁰ Howard J. Markman, "Use of an Empirically Based Marriage Program by Religious Organizations: Results of a Dissemination Trial" Family Relations (2004) Vol. 53: 504-505.

fun and emotionally engaging point in their relationship it becomes much easier to reach and teach them. This is also a key time for couples because married life can carry with it problems that erode a couple's desire for change through training programs. Premarital couples really are at the happiest time in their relationship, a time when they are open to anything that makes their relationship more fulfilling and rewarding.

A third component behind the rationale for premarital training programs has to do with relational patterns. Research indicates that a couple develops "blue prints" for their relationship within the first few years of marriage. There are ways of relating that are formed early on and those ways of relating form the basis for all subsequent interaction and ultimately their relational outcome as a couple. These "blue prints" have something to do with a couple's family of origin and how those family relationships have developed who they are. That is why premarital training is vitally important. It is at this point in their relationship that they must understand who they are and what impact that will have on how they interact with their potential mate. One particular study emphasized this point by saying, "...research is showing that how a couple weathers their first two years together can make or break their marriage."¹¹ The early years are a time when the couple develops patterns, beliefs, expectations and feelings related to one another. Premarital training can intersect that time while the excitement is high, the relationship is viewed positively and there is a high desire for growth.

¹¹ John P. Caughlin, Ted L. Huston, Renate M. Houts, Shanna E. Smith & Laura J. George, "The Connubial Crucible: Newlywed Years as Predictors of Marital Delight, Distress and Divorce" The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (February 2001) Vol. 80 Issue 2: 237-252.

Effectiveness of Premarital Training

In the arena of premarital education and training there is question as to whether or not this type of training has any impact on divorce reduction. Dr. Robert F. Stahmann from the University of Brigham Young states, "... the effectiveness of marriage preparation, whether counseling or educational, has not been clearly established."¹²

There are also other researchers that would echo this same sentiment. It appears that there is one group of marital researchers that clearly believes that divorce rates are not influenced by premarital training, while there is another side that is confident that premarital is the best way to prevent divorce. The later group claims that premarital training is a good thing even though there is difficulty making a clear link between marital outcomes and premarital training.

There is another group of researchers that make a strong case for the effectiveness of premarital training. Here are some words from leading marital researchers about the link between premarital training and marital outcome. Dr Scott Stanley states, "In nationwide polling data, those who had taken premarital counseling in the prior five years were less likely than others to have thought about divorce and were more likely to have confidence in their ability to handle their future."¹³ Another leading researcher states, "... individuals who participated in premarital programs did better than no-treatment control individuals in terms of improving their relationships or preventing later

¹² Robert F. Stahmann, "Premarital Counseling a Focus for Family Therapy" Journal of Family Therapy (2000) Vol. 22: 107.

¹³ Scott M. Stanley, "Making a Case for Premarital Education" Family Relations (July 2001) Vol. 50 Issue 3:275.

problems.”¹⁴ Dr. Robert F. Stahmann goes on to expand his original statement by saying, “A review of the literature related to premarital counseling found that most studies reported positive effects ... No studies have demonstrated negative effects for couples or individuals who participated in various marriage preparation programmes.”¹⁵ There appears to be a correlation between premarital training and marital happiness and stability based on these expert statements.

Probably the best documented research in support of premarital training is the PREP program studies done by Dr. Scott Stanley and Howard Markman. This study followed 114 couples who were divided into three groups. There were twenty-five couples in the intervention/control condition, forty-seven couples in the control group, and forty-two in the second control group. Markman performed two studies after the couples either completed or denied premarital relationship training. His initial findings determined that up to three years after program completion the experimental couples “... continued to show higher levels of marital satisfaction and lower levels of relationship instability than did control couples.”¹⁶ This finding shows that there is a clear difference between couples who participate in premarital training as opposed to those chose to not participate. It should also be brought to light that Markman followed the original 114 couples till they were five years past their premarital training date. Studying their relationship again at this point he found that, “...the experimental group and control

¹⁴ Lee M. Williams, Lisa A. Riley, Gail S. Risch & David T. Van Dyke “An Empirical Approach to Designing Marriage Preparation Programs” The American Journal of Family Therapy (1999) Vol. 27: 272.

¹⁵ Robert F. Stahmann, “Premarital Counseling a Focus for Family Therapy” Journal of Family Therapy (2000) Vol. 22: 107.

¹⁶ Jason S. Carroll & William J. Doherty, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Programs: A Meta-Analytic Review of Outcome Research” Family Relations (April 2003) Vol. 52 Issue 2: 112.

groups generally were not significantly different ...except for increased communication skill usage and decreased tendency to resort to physical violence in men in the intervention group.”¹⁷ So even after five years of marriage the couples who participated in premarital training were better off in some key areas than those who did not participate in premarital training.

One other item that is important to consider is that since premarital training can be shown to be effective, even if only for a five year time frame, it needs to be determined as to what type of training is most effective. There are basically two types of premarital training. One focuses on conveying information about marriage and the other focuses on teaching skills. Research bears out that skills-based training is far more effective than the information-based approach.¹⁸ With this in mind it should be pointed out that the PREP program is a skills-based program not just an information-based program. Most programs today, ones being used in most religious organizations, are largely information-based. Because this is so, the findings of the PREP study do not immediately correlate to those programs. It should behoove the religious organizations of this nation to move beyond filling couples minds and into filling them with skills to make marriage work.

Another item to consider is the population or audience receiving the training. What works with one specific soci-economic group may not be automatically effective with others. Research indicates that “... there are serious methodological challenges in

¹⁷ Howard J. Markman, M .J. Renick, F. J. Flyod, Scott M. Stanley & M. Clements, “Preventing Marital Distress Through Communication and Conflict Management Training: A 4- and 5-yr follow-up” Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology (February 1993) Vol. 61 Issue 1:70-77.

¹⁸ Daniel L. Trathen, “A Comparison of the Effectiveness of Two Christian Premarital Counseling Programs (Skills and information-based) Utilized by Evangelical Churches” (Ph. D., Diss., University of Denver, 1995)

assessing effects, and many unanswered questions remain, such as questions about types of premarital education that are most effective for particular types of couples.”¹⁹ The majority of premarital programs studies have been with white Anglo middle class couples. In order for research to be applied to larger groups of couples there needs to be more studies done with varying couple types. With this thought in mind it should also be mentioned that the SYMBIS program at Hyland Heights was composed of a majority of white middle-class couples.

A final consideration dealing with the effectiveness of premarital training has to do with the amount of time in which it is reasonable to measure positive relationship effects. How long can research demonstrate the positive impact of premarital training in the life of a couple? Current research findings indicate that there is a window of time anywhere from six months after the training to three years in which there are clear and lasting positive outcomes in the couple’s relationship.²⁰ From three to five years the effects of premarital training appear to lessen in comparison with couples who have not had premarital training. At the five year mark couples who have had premarital training and those that have not, do not have any statistically discernable difference as related to marital happiness and relationship stability. Hence, premarital training is effective but it is only effective within a limited period of time. It is up to the couples to engage in refresher courses to keep the knowledge and skills training active in their relationships.

¹⁹ Scott M. Stanley, Christine A. Johnson, Paul R. Amato & Howard J. Markman, “Premarital Education, Marital Quality, and Marital Stability: Findings from a Large Random Household Survey” Journal of Family Psychology. (March 2006) Vol. 20 Issue 1: 117.

²⁰ Jason S. Carroll & William J. Doherty, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs: A Meta-Analytic Review of Outcome Research” Family Relations (April 2003) Vol. 52 Issue 2: 114.

SYMBIS couples that have completed the questionnaire will have been married for anywhere from six months to three years plus. None of the couples will have been married for over four years. The vast majority of the couples participating in this study will fall between one and three years of marriage. Hence, this is a key time to evaluate the program's effectiveness. If SYMBIS is an effective program and if it does have an impact on marital happiness and stability, then the length and quality of these couple's marriages should demonstrate such.

Dynamics of Effective Premarital Training

What are the dynamics of effective premarital training? Actually there are several dynamics of effective premarital training. Effective premarital training has clear goals, specific training content, use of a premarital assessment questionnaire (PAQ) and a set number of sessions.

Goals for premarital training are the objectives that the program should achieve in the lives of the couples. The goals need to be discernable and understandable. Following is a list of goals for an effective premarital program. The following goals have been derived from Dr. Paul Giblin's article entitled Premarital Preparation: Three Approaches.

1. An awareness of personal and couple relationship dynamics
2. Feedback on personal and behavioral skills
3. Cognitive change or belief restructuring
4. Skills training
5. Increasing couple relationship stability and satisfaction
6. Enhancing couple communication

7. Normalizing differences to help promote acceptance and learning
8. Relation of marriage to faith experience and beliefs

Goals are necessary to determine the direction of the program as well as a future guide to assess program effectiveness. Dr. Paul Giblin, professor at Loyola University of Chicago, states, “Psychologically and spiritually informed goal setting is as important to premarital preparation as it is to marriage.”²¹ The goals of premarital are the basis upon which all the other facets of premarital training build.

Content for premarital training comes largely from studies that deal with issues of marital couples. Researchers have decided that problematic issues for married couples are some of the best items for training in premarital programs. One researcher stated that “... issues consistently identified as problematic by couples ... will suggest key content areas for premarital education.”²² Some of the key issues that marital couples face are communication, conflict resolution, expectations, roles, sexuality, finances, parenting, leisure and religious beliefs. Each of these topics in the life of married couples has a direct impact upon the relationship development and subsequent marital happiness and stability. Many of the premarital programs that exist today cover these topics to one degree or another.

Another study simplified premarital training content by breaking down into what they called the five Cs. The five Cs are communication, conflict resolution, commitment

²¹ Paul Giblin, “Premarital Preparation: Three Approaches” Pastoral Psychology.(1994) Issue 42: No. 3 :153.

²² Gail S. Risch, Lisa A. Riley & Michael G. Lawler, “Problematic Issues in the Early Years of Marriage: Content for Premarital Education” Journal of Psychology and Theology (Fall 2003), Vol. 31 Issue 3: 254.

church and children. The founder of these five Cs claims that “Marriage preparation should, at a minimum, address these five areas.”²³

The SYMBIS book and workbooks, as written by Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott, cover many of these topics plus some additional material. This material was adopted for use at Hyland Heights because of the accuracy and thoroughness it displayed. The only topic of the five Cs that SYMBIS does not address is that of parenting.

Another dynamic of effective premarital training is the use of a premarital assessment questionnaire (PAQ). There are several PAQs on the market today. Some of them are designed for conjoint use while others have the ability to be used in group settings. PAQs provide an assessment of the couple’s relationship in a variety of areas. This type of assessment allows a counselor or clergy person to quickly zero in on areas of weakness in a couple’s relationship. “Premarital research suggests that structured individual and relationship assessment, as a part of premarital counseling, has generally been considered helpful by participating couples and professionals.”²⁴ PAQs save time for the counselor as well as give the couple a good overview of their relationship.

There are three commonly used PAQs. These are PREPARE (Prevention Preparation and Relationship Enhancement), FOCCUS (Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study), and RELATE (RELATIONSHIP Evaluation).

²³ Lee M. Williams, Lisa A. Riley, Gail S. Risch & David T. Van Dyke, “An Empirical Approach to Designing Marriage Preparation Programs” The American Journal of Family Therapy (1999) Vol. 27: 280.

²⁴ Jeffery H. Larson, “Premarital Assessment: The Need for Premarital Assessment” Family Therapy Magazine. (May/June 2002): 36-42.

