

**ASSESSMENT OF THE EXISTING PREMARITAL COUNSELLING
PROGRAMS OFFERED IN SELECTED PCEA CHURCHES IN KIAMBU
DISTRICT**

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BY

BY ROSE NGANGA AND CHRISTINE WASANGA

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Marriage is often the backbone of a society – the basic unit on which society leans for proper functioning. It is the closest bond that can occur between two people, but very few people really prepare for the demands of living together in such a way that needs are met, dreams are fulfilled and harmony is attained (Wright 1992). The result of this is marital breakup being so frequent even among Christian couples, that it appears to be the order of the day in our society. Nguru (2006) wondered whether marriages should have a sell by date after observing the number of marriages that were in trouble.

Research shows that effects of broken marriages such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, intimacy problems, finances and stress are far reaching and extend beyond the family to society as a whole (Bridges and Isabella 1998). The institution of marriage has many challenges of its own so it is important that issues already existing must be addressed before couple gets into marriage (Gichinga 2003). One of the forums where these issues can be addressed is through premarital counseling.

Premarital counseling is vital for couples contemplating marriage. It provides couples contemplating marriage with the necessary information to establish and develop a strong marital foundation (Stahmann and Hiebert 1997). These programs offer the necessary guidance and groundwork to assist couples in evaluating their readiness to enter into a permanent life of commitment. Research indicates that premarital counseling plays a vital role in building strong marriages when it is properly done since, in any endeavors, dreams and goals not backed by concrete plans and preparations can result into failure and marriage is no exception claims (Wright 1992).

The first mention of premarital counseling as a valued service occurred in a 1928 article in the American Journal of obstetrics and gynecology. From then, and until the mid 1950s, most of the writings concerned physicians and the premarital physical examinations. In the 1950s, religious literature as well as mental health literature began to focus upon premarital counseling (Boehi, et al 1997).

In the Traditional African societies, before, during and after initiation the young adult was taught to be a wife / husband in preparation for getting married (Mbiti 1969). There was also a reservoir of individuals to whom those in need of help could turn to (Gichinga 2003). They would instruct a couple on the expectations and roles in the marriage.

Following the industrialization, globalization and change of life style from rural to urban away from the familiar village, young people have no access to these individuals. Gichinga (2003) observed that there is a need for professional counselors to replace the traditional ones. Currently, many churches and public health agencies offer their services to young couples contemplating marriage. However, Gichinga (2003) noted that pastors, priests and religious people are the ones who do the premarital counseling.

However, a review of literature reviewed that there is a fair amount of diversity in existing premarital programs, with programs differing on a number of important dimensions. The differences range from the number of sessions, the qualifications of those conducting premarital counseling, the type of programs and the content among others (Gichinga 2003, Wright 1992, Stahmann and Hiebert 1997). For instance, Gichinga (2003) noted that most of the priests and religious people who conduct premarital counseling were not adequately trained and were too busy with church matters.

Although there are different premarital programs, Stahmann and Salts (1993) from a review of twenty premarital programs concluded that ideally premarital counseling should address certain issues which include, communication, conflict resolution, commitment, financial management, sexuality, parenting expectations, partners' family of origin, and couples' background. Gichinga (2003), Wright (1992), and Stahmann and Hiebert (1997), concurred that the premarital counselor should be trained and should display characteristics of a good counselor in order to be effective. Stahmann and Hiebert (1997) argued that the number of sessions depends upon many factors, but sufficient time should be spent in the process and must be spread across an adequate span of time.

Johnson and Booth (1998) stated that good premarital counseling helps couples adjust to marriage, while inadequate premarital counseling does not, but rather hinders it through lack of discussion of key issues that impact marriage. Many churches offer premarital counseling to couples before they wed and the PCEA church being one of the mainstream churches is no exemption.