Each of these PAQs is scientifically tested and has acquired broad acceptance. PREPARE is the most scientifically based and most well documented of the three.²⁵

The SYMBIS program at Hyland Heights adopted the use of the PREAPRE inventory because of its thoroughness and validity. Studies have been performed which demonstrate that PREPARE scales correlate with the scales of the Inventory of Premarital Conflict and the Marital Adjustment Scale. Also, PREPARE has "... displayed substantial predictive validity in predicting marital success over a 3-year period in two separate studies."²⁶

The last dynamic of effective premarital training is the number of sessions the program adopts. Some programs meet for lengthy periods of time where others meet for one or two sessions. Pastors typically meet with a couple for two or less sessions. Research has found that "... respondents who had attended zero or one session rated their preparation significantly lower than respondents who attended four or more sessions. Additionally, respondents who had attended two or three sessions rated their marriage preparation significantly lower than those who had attended eight or nine sessions."²⁷ The study went on to share those respondents who attended eight to nine sessions reported the highest perceived value. According to the study ten or more sessions did not change the perceived value of the program. These findings indicate that less than two

²⁵ Baline J. Fowers, Kelly H. Montel, & David H. Olson, "Predicting Marital Success for Premarital Couple Types Based on Prepare" Journal of Marital and Family Therapy (January 1996) Vol. 22 Issue 1: 108.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷ Lee M. Williams, Lisa A. Riley, Gail S. Risch & David T. Van Dyke, "An Empirical Approach to Designing Marriage Preparation Programs" The American Journal of Family Therapy (1999) Vol. 27: 278.

sessions has little or no discernable impact on the couple's relationship. The ideal length of the program should be eight to ten sessions.

Another study dealing with correlations between length of sessions and positive outcome showed that there was a clear positive correlation between hours spent and marital conflict and marital satisfaction. Researchers found that "... marital conflict declined as premarital education increased from 1 to 10 hr ... correspondingly, marital satisfaction increased gradually as premarital education increased from 1 to 20hr."²⁸

Based on these studies the conclusion could be drawn that premarital training that is most effective should involve more than one or two sessions. According to research, the ideal range is between eight and ten sessions for the greatest impact.

In conclusion, the personal finding of this researcher from past experience is that one or two sessions are hardly enough time to get to know a couple let alone help them learn any significant information about themselves or train them in any lasting skills. Most short term counseling or training programs seem to have limited impact as well as a false sense of security. In light of this the SYMBIS program was designed to last eight weeks with one or two individual sessions with a pastor or lay counselor.

Benefits of Effective Premarital Training

There are some clear benefits that effective premarital provides. Even though there is some debate over the effectiveness of premarital training at prohibiting divorce, it should

²⁸ Scott M. Stanley, Christine A. Johnson, Paul R. Amato & Howard J. Markman, "Premarital Education, Marital Quality, and Marital Stability: Findings from a Large Random Household Survey" Journal of Family Psychology (March 2006) Vol. 20 Issue 1: 117.

not be surmised that premarital has no impact or benefits. Here is a list of some of the benefits of premarital training with brief explanation.

1. A decrease in the odds of having to go through a divorce. Research indicates that couples which complete premarital training have a 30% increased chance of avoiding divorce.²⁹
2. Higher levels of marital happiness and satisfaction.³⁰
3. Gains in communication skills.
4. Increased ability to problem-solve.
5. Increased awareness into the strengths and weaknesses of the relationship.
6. Learn ways to achieve and maintain higher levels of marital satisfaction.
7. Understanding in the areas of commitment, acceptance, forgiveness, and sacrifice which correlate with healthy relationships.³¹
8. Understanding of gender differences and how they impact couple relationships.
9. Supports that can be called upon in time of crisis or need for direction.
10. Understanding that the marriage may be best if it is delayed or abandoned. In some cases the greatest benefit is for the couple to realize that they should not marry at that time or at all.

Benefits may vary and last for different periods of time in a couple's marriage.

Research, from several sources, indicates that approximately 90% of couples who have

²⁹ Scott M. Stanley, Christine A. Johnson, Paul R. Amato & Howard J. Markman, "Premarital Education, Marital Quality, and Marital Stability: Findings From a Large Random Household Survey" Journal of Family Psychology. (March 2006), Vol. 20 Issue 1: 123.

³⁰ Howard J. Markman, Mari Jo Renick, Frank J. Floyd, Scott M. Stanley & Mary Clements, "Preventing Marital Distress Through Communication and Conflict Management Training: A 4- and 5- yr Follow-up" Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology. (1993) Vol. 61, Issue. 1: 72.

taken premarital training say it was worth the effort and that they would take premarital again.³²

Regardless of how long the benefits last it is easy to see the value in having the benefits previously mentioned. Benefits help establish both relational patterns and incentive. As the benefits repeat themselves couples begin to desire those benefits to repeat. This type of incentive causes couples to work harder when times are not good so as to regain the positive benefits. Even if these benefits are short lived it appears that they have a positive impact on the couple's happiness and desire to remain together.

It is presumed by this researcher that SYMBIS will produce these benefits as an outcome of having completed the program; benefits that will forge the way for the future of these marriages and eventually into the lives of the children of these couples. In turn premarital also has the opportunity to produce benefits that will impact a failing society. The potential for premarital to engender these benefits in the lives of young couples who will then go on to impact their churches with marital health and the community around them is limitless. As this becomes a reality the moral fiber of the United States will be impacted as well as its failing economy.

Whether or not one can establish a clear tie between premarital training and specific outcomes is not as important as developing young marriages with benefits that produce marital satisfaction and a desire to remain married. SYMBIS is able to do this.

³²Scott Stanley, "Making a Case for Premarital Education" Family Relations (July 2001, Vol. 50 Issue 3): 1.

Theory on Conjoint versus Group Premarital Training.

In the field of premarital training there is debate over whether conjoint or group training is most effective. Conjoint is when the counselor or clergy person meets with one couple at a time. In conjoint the couple has the sole attention of the leader. Group premarital involves more than one couple with a counselor or clergy person leading the group. In group training the leader's time and focus gets divided among the group members.

Research takes different sides on this issue. Some research indicates that group can be beneficial to help see some of the group dynamics that conjoint would not illuminate. On the other hand group premarital training often can cause the couples in the program to be overly aware of the other couples in the room. With the self-consciousness of all the couples there can be a limiting of responses and consequently a decline in learning and growth. The vast majority of the research on premarital training has been done with groups.³³ This is an interesting fact when one understands that the average church does mostly conjoint premarital counseling. The findings of studies done on group premarital training have yielded some interesting results. The most significant fact is that conjoint premarital training is preferred most by couples whereas the research bears out that group is the most beneficial.³⁴ In other words, the best method of premarital training is through group but it is also the least preferred method by those who participate in it. It

³³ Daniel L. Trathen, "A Comparison of the Effectiveness of Two Christian Premarital Counseling Programs (Skills and information-based) Utilized by Evangelical Churches"(Ph. D., Diss., University of Denver, 1995), 32.

³⁴ Christine R. Mc George & Thomas S. Carlson, "Premarital Education: An Assessment of Program Efficacy" Contemporary Family Therapy. (March 2006), Vol. 28 Issue 1:183.

appears that preferred structure does not equate with program efficacy. If premarital training is to be most effective it needs to be done in a group format.

SYMBIS is unique in this respect because it combines both formats into one program. Each couple that has taken the program has been exposed to group format and to conjoint sessions as well. The group would meet at a set time and then the couple would meet with the class leader for a one-on-one session. The group sessions would be helpful in bringing out some issues that could then be dealt with best through one-on-one counseling. In some cases couples would meet with the counselor for additional sessions based on individual needs.

Because conjoint and group both have strengths that need to be utilized, it appears that the best method is to adopt a “both and” approach instead of an “either or” approach. Both group and conjoint can be taken advantage of if the program design is set to do so.

Present Role of Churches in Premarital Training

In the United States premarital training is being done primarily by clergy and volunteer lay couples. Yet research demonstrates that, “Between 40 and 50 percent of couples divorce within three years of marrying.”³⁵ This simple fact indicates that something that is happening inside the four walls of the church is causing little or no difference in the divorce rate of its couples. Michael McManus, founder of Marriage Savers, says, “Almost 75 percent of all marriages are performed by pastors, and yet we are troubled by the more than 50 percent divorce rate.”³⁶ He also goes on to say, “What

³⁵ Paul Giblin, “Premarital Preparation: Three Approaches” *Pastoral Psychology* (1994): 147.

³⁶ Michael J. McManus, “Veil of Tears: Churches are Part of the Divorce Problem --and Solution” *Policy Review* (1994) No. 67: 50.

clergy call “premarital counseling” often leaves no impression on the marrying couple.”³⁷

It appears from these statistics and expert testimony in the field that the church is presently doing an ineffective job of preparing couples through premarital training.

Pollster, George Barna Jr., echoes this woeful sentiment. He claims that “... virtually all American protestants have higher divorce rates than atheists.”³⁸ He goes on to defend his statement by showing statistics on divorce rates that he has obtained. Atheists in the United States have a 21% divorce rate while 25% of mainline Protestants have been divorced. He continues by stating that 29% of Baptists have experienced divorce and 34% of those in non-denominational Evangelical churches have experienced divorce. Only Catholics and Lutherans have a lower divorce rate coming in at 21%. Yet that 21% only equals the rate of divorce that the Atheists and Agnostics experience. McManus makes a capstone statement when he speaks of Barna’s research statistics and says, “No denomination does a better job with its members than unbelievers do on their own.”³⁹

According to a national survey done in 1994, 94% of clergy agree that premarital counseling should be required of all couples before they marry. Yet at the same time research indicated that “... approximately 50% of clergy received no academic training in PMC, leaving 50% providing such services without having been trained in premarital

³⁷ Catherine Latimer & Michael J. McManus, “How to Give Marriage Insurance to Premarital Couples” (2003), Article retrieved from www.MarriageSavers.com; Internet; Accessed 13 April 2006.

³⁸ B. A. Robinson, “U.S. Divorce Rates for Various Groups, Age Groups and Geography” (2000) Article posted on Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance website www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm; Accessed 10 October 2006.

³⁹ Ibid.

counseling.”⁴⁰ It appears that clergy are not trained well enough, informed or willing enough to make some needed changes. If the current trend of divorce inside the church is going to be less than that of unbelievers it is up to clergy and lay trainers to look seriously at what they are accomplishing in the area of premarital training.

On the positive side, there are several facts that bear mentioning. First is that churches and other religious organizations are probably the best avenue to deliver premarital training. The reasons for this being so are (1) religious organizations have access to high percentage of couples seeking to be married, (2) religious organizations have a reverence for the institution of marriage as well as a desire to prevent marital distress, (3) a level of involvement in the communities that can help instill these values, and, (4) a vast majority of lay leaders who can help train and mentor young couples.

A second positive note is that research has demonstrated that lay couples can be just as effective at premarital training as the “professionals”.⁴¹ This fact should motivate church leaders to train lay workers to do premarital training for them. When this type of exchange in the leadership takes place the church grows, the people become empowered, the staff has time to focus on other tasks, and the body as a whole becomes responsible for marriage training, not just the pastors.

In conclusion it should be emphasized that most churches do have some kind of premarital training program. It may be up to debate as to what type and how effective but they have begun to see the need and have responded. The reality behind this fact is that many of these churches are still “doing it the old way” and are not obtaining the desired

⁴⁰ Eric F. Jones & Robert F. Stahmann, “Clergy Beliefs, Preparation, and Practice in Premarital Counseling” *Journal of Pastoral Care*. (1994)Vol. 48, No. 2:181.

⁴¹ John H. Curtis & Michael E. Miller, “An Argument for the Use of Para-Professional Counselors in Premarital and Marital Counseling” *The Family Coordinator* (1976): 49.

results. Churches today need to examine the types of premarital programs they are offering and the results of such programs. Hence, there are several questions that need to be asked and answered. Among these include the following. Does the program being utilized have solid research upon which it is based? Does the program have clear goals and are they being reached? Is the program frequently evaluated and updated? If these questions are asked and adequate answers are derived then that church should begin to see the tide of divorce and unhappy marriages recede.

CHAPTER THREE FOUNDATIONS FOR THE SYMBIS PROGRAM

The SYMBIS program came into existence at Hyland Heights Baptist Church during the summer of 2002. Prior to this time premarital counseling was done by two or three of the pastoral staff. The content of the counseling each couple would receive was based solely upon the views and understanding of each of the pastors doing the counseling. There was not any uniform teaching or materials that were used. The traditional conjoint approach was employed with all couples.

The amount of time or sessions spent with each couple also varied according to the need or perceived “readiness” of each couple. If a couple went to one staff member they might receive two plus hours of premarital counseling whereas if they went to another they might get several weeks of counseling. Basically, the pastoral staff at Hyland Heights had different standards, expectations, training and hopes for each couple. There was no standard of material or use of a premarital questionnaire, just an individual approach with outcomes that varied. The inventory that was used often was the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The MBTI is not designed for premarital testing but rather for personality assessment.

The outcomes at this time also reflected the approach. In other words the separation and divorce rate appeared to be similar to that of the outside world. This researcher saw about half of the marriages dissolve that he performed with the “old approach” prior to SYMBIS. It really seemed like what the pastors were doing to prepare couples for married life was missing a key ingredient. The very first wedding this

researcher performed ended in divorce within two years, papers signed and final in that span of time. This indicated a great need to do something different, something that helped the couples to build marriages not just make it through the wedding day.

It was upon this backdrop that this researcher began to look for something more. Something with a uniform approach, standardized testing, research based and effective. It appeared that the “old approach” did not allow couples time to get to know one another or give them tools to build compatibility. The variation in material used, content, length of sessions and testing did not enable couples to explore enough of who they were and what was ahead of them. In fact, they were given a false sense of readiness.

Another glaring problem that became evident was that there was too much lecturing being done. The “old approach” was basically lecture driven. The couple would meet with one of the pastors and be lectured about the origin, roles and function of marriage. All these are good and necessary at some point but not adequate at preparing couples to live together and build compatibility. Just hearing the truth and not learning how to apply and live it is not enough for any aspect of Christian life, even marriage. What was happening was that the pastors, this researcher included, were doing way too much talking about theology and not enough skills-based training. Research indicates that “Lecture is not the best instructional method for premarital counseling.”¹ It’s not that theological lecture is not needed, it’s just not sufficient. What most premarital counseling in the church has been comprised of is teaching on the institution of marriage, marriage roles, marriage responsibilities and other relational topics. In this instance the couple sits in the office of the pastor and listens intently and occasionally nods their heads to show

¹ John Schwartz & Norman Theisen. “Pastors Talk Too Much” Clergy Journal (February 2003), Vol. 79 Issue 4: 11.

that they are still listening. They may even answer one of two questions but for the most part they sit and listen to the pastor talk. They were not challenged to get to know one another better or even asked to speak to one another in the office. Consequently they did not learn much about each other or how to interact with one another. That type of premarital teaches couples to sit, listen and act interested, but not how to build relational compatibility together. There were no skills being taught, no hidden issues being brought to light, no expectations explored, no family of origin dynamics resolved which would enable the couple to keep their long-term commitment. With this approach is it any wonder that the divorce rate is extremely similar to that of the outside world?

Somehow in Christianity we think, as clergy, that filling people's minds with truth will result in them living differently. Somehow we believe if we fill their brains with the right biblical concepts they will automatically go out and "do" marriage the way it was intended to be. This type of approach is highly intellectual and also highly ineffective. The intellect is only one aspect of human beings. Healthy, stable marriages require more than good intellect, they require insight, self-control, understanding and effort to be successful.

It is time for the clergy of this nation to begin to understand that premarital training has to do with much more than the right information. "Premarital counseling revolving around exposition of Bible passages and exploration of concepts like covenant marriage is the very sort of preparation for marriage that research is finding to be far less effective than skills-based premarital counseling."² Simply telling them what is right and wrong does not equip them with the skills to make it all work. Pastors must go beyond

² Ibid,12.

basic Bible concepts on marriage and move into teaching couples skills that will enable those biblical concepts to become a marital reality.

Another mindset that pastors and churches of today have is that they view themselves as “rented” tools. Couples today will rent all sorts of items for a wedding. They will rent tables, chairs, candle holders, church buildings and even reception halls. What most of the American pastors have done is to concede to the fact that they to are “rented” for the day. In other words their job is to come in and perform a service for the couple for a fee and then go back home to wait for the next rental period. Mike McManus put it this way. He says, “The church has become a ‘blessing machine’ for couples wanting to marry.”³ He goes on to say that the church should function as a tool to help couples avoid divorce instead. Pastors need to begin seeing themselves as agents in place to help couples prepare for married life not just the wedding day. H. Norman Wright echoes that sentiment by saying that the role of the church is to prepare couples for a lifetime of marriage not just one day at the marriage altar.⁴ Anything less than this should not be called premarital training.

One final problem that this researcher discovered in the “old way” of doing premarital was that couples meeting in conjoint sessions could not learn, identify and grow as much as they could in group settings. Group settings offer individuals the opportunity for identification, learning and a sense of normalcy. Research indicates that “... the group structure is more productive than the conjoint.”⁵ When couples are able to

³ Michael J. McManus, Marriage Savers: Helping Your Friends and Family Avoid Divorce (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 60.

⁴ H. Norman Wright, The Premarital Counseling Handbook (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977), 21.

⁵ Everett Worthington, Counseling Before Marriage. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990)

be exposed to one another they will learn from others in the group as well as become challenged to face some of their issues that they might otherwise keep hidden out of a fear of embarrassment.

Group training also enables the leader to observe couples in a setting where they will respond and interact differently than they might in conjoint sessions. How a couple handles themselves in a public setting can offer the group leader insight into what other topics or issues the couple might need to address. Behaviors like body language, interaction levels with the group and social responses all help to provide feedback for the group leader. It is important to note that people often take on different ways of acting and behaving in public than they do in private. Group premarital training allows these dynamics to be better seen.

Group training as well allows couples to be taught on how to read non-verbal behavior. Through role play couples can be taught to observe their partners non-verbal behaviors. Non-verbal behaviors are excellent indicators as to how the person is feeling or responding to a given context. Learning to read non-verbal behaviors will enable couples to avert or shorten conflicts. Group training enables these non-verbal behaviors to become apparent to the couple themselves and to the others in the room.

Overview of the SYMBIS Program

The SYMBIS program, as designed and implemented at Hyland Heights Baptist Church, is comprised of several components. The first component of the program is the training materials. The materials used are the book and accompanying workbooks written by Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott entitled, Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts. The

SYMBIS book has seven chapters. Each chapter is a question that couples need to explore in their relationship, both before and after marriage. The chapter contents are as follows.

Chapter One: Have You Faced the Myths of Marriage with Honesty?

This chapter focuses on exposing and discussing some of the most popular false beliefs or myths of marriage. An example would be that we will live happily ever after. This chapter delves into these myths and enables couples to move beyond some of the fantasy attached to marriage.

Chapter Two: Can You Identify Your Love Styles?

This second chapter delves into the different love styles that individuals have and how those love styles impact the marriage relationship. The authors touch on the love styles of withholding, pleasing and true loving.

Chapter Three: The Habit of Happiness

This chapter deals with the habit or mindset of being happy. The authors focus on this as being one of the most important qualities in a marriageable person. They also teach that this habit is the responsibility of each person in the marriage. It is both a desirable trait and a responsibility.

Chapter Four: Can You Say What You Mean and Understand What You Hear?

This chapter focuses on how to speak more effectively and to learn how to better hear. The authors teach listening and speaking skills. They also teach about communication filters and how filters can cause people to sometimes receive a different message than was intended.

Chapter Five: Have You Bridged the Gender Gap?

The authors demonstrate in this chapter the differences of men and women based on gender and how those differences impact the relationship men and women build in marriage. Basic differences between the sexes are outlined.

Chapter Six: Do You Know How to Fight a Good Fight?

This chapter deals with conflict in relationships and how to use that conflict to bring you closer as a couple. The presence of conflict is not a negative but rather a reality that every relationship experiences. The authors teach that it should not be avoided but rather utilized to shed light on how a couple can grow together.

Chapter Seven: Are You and Your Partner Soul Mates?

This seventh chapter draws in the concept of spiritual oneness. Emphasis is placed upon spiritual beliefs, practices and service together. The couple is challenged to examine their beliefs as well as their worship habits together.

The written curriculum also has accompanying workbooks for both men and ladies. The workbooks for the SYMBIS program correlate with each chapter. The workbooks have twenty exercises in them. The exercises are designed to complement the written materials and help couples discover areas of difference as well as areas that need further work in their relationship. Promoting self-awareness is the main goal of the workbooks.

Another written component of the SYMBIS program is the Premarital Assessment Questionnaire (PAQ). The PAQ that was chosen to be used with the SYMBIS program is the PREPARE Inventory by Life Innovations, Inc. This inventory was chosen for several reasons. First and foremost, it came highly recommended to this researcher. After a conversation with Dr. Scott Stanley this researcher became convinced that the PREPARE

inventory stood head and shoulders above many others. A second reason for choosing this inventory is because it is specifically geared towards the needs and issues of premarital couples. PREPARE is "... a 125-item inventory designed to identify and measure premarital "relationship strengths" and "work areas" in 11 categories."⁶ The eleven relationship areas that PREPARE assesses include: realistic expectations, personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relationship, children and parenting, family and friends, equalitarian roles and religious beliefs. There is also a separate Idealistic Distortion section as well as a Family of Origin Scale. Each category has a score range of 0 to 100 based on the couple's answers. Scores ranging from 30% and below are low score areas which show that the couple is still largely unaware and idealistic about that given category. Scores ranging from 40% and above indicate that these areas can be seen as strength areas or at least potential strength areas. This type of scoring allows both the counselor and the couple to view the areas of their relationship in a tangible way.

Each couple is given the PREPARE inventory early in the SYMBIS training program. Once the inventory is completed it is mailed in for grading. The counselor then receives a fifteen page report on the couple's relationship. The counselor then arranges to meet with the couple outside of class to go over the inventory results. This completes the conjoint aspects of the SYMBIS program. The couples will meet with the class leaders from one to several times, based on the scores of the inventory.

The PREPARE inventory was chosen because of its reliability, validity and high degree of predictability. PREPARE is one of the best documented and most thoroughly

⁶ Jeffery H. Larson, Thomas B. Holman, David M. Klein, Dean M. Busby, Robert F. Stahmann, & Diane Peterson, "A Review of Comprehensive Questionnaires Used in Premarital Education and Counseling" Family Relations. (July 1995) Vol. 44 Issue 3: 249.

tested inventories on the premarital market. “PREPARE appears to be the most studied of all the PAQS ...”⁷ In fact, PREPARE scores are able to predict which couples will divorce from those who will be happily married with 80-90% accuracy.”⁸ Some of the other strengths of PREPARE include its short length, comprehensiveness, ease of administration and ease of interpretation.

The only concern often raised in regard to PREPARE is the cost of having the inventory graded. The cost of the inventory is \$35.00 per couple. This is a grading cost and is paid to Life Innovations, Inc. There is also the training cost which is about \$100.00 if the self-train DVD is used.

Some other components of the SYMBIS program include the time and place of meeting. Research shows that “... the church is strategically suited to help build solid marriages.”⁹ With this fact in mind the SYMBIS program was offered through the local church. Since couples were coming to pastors to ask for their wedding to be performed it only seemed logical to offer the training in the local assembly. The time that SYMBIS was offered was initially on Wednesday nights. This time slot worked well but as time progressed the training began being offered on Sunday mornings as well. The change in times being offered had more to do with the availability to couples than anything else. Sunday mornings captured more of those wanting to complete premarital training.

⁷ Ibid., 250.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jan Johnson, “How Churches Can be Truly Pro-family: Proven Strategies for Effective Ministry” Christianity Today (1995) Vol..39:No. 2: 33.

Unique Aspects of SYMBIS

There are a few unique aspects of the SYMBIS program at Hyland Heights that most other church-based premarital programs do not have. Aspects that have made this program a success as well as sought after by couples in the community.

The first of these unique aspects is that SYMBIS has integrated both group and conjoint sessions. Most premarital training in religious organizations today is done through conjoint format. In fact, early research in premarital studies touts conjoint as “... the best approach ...” for assessing couple relationship dynamics.¹⁰ As time has progressed and research has further investigated premarital training, researchers have come to the conclusion that both formats have their advantages but “...group training structure is more productive than conjoint.”¹¹ In light of these findings and the fact that both formats have their advantages, SYMBIS was designed to incorporate both group and conjoint formats. When the couples meet as a group for skills training and discussion of marital topics group dynamics are in effect. When they meet with the group leader one-on-one they are then able to benefit from the conjoint format. This way all the couples who complete SYMBIS get both formats as well as the benefits of both.