Objectives

It is with this background that the researchers sought to investigate the nature of premarital counseling offered in P.C.E.A. churches in Kiambu District. The objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To find out the personnel involved in the premarital programs and the level of their counseling training.
2. To find out the content covered in premarital programs in the PCEA Churches in Kiambu District
3. To establish the practice of the premarital programs offered in the PCEA Churches in Kiambu District

4. To make recommendations for a standard premarital counseling program to be used in the PCEA Churches in Kiambu District

2.1 Methods/Descriptions

To achieve the objectives, a qualitative survey design was used. The target population consisted of Parish Ministers and church wedded couples in PCEA churches in one of the Divisions of Kiambu District. A sample of eight church ministers and eighty church wedded couples was drawn from eight parishes. To select a sample from the church wedded couples, snowball sampling was used.

The research instruments used were questionnaires for the church wedded couples and interview schedule for the parish ministers. Piloting was carried on a small number of wedded couples from PCEA churches that did not form the study group in order to ensure that the instruments were of acceptable reliability and validity, before the actual field research was carried out.

Data generated by questionnaires, was analyzed using descriptive statistics, diagrams and tabulation of statistical data, frequency distribution and percentages. Qualitative data was coded and content analyzed.

Ethical considerations were observed by seeking and obtaining informed consent from the respondents. The respondents were informed that Participation in the research was voluntary and they had a right to refuse to divulge certain information about them. Participants were also assured that the information they disclosed would be kept confidential and used only for the purpose of the research. In addition, the respondents were asked to supply data without writing their identities on the instruments.

3.0 Results/Findings

3.1 Description of the Respondents

Table 1 Gender of the Respondents

Gender	Couples		Parish ministers	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Female	34	42.5	0	0
Male	46	57.5	8	100
Total	80	100	8	100

Of the respondents, 57.5% were male and 42.5% female. All church ministers were male. This seems to be a male dominated field in the area under research. Perhaps it is important to have female church ministers too so that those contemplating marriage get views from both genders during premarital counseling. The female perspective would obviously be a valuable addition especially to the females going through premarital counseling.

Table 2: Age of the Respondents

Age (yrs)	Couples			Parish ministers		
	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
20 – 25	1	1.25	1.25	0	0	0
26-30	14	17.5	18.75	0	0	0
31-35	29	36.25	55.0	0	0	0
36-40	18	22.5	77.6	2	25	25
Over 40	18	22.5	100	6	75	100
Total	80	100		8	100	

As shown in table 2, most of the couples were above thirty years (81%). The majority of the couples are in the young adulthood stage (below 35 years). According to Corey (2000) this is the time to form intimate relationships, marry and get children. At least, the parish ministers were older and mature enough to take the couples through premarital counseling. All the parish ministers were over 35 years with 75% percent of the parish ministers above 40 years. The Parish Ministers were all married. This means that all the parish ministers interviewed know what marriage life is like and may be able to assist the couples regarding marriage life from their own experiences to some extent. The marriage experience alone is however not adequate. The people offering premarital counseling must be trained.

Table 3: Length of Marriage for couples

Number of years	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Below 5years	32	40.00	40.00
6 – 10 years	17	21.25	61.25
11 – 15 years	18	22.50	83.75
16 – 20 years	8	10.00	93.75
Over 20 years	5	6.25	100
Total	80	100	

The results in table 3 above reveal that 61.25% of the couples have been married for less than 10 years with 40% being married for below 5 years. This indicates that the majority of the marriages are young; they have small families and young children who are not yet in school hence fewer challenges especially to do with finances. In addition to this, the couple usually receives many gifts in form of household goods and money during the wedding ceremony so probably for the first few years financial challenges may be few.

3.2 Personnel Involved in Counseling and level of Training

On the personnel offering premarital counseling, it was found that Parish ministers are the ones who mainly offer premarital counseling (94%) while the rest (6%) is offered by the best couple. Parish ministers also revealed that church elders, school guidance and counseling teachers, theological students, lay counselors, health workers and lay preachers also participate in premarital counseling.