The second unique aspect of SYMBIS is that it is lead by a couple. In the vast majority of pastoral and even counselor led premarital the couple is exposed to one person of one gender. The uniqueness of SYMBIS is that the leaders of the class are a married couple who not only lead the class discussion and lesson but they also share their

¹⁰ Lynn P. Buckner & Connie J. Salts, “A Premarital Assessment Program” Family Relations. (October 1985, Vol. 34 Issue 4): 514.

¹¹ Michael Larry Bird, “Christian Premarital Counseling and the Efficacy of Group Training Verses Conjoint Training Utilizing the Couple Communication Program: A Project and Study Employing a Premarital Skills-based program and Measuring its Effects upon Relationship Satisfaction, Confidence and Adjustment with an Evangelical Population” (D.Min., thesis, Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1997), 115.

experiences. This allows the members of the class to see real live examples of married life from both the male and female perspective. Instead of having the class be exposed to the viewpoint of one gender or the other they are able to get a balanced view. Research has also proven this to be an effective approach. When married lay couples work with premarital couples there is an added impact that the counselor or pastor alone can not bring to the experience.¹²

Lay couples have been trained along the way to work with the premarital couples. The training consisted of the lay couples taking the ENRICH inventory as well as sitting through the SYMBIS training themselves prior to leading. Once they completed these two tasks the couple was then allowed to teach the class under supervision of this researcher. This format has worked well and several couples have been trained to do premarital training in the church. Some have stayed at Hyland Heights and others have gone on to work in the area of premarital training at other churches or counseling centers.

A third unique aspect of the SYMBIS program is the times of the year it is offered. Because it lasts eight weeks it is offered three times a year. It is offered in January, May and September. Being offered like this allows couples to plan ahead in regard to when to take the class. Couples that are serious about their marriages will plan ahead. Some have even taken the program a year ahead of time just to make sure they were right for one another. This approach is organized, systematic and predictable, all qualities that have made it desirable.

Through implementing SYMBIS this researcher has noticed that couples that are serious about their marriages are more willing to plan in advance for things like

¹² Les Parrott, The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2005), 17-18.

premarital training. The “old days” of couples calling a week or two in advance have all but disappeared. The couples that SYMBIS is attracting are ones that are thinking and planning ahead. Many of the couples in the SYMBIS program have come anywhere from six to nine months ahead of their marriage date. We have also seen a fair number of couples that have come prior to even having a wedding date or being engaged. Some couples have used SYMBIS as a way to check their marital readiness. All in all, SYMBIS has attracted couples that are serious about their relationships, not ones that are haphazard in their view of marriage.

The last unique aspect of SYMBIS is that it is linked to a marriage mentoring program. Although the mentoring is not required it is promoted and has been taken advantage of in several cases. Couples that choose may request to be paired with a mentor couple for one year. In that year they will meet with the mentor couple four times. The first meeting is for both couples to get to know one another as well as to discuss how the mentoring relationship will work. The other three times they met are for the mentor couple to do a “check up” on the newlywed couple’s relationship. The mentor couple, after each meeting, completes a relationship evaluation form on the couple they are mentoring. This form allows the mentor couple to be aware of how the couple is doing as well as the pastor or counselor who oversees the mentoring program. After one year of mentoring the couple is reassigned to another newlywed couple.

The mentoring aspect of the SYMBIS program was availed to all the couples who completed the program. Approximately 20% of the couples took advantage of this opportunity. For whatever reason, the other couples chose to not take part. Many of the couples were not planning to stay in the area for one year so they decided to not take part.

Of the ones that did take advantage of the mentoring program they found it very rewarding to them. The mentor couples also found this to be a rewarding program. It was to them a way of giving back to someone else what they had learned and experienced over the many years of their marriage.

Implementation of the SYMBIS Program

The implementation of the program began in May of 2002. As the need became more and more obvious that the premarital program at Hyland Heights needed to become more uniform and up-to-date, this researcher began locating and designing the facets of the program. Once these facets were decided then the program was ready to be offered to the public.

There were several items that needed to be accomplished in order to implement the program at Hyland Heights. The first step was to get the pastoral staff to sign on to the idea. This would require them to agree to relinquish all premarital counseling to this program as well as agree not to perform any weddings for couples unless that couple had completed the SYMBIS program (more will be mentioned in the next section about the premarital policy adopted at Hyland Heights). It was at that time that all the pastoral staff agreed to the policy and to sending all premarital couples seeking to be married through the program. It was also necessary at this time to share with the church the new policy that had been adopted by the staff so they could be aware and plan accordingly.

The next item to be solved dealt with when to offer the program. What was the most convenient time and place to offer the program? Because the church was the best option for holding the training it was decided that either Sundays or Wednesdays would

be best. To begin with the training was offered on Wednesday evenings. The time slot of 6:30 to 8:00 pm was chosen. This gave more than enough time for training as well as interaction.

The next item to be faced was how to “get the word out.” Several means were adopted to get the information out about the premarital training. Since the majority of couples seeking to be married was from inside the church membership the advertising focused there first. The church bulletin was used because it is one of the most read pieces of church literature. A small ad was placed in the bulletin telling about the class, the times that it would meet and the cost. The second means of advertising was through posters placed in the church building and in local businesses. The posters helped to get larger public attention outside the church membership.

A third means of advertising was through word of mouth. People began to talk about the program and all that it was aimed at accomplishing. The training became part of conversation for many of the staff and for some of the key church leaders. As the class has grown word of mouth has been the best means of advertisement, word of mouth from satisfied couples who benefited from the program.

One final means of advertisement was the local bridal shop and bridal guide. The Central Virginia Bridal Guide was in existence at that time and was promoting all types of bridal and wedding needs. Along with ads in the guide was at least one yearly bridal event. These events were attended by all sorts of businesses having to do with weddings. In the midst of all those wedding related businesses SYMBIS would have a booth. This proved to be fruitful for the SYMBIS program because of the volume of couples that learned about SYMBIS through the bridal event.

The Bridal Guide also was utilized to promote SYMBIS. This researcher wrote articles on the SYMBIS program at Hyland Heights as well as the mentoring program. This guide circulates through many local businesses and to other communities. One article in particular was entitled Marriage Insurance. The article focused on how couples could invest in their marriages through premarital training just like buying insurance.

Presently this researcher has a good working relationship with both the Central Virginia Bridal Guide and a local bridal shop called Celebration Bridal and Formal. Both of these businesses actively promote the SYMBIS program as well as have family members who have completed the SYMBIS training themselves.

The actual first SYMBIS class was in July of 2002. It was composed of four couples. Three of the couples were getting married for the first time and one was getting remarried. The class met for an hour and a half for eight weeks. Each week a chapter of the SYMBIS book was covered. During this time three of the couples met with this researcher to go over the results of the premarital inventory (PREPARE) they had taken. One couple did not complete the course due to personal reasons. This couple broke off their engagement and ceased coming to the class all together.

Over the last four years the SYMBIS program has been run in similar fashion. The class sizes have varied but the program has been the same. All the couples have been taught the same materials and given the same premarital inventory. There have been different class leader couples over the four years. Each of the leaders is from a different role and has a different educational background. This researcher is trained in psychology and theology and fills the role of an associate pastor. The other leaders are lay persons who are trained in counseling and biblical studies. One of the lay leaders is a college

professor and the other is a ministry assistant at the church. These differences are pointed out because some research has questioned the efficacy of lay persons doing premarital training instead of professionals. Some research has indicated that lay couples can be just as effective in premarital training as the professionals.¹³ On the other hand research has been done with clergy to see how clergy fair as premarital trainers in the religious setting. The outcome of that research also appears to indicate that clergy can perform premarital training as well as trained professionals, provided they are using a skills-based training program that they are adequately acquainted with.¹⁴ The results section of this study will hopefully shed more light on how effective each of the SYMBIS leaders was based on their role and educational backgrounds.

Policy on Premarital Training

As the thoughts about a uniform training program began to develop one concern became evident. If the program was offered but not required, how could it be nearly as effective as it was hoped to be? With this thought in mind this researcher composed a premarital policy which would need to be adopted by the staff and church as a whole.

This policy was adopted based on some research which indicated that marriage divorce rates had dropped due to what are know as Community Marriage Policies. Community Marriage Policies were beginning to be used throughout the United States in an attempt to curb the divorce rates in various communities. Early research showed that communities which adopted some kind of marriage policy saw a slow but steady decline

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Howard J. Markmann, "Use of an Empirically Based Marriage Education Program by Religious Organizations: Results of a Dissemination Trial" Family Relations (2004) Vol. 53: 508.

in the divorce rates of that community. In fact, an article in USA Today stated that, "... counties with the marriage policy experienced a decline of 8.6% in divorce rates over four years, while a control group of counties without such a policy showed a decline of 5.6%. After seven years, the divorce rates fell an estimated 17.5% in areas with such policies and 9.4% in comparison counties..."¹⁵ Thought it may not all be attributable to a Community Marriage Policy it can be deduced that Community Marriage Policies do have a positive effect on lowering the divorce rate.

Community Marriage Policies have come into existence as the result of the work of Mike McManus, founder of the Marriage Savers movement. Back in the mid to late 1980s McManus began challenging communities and church leaders to adopt Community Marriage Policies. These policies had five components to them.¹⁶

1. Require rigorous premarital of at least four months, during which couples take a premarital inventory and discuss relational issues with a trained mentor couple.
2. Renew existing marriages by promoting an annual marriage retreat.
3. Restore marriages by training mentor couples to work with crisis marriages.
4. Reconcile separated marriages with a course curriculum and a same-gender support partner.
5. Revive stepfamilies by developing support groups for remarried parents with children.

As Community Marriage Policies began to be implemented around the nation their rate of divorce also began to show decline. Also, 80% of couples in chronic

¹⁵ Karen S. Peterson, "Study: Marriage Program has Impact" USA Today (2004): 6.

¹⁶ Paul J. Birch, Stan E. Weed & Joseph Olsen, "Assessing the Impact of Community Marriage Policies on County Divorce Rates" Family Relations. (2004) 53: No. 5: 496.

marriages headed for divorce have been saved by working with mentor couples whose own marriages once were on the verge of failure.¹⁷ Over time, since 1986, Marriage Savers has worked with 176 cities and towns to create Community Marriage Policies.

It all began in 1986 in Modesto, California as Michael McManus challenged religious leaders of that community to adopt a Community Marriage Policy. Once that city adopted a Community Marriage Policy the community began to see a decline in its divorce rates. From 1986 to 2002 the city of Modesto cut its divorce rate by 57% while at the same time the city's marriage rate rose by 12%. Along with Modesto other cities have also watched their divorce rates plunge. According to the Institute for Research and Evaluation, "...divorce rates fell 23.4% in 121 Community Marriage Policy cities/counties over a decade."¹⁸ Whether slow or fast it appears that divorce rates decline following the signing of a Community Marriage Policy.

Based on this type of information and statistics Hyland Heights signed the Community Marriage Policy of Lynchburg, Virginia. Immediately following that it put into effect a church-wide premarital policy. The premarital policy was simple but direct. The policy included the following guidelines.

1. No staff person shall perform a wedding at HHBC unless the couple desiring to be married has completed the SYMBIS premarital training. No exceptions will be made to this rule.

¹⁷ Michael J. McManus & Harriet McManus, "How to Create an America that Saves Marriages" *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. (2003) Vol. 31:No. 3: 196.

¹⁸ Ibid.,198.

2. Any couples being married at HHBC by another clergy person will be made aware of the SYMBIS premarital program and invited to attend the training. It is not required for non-members but it is strongly encouraged.

3. Any member of HHBC being married by a staff person, whether at the church or another location, must complete the SYMBIS training before the wedding can be performed.

4. In rare instances the materials have been adapted to meet space and time limitations for couples out of state or planning to go out of state.

Since the inception of this policy at Hyland Heights all couples seeking to be married by a staff person from HHBC have completed the SYMBIS training. In one or two cases the program content and format have been adapted to meet specific couple needs. Some couples seeking to be married by a staff member have been denied due to time or geographical limitations. In those cases the couples have been referred to other churches or organizations to have their weddings performed.

CHAPTER FOUR PROCEDURE AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter presents the methodology utilized in conducting the study. It is divided into five sections. The first section focuses on the organization of the project. The second section outlines the research hypotheses. These hypotheses will be evaluated in light of the research outcomes. This section is followed by the third section which includes a description of the method of evaluation. The fourth section will then focus on explaining the process of evaluation. The fifth and final section of this chapter will address how the data was collected and recorded.

Organization of the Project

This project was organized to test the effectiveness of the SYMBIS premarital program as organized and implemented at Hyland Heights Baptist Church over a four year period beginning in July of 2002 and ending in July of 2006. During those four years 90 couples completed the SYMBIS program. Of those 90 couples 80 of them were able to be contacted for survey purposes. Some of the couples moved and current addresses were not able to be obtained. Each of the 80 couples was sent a thirty question survey of the SYMBIS program and of their current relationship status. All of the couples that were surveyed had been married less than five years. The majority of the couples were white Anglo-Saxon middle class individuals. The majority of the couples were college educated. Only a few couples in this survey were living together. Most were not cohabiting. Most but not all of these couples professed to be Christians. The majority of

these couples were getting married for the first time. Their age range, for the most part, was in the early twenties. Some of the individuals came from backgrounds where their parents had divorced. There were also two inter-racial couples in the group.

All of the couples in this study were self-selected. They each came for the SYMBIS training through one of the following avenues. Subjects for SYMBIS were solicited through various means of advertisement. Bridal shop ads, bridal fairs, posters at local businesses, church bulletin ads, premarital brochures and web-site ads were the means of soliciting the couples.

Once the couples came for the training they were informed of the materials being used, the premarital inventory, the length of the sessions and the cost. Each of the couples was then taken through the SYMBIS materials as a group. The training lasted for eight weeks and met on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights. Each session lasted about an hour. There was homework and reading assignments given each week. Each week the class met the couples would be trained in one of the topics. Each session would begin with a ten to fifteen minute video segment that introduced the topic for that week's training. This was followed by further explanation, discussion and interaction with the group. Role play was employed at times to demonstrate techniques to the class so as to enhance their abilities and understanding. Each couple also completed the PREPARE premarital inventory in the first session. The cost of the course and all the materials was \$60.00 per couple.

Method of Evaluation

The method of evaluation was through the use of a self-report inventory. The inventory was designed by this researcher and consisted of five areas of examination. The objective was to evaluate the efficacy of the SYMBIS premarital program in five specific areas. The first area of the questionnaire dealt with the class format. Because this program was designed to include group dynamics it seemed good to evaluate the helpfulness of this dynamic on the couples training. The second area of the questionnaire examined the class materials. Questions in this area focused on the helpfulness and completeness of the SYMBIS materials. The third area of the questionnaire focused on the class leaders. This section was aimed at discovering how effective and competent the leaders were as compared to one another. Since three different leaders were used over the four year period it became an item of interest to see how each was viewed by the couples. The fourth area of the questionnaire dealt with examining the PREAPRE inventory that each couple had taken as well as the interpretation of the results to the couples. Items like the ability of the inventory to help couples see areas they would not have otherwise noticed, the scope of the topics covered and its general helpfulness to them. The fifth area the questionnaire covered was the couple's relationship. Questions about their marital state, their ability to communicate, ability to work through conflict, marital satisfaction level and general opinion on the effectiveness of the SYMBIS program as a means of preparing for married life were included in this section.

The questionnaire included yes and no responses as well as scaling responses. It was designed to be completed by the couple in about five minutes. There were also some questions that allowed couples to expand on their answers if they chose to. The use of

comparison questions was also used to allow the data to focus in on one specific cause or help. The questionnaire also allowed couples to indicate the length they had been married by yearly increments.

Process of Evaluation

Each of the eighty couples was mailed a copy of the premarital questionnaire. There was also a cover letter which explained the purpose of the questionnaire as well as its intended use. For convenience sake a along with the questionnaire this researcher provided a self-stamped envelope for them to return the questionnaire. Participation in the questionnaire completion was entirely on a volunteer basis. The couples were offered a chance to see the results but no form of payment of compensation was included. The questionnaires were all sent out by mail on July 5, 2006. Time was then allowed for the couples to receive, complete and return the questionnaire. In a few cases the questionnaires were returned because of incorrect address. In those cases they were sent out again once current mailing information was obtained.

Within the first few weeks many of the questionnaires were completed and returned. As of September 2006 about 51% of the questionnaires had been received back. Because this researcher wanted to have a larger response base to draw data from a second letter was sent out to all eighty couples on September 11, 2006. The second letter was designed to thank the couples that had participated in the study as well as to encourage others to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was not included with the second letter. Instead, this researcher's email and phone number were included so couples that wished to participate could make contact to get a copy of the questionnaire

mailed to them. As of the second letter going out only one additional couple has requested a copy of the questionnaire.

Collecting and Recording the Data

As the questionnaires were returned completed, this researcher entered the results into an Access database. The database was designed for compiling and analyzing the data. The Access program was designed by Dr. Earl Sargeant. Dr. Sargeant has functioned as technical support for this project. Once the data was entered into the Access program it was then merged into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The Excel spreadsheet allowed this researcher to compare and analyze the data more thoroughly.

Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: The SYMBIS premarital program, as designed and implemented, will demonstrate significant levels of marital satisfaction among the couples that participated in the program.

Marital satisfaction will be determined by examining the self-report scores of the couples as a group. The questionnaire covered this topic well.

Hypothesis 2: Couples in the SYMBIS program will demonstrate that group premarital training is both desired and beneficial as compared to conjoint premarital training alone.

Research discusses the usefulness of group premarital and its benefits as opposed to conjoint only. Since the SYMBIS program employed both group and conjoint formats it will be able to draw conclusions as to which format the couples found most helpful.

Hypothesis 3: The SYMBIS program will demonstrate lower levels of divorce among its couples as opposed to the divorce rate that Hyland Heights had in the four years prior to the implementation of the SYMBIS program.

This finding will be determined by the amount of couples in stable marriages from the SYMBIS program as opposed to the percent of couples divorcing in the years prior to the SYMBIS program at Hyland Heights Baptist Church. The span of years prior to SYMBIS ranged from 1998 to 2002. Those years were chosen because they represent the time in which this researcher was on staff at Hyland Heights but SYMBIS was not in existence. In those four years the conjoint only method of premarital training was utilized. All training was done by individual pastors in a conjoint format. The use of a verifiable premarital inventory or group dynamics was not employed. Each couple was treated as a unit and was given training that was neither uniform nor scientifically sound. The results from these four years will act as a base line of divorce at Hyland Heights prior to SYMBIS. Once these numbers are compared the actual percent of marital permanence will be determined.

CHAPTER FIVE INTERPRETING THE FINDINGS

This chapter will focus specifically on the results that were obtained through the use of the questionnaire. The data from that questionnaire will be examined in the following fashion. First, the three hypotheses will be tested based on the results. Second, the overall quantitative results will be demonstrated and discussed. Third, each area of the questionnaire will be individually examined to ascertain the validity and effectiveness of the SYMBIS program components. Taking this step will serve to provide the ground work for future changes and improvements in the SYMBIS program. Fourth, the results will also be examined across categories to determine facts and findings that may not be immediately apparent. Fifth, improvements to the SYMBIS program will be suggested based on the examination of the findings. Sixth, the area of the anticipated role of churches in premarital training will be addressed. Seventh, suggestions for further study will be put forth. Last, conclusions will be drawn about the entire study.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: The SYMBIS premarital program, as designed and implemented, will demonstrate significant levels of marital satisfaction and success among the couples who participated in the program.

Area number five of the questionnaire specifically addressed the quality of each couple's relationship. It is from that section of the questionnaire that the data will be examined to answer this matter. There were specific questions in the questionnaire which

were aimed at determining the marital satisfaction level of each couple. The couples were given three choices upon which to rate their level of marital satisfaction. The three choices were very happy, happy or unhappy. The choice of unhappy was not chosen by any of the couples. All the couples chose one of the other two categories to describe their level of marital satisfaction. The category of very happy was chosen by 82.5% of the couples to rate their level of marital satisfaction. While the remaining 17.5% chose to rate their marital satisfaction as happy. Based on these numbers alone it can be deduced that SYMBIS premarital couples show significant levels of marital satisfaction.

Two other questions in this area also support that marital satisfaction of the SYMBIS couples. These two questions dealt with the topics of communication and conflict resolution. Each of the couples was asked to rate their level of communication as well as their ability to work through conflict. Both of these questions were scaling questions rating from low to high.

In the area of communication the couples were asked to rate their ability to communicate with a rating of needs work, average, above average or excellent. In the category of needs work only 5% of the couples chose to describe their communication ability this way. The category of average was chosen by 22.5% of the couples. The above average category was chosen by 60% of the couples and 12.5% of the couples chose excellent to describe their ability to communicate. When the top three response scores are combined there is a 95% combined score. If only the top two categories of above average and excellent are combined there is still a majority 72.5% score. It appears that the communication ability of the couples who completed SYMBIS is significant.

The second question from the questionnaire that bears on hypothesis one is directly related to the couple's ability to work through conflict. The couples were asked to rate their ability to work through conflict. They were given four possible responses to that question. They could chose to rate their ability as poor, average, good, or very good. None of the couples chose poor to rate their ability to work through conflict. The category of average was chosen by 17.5% of the couples. The category of good was chosen by 47.5% of the couples and the category of very good was chosen by 35% of the couples. Combining the top two categories of good and very good demonstrates that 82.5% of the couples possess significantly good ability to manage conflict.

In conclusion to the aspect of couple marital satisfaction levels, it can be said that the couple's self-report score indicated that 82.5% of the couples are very satisfied with their relationships in these areas. It can also be concluded that in the areas of communication and conflict resolution the couples are better off for having taken the SYMBIS program. These two findings combined appear to indicate that SYMBIS couples have significant levels of marital satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Couples in the SYMBIS program will demonstrate that group premarital training is both desired and beneficial as opposed to conjoint premarital training alone.

Research seems to indicate that conjoint premarital training is favored over group. SYMBIS was specifically designed to utilize group dynamics. It was believed, without consulting the research, that couples would benefit more by participating in group as opposed to conjoint alone. With this belief in mind SYMBIS was designed and implemented so that all couples would be exposed to both formats. The couples received

group training times and then individual time with the class leader. This way they received the benefits of both formats.

The questionnaire focused on gaining information on these two formats. The couples were asked to rate their group and individual sessions separately. The first area of the questionnaire focused on this matter. Four of the questions from section one were simple yes or no responses while the fifth question asked the couples to choose between group and one-on-one time as their preference. The third question of this section asked which was more helpful, group time or the time with the class leader. Time with the leader one-on-one was preferred by 68.29% of the couples. On the other hand 39.02% chose time with the group as their preference. The reason these figures do not equal 100% is because some of the couples chose to answer individually. For instance, the female of the couple chose group experience and the male of the couple chose one-on-one time. Regardless of the scores, the bottom line is that 68% of the couples believed that one-on-one (conjoint) was more helpful than group time.

There are also a few other questions that bear on this topic. The very first question of the questionnaire asked if the couples benefited from meeting with the group. The affirmative response to that question had 97.22%. On the other hand 8.57% said they saw no benefit in meeting with the group. It appears that an overwhelming percent of the couples did find benefit in meeting with the group even though that might not have been their preferred format to receive premarital training.

The second question of the questionnaire asked if the couple benefited from meeting with the class leader one-on-one. An overwhelming 92.68% agreed that they benefited from meeting with the leader. On the other hand 9.76% said they saw little or

no benefit in meeting with the class leader one-on-one. This finding was somewhat surprising because it was expected that the personal one-on-one time would be beneficial for all couples due simply to the focused attention they received in that time. As well, research has proven that couples prefer conjoint premarital training. Yet in this case almost 10% of the couples did not find any benefit in meeting conjointly.

The third question of the questionnaire also has bearing on this topic. The third question asked the couples if they felt like they learned from others in the class. Did they find benefit to the class sessions even though they may not have preferred that format? A strong 80% said yes to this question. Whereas 17.5% said they found no learning benefit from being in the class with other couples. Once again the scores are skewed a little because some couples chose to answer independently of one another on this question.

One final question that pertains to this hypothesis is question number five. This question simply asked if the couple found the class experiences a positive one or not. It was a simple yes or no response. An overwhelming 97.5% of the couples said that the class experience was positive. Only 2.5% of the couples said that the class experience was not positive.

In conclusion to the matter of conjoint verses group, it is safe to say that the majority of SYMBIS couples liked meeting in group format and even benefited from being in the group experience but when asked which format they liked best they preferred conjoint over group. It is also safe to assume that these couples on a whole received benefit from the group experience even though they would not have chosen that to begin with. The simple fact that they had to participate in group enabled them to benefit from it.

Hypothesis 3: The SYMBIS program will demonstrate lower levels of divorce among its couples as opposed to the divorce rate that Hyland Heights had prior to the implementation of the SYMBIS program.

The main reason SYMBIS was designed and implemented at Hyland Heights was to curb the divorce rate with the secondary goal of cutting down on the need for counseling services that failing marriages were providing. At the time that SYMBIS was designed and implemented the amount of couples with counseling needs was overwhelming at times. The hope of the SYMBIS program was that it would “kill two birds with one stone.” It would severely cut down on the counseling needs of couples in trouble and curb the rate of divorce. This in turn would allow more time for the pastoral staff to invest themselves in other aspects of the ministry.

In order to have a baseline to work from the four year period prior to SYMBIS was chosen. That time period was from 1998-2002. In that time period the divorce rate at Hyland Heights was 17.85%. There was also a separation rate of 7.14% during that same time period.

In the questionnaire each couple was asked about their marital success and marital status. They were asked to place their marriage in one of three categories. The categories were married, separated or divorced. Both the separated and divorced categories had 0%. In other words, all the couples that completed the survey are still married. When this number is compared against the national average of 40-50% SYMBIS beats those numbers hands down. Even other programs like PREP by Dr. Scott Stanley can only boast of a 4% divorce rate. SYMBIS numbers exceed those of any other program that this researcher is aware of.

In order to be totally fair and accurate some other facts need to be mentioned. First, SYMBIS had 90 couples complete the program over its four year period. Of those 90 couples this researcher was able to find 80 of the couples' recent addresses. That means that only 80 couples actually had the questionnaire mailed to them. Of those 80 couples that received the questionnaire, 52.5% of the couples returned the questionnaire completed. According to this researcher's knowledge two of the couples that have not completed the questionnaire have divorced. One is not able to be found and the other couple shared this fact by phone but did not complete the questionnaire. One of those couples divorced within the first year and the other after two years of marriage. With these two divorces taken into account the divorce rate for the SYMBIS program is 2.22%. This number was obtained by dividing the number of couples that did complete the program into the number that actually divorced. Even the rate of 2.22% is better than any other printed divorce rate of any other program.

It appears that SYMBIS has reached its intended goal – to virtually eliminate divorce from the body of Hyland Heights Baptist Church. Not only is this true but it is also safe to assume that the couples that have completed SYMBIS are not the ones taking up all the counseling time of the pastors. The counseling time for couples of the SYMBIS program is extremely low. Over the four years and the 90 couples only a small number have come back for counseling needs beyond their premarital work. The ones that have come back are ones that have indicated upfront that they came from less than desirable backgrounds and therefore they knew marriage could be a difficult transition for them. This researcher only recalls of three couples that have returned for extended counseling beyond SYMBIS. It should be pointed out that every couple that has completed

SYMBIS has been extended the opportunity to return at any point if they see the need for further counseling.

Quantitative Analysis

At this point the results of the questionnaire will be examined by individual section. Each is outlined individually to provide a more cohesive approach. Questions with scaling answers are listed separately.

Area One: Format	Yes	No
Did you benefit from meeting with the group?	97.22%	8.57%
Did you find it beneficial to meet with the class leader?	92.68%	9.76%
Did you learn from others in the class?	80.80%	17.50%
Was the class experience a positive on for you as a couple?	97.50%	2.50%

Based on these findings it is safe to say that the couples as a whole found the class experience worthwhile and positive. Also the findings appear to indicate that the SYMBIS program should continue to incorporate the group and the conjoint formats. To eliminate the group dynamic would be to under cut the learning and potential growth of the couples in the class. Sometimes exercises that appear difficult for one to go through can afford the greatest benefit.

One other question not reflected above dealt with skills training verses information training. Research bears out clearly that information only premarital training is not nearly as effective as skills-based training. Teaching couples skills that they can use in their marriages enables them to build stronger and more fulfilling marriages. The

couples in this study were asked if they felt like they received more skills or information training. The results indicate that more couples felt like they received information training than skills-based training. Skills training received 34.15% of the vote and information based training received 70.73%. From the couples' perspective SYMBIS provided them with double the amount of information as it did skills on how to build their relationships. This finding will come into play again as the suggested improvements section is developed.

Area Two: Materials	Yes	No
Did you find the materials helpful and easy to understand?	97.62%	2.38%
Have you referred back to the SYMBIS materials since completing the program?	61.90%	38.10%

It appears that the SYMBIS couples found the books and workbooks helpful and easy to understand. It also stands to reason that since almost 62% of the couples have referred back to the book that there is added value to the materials even beyond the class training. Based on these results it seems appropriate to continue to use the SYMBIS materials in the future. There are some additions that this researcher would like to add to the program and these will be mentioned later in the suggestions for improvement section.

There are two other questions that need to be mentioned here as well. The couples were asked to rate the class materials overall. The choices for rating the materials were

poor, fair, good and very good. The vast majority of the couples (95.24%) rated the materials as good or very good. Only 4.76% of the couples rated the materials as less than good.

There is also another question in this area that is worthy of mentioning. The question allowed for comparison between the class teaching time, the book reading and the workbook exercises. The question asked the couples to pick one of the three items as the most helpful to them in the SYMBIS program. The book reading received 4.76% of the vote. The workbook exercises received 47.62% of the vote and the class teaching time received 54.76% of the vote. In other words the class teaching time was the most helpful aspect of the class for the couples. Workbook exercises did not fall far behind and book reading itself was rated as least helpful.

Area Three: Leader	Yes	No
Did you find the leader approachable?	100%	0%
Did your leader appear to know the materials well?	100%	0%
Was the one-on-one time with your leader helpful?	87.18%	12.82%

Based on these results the leaders that were chosen proved to be competent and caring. Couples in the classes perceived them as approachable and knowledgeable. All three leaders were good with the couples as well as proficient in the materials they were teaching according to the response of the couples.

Another question in this area asked the couples to rate their leader overall. Leader rating was a scaling question ranging from poor to very good. None of the leaders were

rated as poor. The rating of good was used by 19.51% of the couples. The rating of very good was chosen by 80.49% of the couples. It appears that the couples all thought highly of their leader.

One other question about the leader was contained in area three. Since each of the leaders was from different educational and vocational backgrounds, this researcher sought to find which leader was rated highest. The three leaders were Scott, Paul and Ryan. Paul, this researcher, is a clergy person by profession. Scott is a layperson and college professor by profession. Ryan is a college layperson as well as a ministry assistant at the church. The couple's responses show that 53.66% of them had Paul as their leader; while Scott and Ryan had 24.39% and 21.95% of the couples in their classes. The reason this question was added is because there is a reasonable amount of debate over the effectiveness of lay leaders over the professionals. Later in this chapter the individual scores of the leaders will be contrasted with the couple's comments on each leader's knowledge, approachability, helpfulness and overall rating.

Area Four: Premarital Inventory (PREAPRE)	Yes	No
Do you feel that the premarital inventory was helpful to you as a couple?	90.24%	7.32%
Do you feel the inventory helped you to see items you would not have otherwise seen?	87.18%	12.82%
Where there any topics that you felt the inventory did not address regarding marital living and relationship?	10.53%	89.47%
Were the results of the inventory easy for you to understand as they were explained to you?	97.50%	2.50%

Based on these findings the PREPARE premarital inventory is both comprehensive and effective. The vast majority of the couples found the inventory helpful, revealing and easy to understand. A small group of couples, 10.53%, felt like the inventory did not address certain topics. The topics they felt the inventory did not address were sexuality, parenting and finances. These topics will be taken into account in the section on suggested improvements as well as the steps and materials needed to strengthen the program in these areas. It should be noted here that the SYMBIS materials spoke very little to the area of sexuality. This is one obvious shortcoming of the SYMBIS printed materials.

There was one other question in this area that asked the couples to rate the PREAPRE inventory overall. They could choose poor, fair, good or very good. The rating of poor received 2.5% while the rating of fair received 5.0%. The ratings of good and very good received 45% apiece. In other words 90% of the couples viewed the PREAPRE inventory in a positive light.

Area Five: Couple Relationship	Yes	No
Did you choose to marry?	97.5%	2.5%
Do you feel like SYMBIS was a good way to prepare for married life?	100%	0%
Would you recommend SYMBIS to other couples getting ready for marriage?	100%	0%

The vast majority of couples who took the SYMBIS program chose to marry. Only a small percentage of the couples that completed SYMBIS chose to not marry. All of the couples, both those that did and those that did not marry, thought SYMBIS was a good way to prepare for married life. This same group was also willing to recommend the SYMBIS program to other couples seeking to marry.

Another question in this fifth section dealt with the couple's length of marriage. Because the couples were all married at different times, the length of each couple's married time was different.

Length of time married	Percentage
Less than one year	25.00%
One to two years	17.50%
Two to three years	37.50%
Three or more years	20.00%

Based on these findings 57.50% of the couples have been married for two or more years and 42.50% have been married less than two years. These findings will be examined further in the next section of this chapter. The length of each couple's married time will be contrasted against their communication and conflict resolution ability. This will demonstrate what the relation is between length of marriage and marital satisfaction. This researcher was curious as to what impact the length of marriage would have on the couple's level of marital satisfaction.

There is one last question in this section that needs to be examined. The question was how often the SYMBIS graduates engaged in some form of a marital enrichment opportunity or marital seminar. This question was asked because research indicates that premarital training is effective for a specific window of time. That maximum window of time is around three years. This means that many of the SYMBIS couples (80%) are still in that premarital beneficial window.

The couples were given three possible responses to answer this question. The responses were once a year, once every six months and haven't yet. The results showed that 72.5% of the couples had not engaged in any form of marital enrichment opportunity. On the other hand 22.5% of the couples had engaged in some form of marital enrichment over the last year. Only 5% of the couples had engaged in some form of marital enrichment in the last six months. All in all, it appears that most of the SYMBIS graduates have not taken the time to engage in marital enrichment opportunities. The reasons for this are unclear especially when the class leaders all emphasized doing something on a regular basis to strengthen their marriages. It should be pointed out that many of the couples rated their marital satisfaction high despite not attending on-going enrichment opportunities.

Qualitative Analysis

The focus of this section will be to examine the relationship between the different areas in which data was collected. The first area to be examined is the quality of each couple's relationship. The length of years and their ability to manage conflict will be examined. The question to be answered is whether the couples that have been married

longer show greater ability to manage conflict or not. The second area of relationship quality will examine the relationship between years married and marital satisfaction. Do couples that have been married longer show increased levels of marital satisfaction? The third area will examine the correlation between communication ability and information received from premarital training. Did the couples who stated that they received more information than skills-based training have lower levels of communication ability? There is also a second part to this third area. The second part of this area will examine the relation between skills training and communication ability. These will be the couples that stated that they received more skills-based training. The question to be answered here will be whether or not their communication ability ranked higher than the others in the group. The fourth area will examine the interaction between both skills and information as they impact the couple's ability to work through conflict. Did the couples with more skills-based training fare better than those that said they received more informational training? Following that the fifth area to be examined will be the correlation between a couple's length of marriage and their ability to communicate. Do the couples that have been married longer exhibit better communication ability? Finally, there will be a sixth area in which the class leaders will be examined to determine which was most effective with the couples. The couples' rating of the leaders and the background of the leader will be interacted with. The question to be answered is whether or not the trained professional fared better than the lay leader in the eyes of the couples.

The first area of examining the couple's years married and ability to manage conflict rating broke down as follows.

Years Married	Average	Good	Very Good
Less than 1 yr.	40%	40%	20%
1-2 Yrs.	0%	71.42%	28.57%
2-3 yrs.	14.28%	42.85%	42.85%
3-4 yrs.	12.5%	50%	37.5%

Based on these findings it appears that the couples married less than one year are in a transitional stage where they are still learning to manage conflict. For the length of married from 1-2 years there appears to be a significant improvement in the good category and a slight improvement in the very good category. In the range of 2-3 years of marriage the category of average increases slightly where the good and very good categories are even. In the 3-4 year period the percentages shift slightly with only the category of good increasing. It appears that during years 2-3 was the best time for the SYMBIS couples for working through conflict.

Two conclusions from this data interaction would be that couples married between 3-4 years would be good candidates for a refresher course on conflict management and that couples married for less than one year would probably benefit from a mentor relationship with an older married couple.

The second area to be examined is the level of marital happiness as correlated with the length of years married. Did being married longer cause a couple to have a greater level of marital happiness/satisfaction? The findings are as follows.

Years Married	Very happy rating
Less than 1	90%
1-2 years	85%
2-3 years	60%
3-4 years	87.5%

Based on these scores the following conclusions can be drawn. First, couples in the first year of marriage demonstrate a high level of satisfaction. This is probably due largely to the newness and excitement of married life. Second, there is a noticeable drop in the scores from year two to three. This may be the result of jobs, children, and large purchases like a home or some other factors. It is in this window of time that marital enrichment opportunities would be of the greatest help. Last, the third year and beyond begins to demonstrate a rebound in the area of marital satisfaction. This is seen as a positive by this researcher since the third year score will have some impact on the following year's marital satisfaction outcomes.

The third area to be examined is the relation between skills, information and communication ability. Each of the couples was able to state whether they felt like they received more skills or more information from the training. First the skills-based group's scores will be figured and then the information group's scores will be figures. Doing this should reveal any significant differences between the two group's abilities in communication. The results for this area are as listed below.

Skills group rating	Communication score
Needs work	7.14%
Average	14.28%
Above average	71.42%
Excellent	7.14%

Based on these findings, the couples which stated that they received more skills than information in their training also scored well in their ability to communicate. Combining the top two scores gives this group a score of 78.56% in the above average or excellent category.

Next, listed below are the findings from the group that stated that they felt like they received more information than skills training from SYMBIS.

Info. group rating	Communication score
Needs work	3.44%
Average	20.68%
Above average	65.51%
Excellent	10.34%

These scores are very similar to those of the skills-based group. The only difference, and it is slight, is when the top two categories scores are added. When the categories of very good and excellent are added for this group the score comes out to

75.85%. The difference between the skills and information groups is 2.61%. This difference is not significant.

The fourth area to be examined deals with skills and information as they relate to each couple's ability to manage conflict. Once again, did the group that believed they received more skills training demonstrate any significant difference in their ability to manage conflict than those which felt they received more information-based training? The findings are listed below.

Skills group rating	Conflict score
Poor	0%
Average	14.28%
Good	64.28%
Very good	21.42%

Based on these scores the skills-based group has significant ability to manage conflict with only 14.28% rating themselves as average in this area. A significant 85.70% of these couples are doing quite well in the area of conflict management.

Below are the scores of the group that felt like they received more information than skills-based training from SYMBIS in the area of conflict resolution. According to research these couples should not demonstrate as good an ability to manage conflict than those which received skills-based training. The chart below gives the percentage of response for the couples in the area of conflict resolution.

Info. group rating	Conflict score
Poor	0%
Average	31.03%
Good	31.03%
Very good	37.93%

Based on these results the skills group shows a marked difference in their ability to manage conflict. If the top two categories of good and very good are added together and compared, the group results become significant. The skills group has a score of 85.70% and the information group has a score of 68.96%. In light of these results it is safe to say that the skills group did come out ahead in their ability to manage conflict. It is also noteworthy that neither group had scored themselves in the poor category.

The fifth area to be examined is the relationship between length of marriage and communication ability. Do the couples that have been married longer demonstrate higher levels of communication ability? The findings are as follows below.

Years Married	Rating	Score
3-4 yrs.	Above average	100%
2-3 yrs.	Average	11.11%
2-3 yrs.	Above average	66.66%
2-3 yrs.	Excellent	22.22%
1-2 yrs.	Needs work	14.28%
1-2 yrs.	Average	14.28%

1-2 yrs.	Above average	57.14%
1-2 yrs.	Excellent	14.28%
Less than 1	Needs work	11.11%
Less than 1	Average	88.88%

Based on these findings the degree of couple communication ability rose as the couple's years of marriage increased. By the time the couples had reached year three and beyond they all rated their ability to communicate as above average. One other important fact that should be mentioned is that the category of needs work was only chosen by couples married less than two years. Once couples moved past the two year mark they did not choose that category to describe their communication ability.

The sixth and final area to be examined is the area of the leaders of the SYMBIS training. Research, as previously noted, indicates that lay persons are as effective as professional leaders in the area of premarital training. At this point the actual leaders of the SYMBIS program will be evaluated based on the couple's responses. The goal here is to determine if the actual research findings noted earlier also occurred in the SYMBIS study.

Question number fifteen of the questionnaire was directed towards the topic of leader effectiveness. The question was worded, "Was the one-on-one time with your leader helpful?" In response to that question 87.18% answered the question with a yes. While the remaining 12.82% answered with a no. This question was examined further by looking at which couples said no and which leader they had for the SYMBIS training. Pastor Paul was rated as not helpful by 10.5% of the couples who answered with a no.

Scott was rated as not helpful by 2.56% of the couples that answered no to the question of leader helpfulness. Ryan, the lay worker, was not rated as unhelpful by any of the couples. In other words the lay worker, Ryan, received 100% positive feedback in the area of leader helpfulness.

In order to check these results even further the answers to question number sixteen were examined. Question number sixteen of the questionnaire asked the couples to give their leader an overall rating. They could pick from poor, good or very good as possible responses. The response of poor was not chosen by any of the couples. The response good was chosen by 19.51% of the couples. The response very good was chosen by 80.49% of the couples to describe their leader overall.

It was encouraging to see that none of the leaders were rated as poor but the question was still left as to how each leader was individually rated. After looking back at the couples that rated their leader as very good the following results were obtained.

Leader	Rating	Score (percent)
Paul	Very good	62.5%
Scott	Very good	85.71%
Ryan	Very good	100%

When these numbers are compared, the professionals Paul and Scott, rate lower than the lay worker Ryan. It appears that the research in this area is accurate and has demonstrated to be consistent in the SYMBIS program as well. Lay leaders can do as good or better of a job than trained professionals in the area of premarital training.

SYMBIS Premarital Program Improvements

The focus of this next section is to suggest, based on the findings of this study, improvements to the SYMBIS program. Each of the five areas of the questionnaire has been factored in to obtain these suggested improvements.

Question number eleven of the questionnaire asked the couples if there were any areas that they wished had been covered in the SYMBIS training. Of the couples that were polled 26.19% of the couples said that they believed there were some topics left out in their opinion. The items they cited included parenting, financial advice, sexual relations issues, working through differences and individual needs based on gender. Based on these findings the following improvements need to be implemented into the SYMBIS program.

1. Conflict Management

The SYMBIS program does have one session on the topic of conflict and how to manage it. The PREPARE inventory also covers the area of conflict and how to handle it. The lack here appears to be in the actual practice of conflict resolution as opposed to information regarding conflict resolution. SYMBIS needs to become more skills-based in this area of its training. One practical way to accomplish this would be to use the PREPARE workbook which includes ten steps to resolving conflict as well as individual sheets that couples can use to effectively examine their options and ways of solving conflict. Having each couple pick a point of conflict and then giving them the assignment to work through that conflict using the worksheets and ten steps in the workbook would be good practice. Also, taking time in class to model and demonstrate conflict resolution would increase their ability. This would allow the couples to experience the process as

well as the outcome. One final step that needs to take place is for each couple to practice the ten steps of conflict resolution in front of a counselor or the class leader. This way the couples could learn new skills and ways of handling conflict.

2. Gender-based Needs Training

The SYMBIS materials do cover some gender differences. It does not however cover the unique needs of males and females. SYMBIS needs to incorporate the needs of men and women as they find themselves in the marriage relationship. Just talking about gender differences alone is not enough. This material can be easily incorporated into the training in the same session on gender differences. The material that can be used to supplement this area is by Willard Harley. Harley, in his book called, His Needs Her Needs, does a great job of outlining the needs of men and women in a marital context, needs that affect the emotional climate and satisfaction of each couple. Harley touches on items like respect, admiration, emotional connection and security. Utilizing this book as supplemental reading would also go a long way in helping couples understand that their spouse is made complete through them. Failure to understand and meet these needs leaves one's spouse vulnerable to marital unfaithfulness.

3. Financial Management

Of all the items suggested as topics the SYMBIS material overlooked, financial management was mentioned most. This topic made up 36% of all the items mentioned. The SYMBIS materials do not specifically teach on money and financial management. The PREPARE inventory covers this area and does a good job of it. There are worksheets for financial budgeting and for short and long-term goals. A future suggested improvement in this area would be to include at least one session devoted to financial

management. Items like budgeting, insurances and investments need to be a part of that training.

Also, in order for the couples to have a real life experience they need to be required to complete a budget. Actually taking the time to work through the items they are aware of now and integrating future additions would serve them well. This session would take up a good amount of time so adding it as one more separate session would be of greater benefit to the couples than trying to squeeze it into an existing session.

4. Parenting Basics

The SYMBIS program does not include any parenting materials. The PREPARE inventory deals a little with parenting and gender roles but not anything that would be useable by a couple that is expecting or living with a new born. Reality is that most couples getting married will have children of their or own or choose to adopt. Because of this there is a need to have one session on parenting and what to expect during that phase of life.

When it comes to finding parenting materials there is no lack. The dilemma seems to be in what materials to use and how to find something that covers the basics in one hour or more. It is also a challenge to find materials that include the changes in the couple's relationship during the first child and how to handle those changes. For many couples the first child brings a drop in marital satisfaction due to the increased pressure and needs of the new family member. How to navigate those changes as well as understanding the changes before they come will greatly enhance the couple's chances of surviving this transition.

It appears that this should be a separate session based on the uniqueness of the topic and the amount of time needed to cover the basics. It also appears that this topic will need to be developed from various sources and then condensed to fit a one session format. Combining materials on changes in couple lifestyle and parenting basics will comprise most of this new session. It will also be necessary to add some resources for couples to locate later when the need to do so arises, resources the couples can use to educate themselves about the intricacies of parenting.

5. Sex and Married Life

The topic of sex in marriage was mentioned by 18% of the couples as an item they wished they had more premarital training in. In fact, one couple requested information on how to handle the situation of a wife having greater interest in sex than her husband. The area of sex was not discussed in the written SYMBIS book. The premarital inventory, PREPARE, did include sex in the area of sexual expectations. In the conjoint time the counselor and the couple would discuss the topic of sex in marriage but it was mostly done in brief.

A suggested improvement for SYMBIS would be to incorporate one session on sexual living for married couples. Items like gender differences in sexuality, sexual needs, communication in sex and how to handle sexual difficulties will need to be addressed. There are some good materials to draw from to develop training for this topic.

6. Teaching on Marriage Maintenance

Marriage is often viewed as a “one time” event. It is something the individuals in the relationship have accomplished and then have moved on to conquer other things. This mindset is often the beginning of marital drift, a time when couples slowly move

apart due to investment in activities and goals other than their marriage. These goals and activities are often good and worthy but the marriage relationship suffers because it is not nurtured and developed. The problem with our view of marriage is that we, as couples, do not understand that our marriages need daily, weekly, monthly and yearly maintenance. SYMBIS needs to incorporate materials that draw attention to the marital journey that each couple is beginning on their wedding day. Teaching on marriage stages and growth would be a good way to address this topic. This type of teaching would enable the couples to be prepared for those changes as well as have some tools and understanding on how to move through each of those stages.

Another dynamic of marital maintenance that needs to be added to the SYMBIS program is information on marital seasons. Gary Chapman in his book, The Four Seasons of Marriage, outlines the four seasons that all marriages pass through. The seasons he shares are spring, winter, summer and fall. Each season has attitudes, actions, emotions and a climate that is associated with that season. Helping couples to see the seasons as well as their transitional nature and purpose will enable couples to move through them better. Too often couples are ready to quit on their marriages when the opportunity for growth is at its best. Too often marital struggles are viewed as reasons to walk away and quit instead of viewing them as a time that is transitional.

7. Teaching on the Purpose of Marriage

Marriage, as the American culture largely views it, is a vehicle for happiness and self-fulfillment. Fulfillment that comes out of each member having their desires and expectations met. The fulfillment of these desires and expectations then lead to

happiness. Personal happiness has thus become the main reason for marriage in our American culture.

SYMBIS needs to address this belief from a biblical perspective. Couples need to grasp the fact that God has not designed marriage for personal happiness. It is not designed to keep us happy or to make us happy. It is designed to honor Him and that is through difficulty and even unhappiness at times. It was designed by God to teach us how to love, to procreate and to ultimately glorify God through our actions as individuals and families. SYMBIS can incorporate these items into the program without designing a new session. The introductory week, session one, can be utilized to accomplish this. The material content can be drawn from various Christian sources on this subject.

Anticipated Role of Churches in Premarital Training

It is the desire of this researcher that the churches of the United States of America begin to change the ways in which they think and act in regard to marriage. Outlined below are several changes that need to be implemented in local churches if they hope to have a reasonable impact on the future of marriages and families in this country.

The first change has to do with the way the institution of marriage is viewed by most clergy. Marriage is often viewed as a “one time” event. Clergy persons need to understand that marriage, the actual service, is just the beginning. Marriage should be viewed as a process in which there is a beginning which is to be followed by an on-going state of growth and change. H. Norman Wright said it well when he said that church ministers should realize that “...their calling is not to perform weddings but to nurture

marriages.”¹ The day of the wedding is just a beginning for the couple. Performing a wedding is like giving birth to a child, one that is not abandoned after birth. When this on-going mindset is adopted then the preparation as well as the time invested in the couple will significantly increase. Items like requiring premarital training, not doing spur of the moment weddings and telling couples to wait even if it causes conflict will begin to be regular practices.

The second change has to do with the content of premarital training. When premarital training is performed by various clergy on a church staff, the content often is not consistent from one pastor to another. Hence, one couple may be getting great premarital training while another is getting much less. Because of difference in experience and training there is no way to guarantee that each couple is getting what they need. The way to guarantee quality comes through uniformity and adherence to solid premarital research. It is this researcher’s hope that clergy will avail themselves of more than just the theological aspects of marital training. That they will look to what solid Christian researchers have learned and begin to incorporate these findings into their premarital training.

The third change has to do with skills-based training. Too often premarital training is done conjointly which often amounts to no more than an exchange of information. Mike McManus, the founder of Marriage Savers, has said it well when he said, “Pastors talk too much.” What he meant by that is that couples are hearing too much and not being challenged to learn new skills. They sit and shake their heads in agreement all the while they have not learned anything skills-based that will help them in time of trouble. Couples must learn the skills necessary to build their own relationships.

¹ H. Norman Wright, The Premarital Counseling Handbook (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977), 21.

Education does not insure growth or the ability to perform that which one is taught. Experience yields skill and growth. The problem in churches today appears to be that pastors believe that more information will yield spiritual and personal growth. If one hears enough good teaching or preaching he will become all that God wants him to be. All the while we stand by and watch “Christians” live contrary to the teaching they have sat under for years. With this being the case should it surprise us that couples who are taught right will not simply act right? Probably not!

Clergy need to begin teaching skills through “hands on” training. Adopting a curriculum that requires couples to interact, solve problems and even fight if necessary is a must. Whatever skills a person has not learned in the home environment he will not demonstrate in the marital relationship. It is therefore the responsibility of the church to train couples on how to “do” marriage relationships. The breakdown of the American family structure is what has passed this responsibility on to the church. Churches must pick up the mantle and begin restoring the family by training couples before marriage to live and love right. This in turn will put the responsibility back in the hands of the American family.

A fourth change in the role of churches has to do with empowering lay couples to do the work of premarital training. Premarital training is more effective and better received with lay persons than with professionals. The professionals are simply not as well received as the lay persons. If churches could begin to catch a glimpse of handing this work over to qualified lay persons the church as a whole would benefit. Making this a reality will require several steps. First, we as clergy must be willing to trust others with this aspect of ministry. We must be willing to let go of control and allow qualified

couples to forge their way. Essentially, we must face our own fears and limitations. Empowering lay couples to do this part of the ministry allows pastors to have more time to invest themselves in other areas of ministry. Second, we need to select couples with strong marriages, marriages that have the respect and admiration of those in the church. Hand picking couples to do this work is the best approach. Taking the time to observe, interact with and learn about the couples of the church body is the place to start. Then set out to involve the ones that demonstrate a strong marriage by asking them to be a part. Third, we need to invest our time in training and preparing leaders to do the work. The time spent training marriage leaders is an investment in the future of countless couples. Premarital that multiplies is the way of the future. Last, we need to avail the lay leaders to on-going training and marital enrichment. Couples in leadership need to have times of refreshment as well as further education in marital work. Training and enriching couples ensures on-going quality in the premarital program.

A fifth and final change for the churches is to view premarital training as an evangelistic tool. Too often pastors pass up the opportunity to bring in the lost and to build their church with young couples by ignoring this aspect of premarital training. This researcher has witnessed individuals getting saved through SYMBIS as well as many other young couples that were un-churched getting involved in a local assembly. Premarital training has great potential for any and every church regardless of its size or number of weddings it does a year. If pastors want to reach the lost and un-churched young couples of today premarital training is a great way to do it.

One of the main reasons for this is because marriage is a right of passage that many Americans will involve themselves in. Offering premarital training is a way of catching those couples at a time and a way in which they want to be caught.

Suggestions for Further Study

The largest suggestion for further study would be to resurvey these same couples in another five years to determine a long-term impact SYMBIS has had on their marriages. Because SYMBIS has only been in existence for a little over four years there is not any long-term study or data to support conclusions past the fourth year of marriage. The short-term data is promising but in order to fully substantiate this program there needs to follow-up studies. This should be done once all the couples have passed the five year mark. This will require waiting a bit but it will further indicate the worthiness of the SYMBIS program at prohibiting divorce and at building healthy marriages.

A second aspect of further study is to use the SYMBIS program with another population that is different than the population of Hyland heights Baptist Church. The group at Hyland Heights was mainly composed of white middle-class individuals. It would be good to use the SYMBIS materials in different socio-economic settings to find the effectiveness with other groups. Because America is becoming more and more racially diverse further testing of this nature would be the best way to determine the effectiveness of the SYMBIS program nationally.

Conclusions

There are several conclusions that this study provides. They are outlined below with brief explanation.

First, the SYMBIS program is a worthy program, as proven through the data, at preparing couples for marriage as well as curbing the divorce rate among its students. The SYMBIS program stands head and shoulders above many if not all other programs in existence with a divorce rate of 2.22%. The closest figure to compete with this rate of divorce is the PREP program which boasts a 4% divorce rate over a five year period. The only two couples that did divorce from SYMBIS are ones that have been married less than two years. If that trend proves consistent the long-term divorce rate may be as good.

Second, the SYMBIS program demonstrates that couples benefit from group and individual training. It is not a debate of which one works best it is a combination of both. When this approach is utilized the couples receive the benefits from both formats.

Third, the data from this study shows that couples fair better with skills-based training as opposed to information-based approaches. Training couples how to communicate and handle conflict is better than educating them about communication and conflict.

Fourth, the PREAPRE premarital inventory is an effective tool at helping couples gain insight into their relationship. It is broad enough to cover the majority of issues couples need investigate prior to marriage. Specific areas will need to have greater focus and time in the future.

Fifth, based upon the results and reception of the SYMBIS program it is worthy of replication in other churches around the nation. The data speaks for itself. This

program is able to help couples build marriage that have a high level of relational satisfaction as well as proficiency in communication and conflict resolution skills.

Sixth, the SYMBIS written materials are of good quality. Through this study they have demonstrated an ability to inform and equip couples with the tools necessary to build healthy relationships.

In conclusion, the SYMBIS program has been worth all the hours that have been invested in the preparing, organizing, teaching, modeling, and counseling necessary to make it a reality. This simple but effective program should be replicated in as many churches across the United States as possible in an attempt to preserve marriages and families for the next generation. This program should also be incorporated into training for seminary students who will one day be offering premarital training to the thousands of couples they will encounter in their years of service to our Savior.

APPENDIX A

Premarital Questionnaire

Area One: Format

1. Did you find benefit in meeting as a group with other couples? () Yes () No
2. Did you find it beneficial to meet with the class leader one-on-one? () Yes () No
3. Which was more helpful to you as a couple, time with the leader one-on-one or time with the class? () Leader () Class
4. Did you learn from others in the class? () Yes () No
5. Was the class experience a positive one for you as a couple? () Yes () No
6. Do you feel like you received more skills training or information from the class times? () Skills () Information

Area Two: Materials

7. Did you find the materials helpful and easy to understand? () Yes () No
8. Have you referred back to the class materials since completing SYMBIS? () Yes () No
9. What was most helpful to you of the following three choices? () Book reading () Workbook exercises or () Class teaching
10. How would you rate the class materials overall? () Poor () Fair () Good () Very Good
11. Are there any topics you wished that the material had covered? () Yes () No If yes, what area or topic would that be? _____

Area Three: Leader

12. Who was the leader of the SYMBIS class when you took it? () Pastor Paul () Scott () Ryan
13. Did you find the leader approachable? () Yes () No
14. Did your leader appear to know the material well? () Yes () No
15. Was the one-on-one time with your leader helpful? () Yes () No
16. How would you rate your leader overall? () Poor () Good () Very Good

Area Four: Premarital Inventory

17. Do you feel that the premarital inventory was helpful to you as a couple?
() Yes () No
18. Do you feel that the premarital inventory helped you to see items you may have not seen otherwise? () Yes () No
19. Were there any topics that you feel the inventory did not address regarding marital living and relationship? () Yes () No
20. Were the results of the inventory easy to understand as they were explained to you? () Yes () No
21. How would you rate the inventory overall? () Poor () Fair () Good
() Very Good

Area Five: Couple Relationship

22. Did you () Marry () Choose to not marry
23. How many years have you been married? () Less than one () One to two
() Two to three () More than three
24. What is your present marital status? () Married () Separated () Divorced
25. How would you rate your marital satisfaction? () Very Happy () Happy
() Unhappy
26. How would you rate your communication with one another? () Needs work
() Average () Above average () Excellent
27. How would you rate your ability to work through conflicts as a couple?
() Poor () Average () Good () Very Good
28. How often do you take time to engage in marital seminars or opportunities to strengthen your marriage? () Once a year () Once every six months
() Haven't yet
29. Do you feel like SYMBIS was a good way to prepare for married life? () Yes
() No
30. Would you recommend SYMBIS to other couples getting ready for marriage?
() Yes () No

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EDUCATIONAL

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MINISTERIAL

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PROFESSIONAL

Hyland Heights Baptist Church, Associate Pastor, December 14, 1997 – present.

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, Full-time student, 1995- December 1997

Central Virginia Community Services, Residential Technician, September 1993-
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PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES

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