On the level of training, 75% of the parish ministers interviewed indicated that they have a degree certificate in pastoral counseling, while 25% had a diploma certificate in the same. All the eight ministers reported to have been trained in counseling during pastoral training. 12.5% had received training in premarital counseling up to Masters Level while 62.5% indicated that - they had received training in premarital counseling in form of seminars/workshops. 25% had not received any training in premarital counseling.

Stahmann and Hiebert (1997) argue that for a person to adequately provide premarital counseling, a graduate study at Master's level is necessary. Going by this it would mean that only one out of the eight parish ministers interviewed is qualified to offer premarital counseling. Some couples indicated that some of the people who offered them premarital counseling were unable to address issues of sexuality since they were shy. This further indicates that some of the people offering premarital counseling may not have received adequate training even in general counseling. It is very important that qualified personnel do this crucial counseling so that people who receive it are adequately helped.

3.3 Content Covered in Premarital Counseling

The respondents listed down the topics addressed during premarital counseling as follows

Table 4: Content Addressed in Premarital Counseling

Topic	Frequency	Percent
Income/finances	40	58
Sexuality	39	56.5
In law relationships	24	34.8
Parenting	20	29
Communication	20	29
Commitment	13	18.8
Spiritual Foundation	12	17.4
Roles/Responsibilities	11	15.9
Conflict Resolutions	8	11.6
Wedding day	6	8.7
Marriage pitfalls	4	5.8
Marriage Expectations	3	4.3
Family Background	1	1.4

The top three topics that were addressed were income/finances, sexuality and in law relationships. Most of the parish ministers seem to consider the issues of finance and sexuality to be most important. They revealed that these are the two areas (sexuality and finances) that are the main sources of marital conflicts. This is confirmed by Schwartz and Scott (1997) who argued that money ranks as the most ordinary cause of conflicts in marriages. Issues of sexuality if not well addressed during premarital counseling usually result in infidelity.

The issues of in-laws were addressed to only 34.8% of the couples as shown in table 4.6 above. This is an area of a lot of marital conflicts. Most in-laws tend to be controlling and hence end up being the cause of marital disharmony. This area should be given more emphasis, so that the

parental influence is minimized. Less than 10% of the wedded couples had topics on wedding day, marriage pitfalls, marriage expectations and family background addressed. Issues on vows and their meaning, expectations, family of origin, death and inheritance, HIV/AIDs and conflict resolution seem not to have been given emphasis. It is surprising that issues of conflict resolution were rarely addressed in spite of the knowledge that conflict will surely occur. It would therefore seem like some of the important topics identified by Stahmann and Salts (1993) are not part of premarital content.

3.4 The Practice of Premarital Counseling

3.4.1 Location

On the site where premarital counseling took place, 91% of the respondents reported that it took place in church office while 9% said that it took place at the home of church ministers. No special rooms had been set aside for counseling. Some of the church offices were not conducive for counseling since they were not sound proof and one could hear people outside talking. In addition, there was interference from outsiders knocking at the door. No special rooms had been set aside for counseling purposes. The counseling room ideally should be located away from any noise and interferences to enable the client to self disclose. Counseling at home is also inappropriate as there is bound to be very many interruptions.

3.4.2 Timing for Premarital

49% of the couples reported that they began premarital counseling sessions two months before the wedding, 25% one month before the wedding while 13% one week before the wedding. Only 13% began the counseling sessions 4 to 6 months before the wedding. The timing of the premarital counseling for the majority (87%) of the couples was not appropriate. Oslon and DeFrain (2003) assert that an effective premarital program should start 12 months before the marriage day. According to Gichinga (2003), premarital counseling should not be done in the last two weeks before the wedding since few couples pay attention at that time.

3.4.3 Number of Sessions

On the number of counseling sessions offered, 32% indicated they were counseled for two sessions, 25% three sessions and 16% one session. Only 12% were counseled for more than 5 sessions. Given the fact that a number of topics need to be addressed during premarital counseling, more sessions are required. Wright (1992) suggested that at least 6 sessions plus 60-70 hours of homework should be planned for in order to cover premarital issues adequately.

3.4.4 Duration of Each Session

Respondents reported that the duration of each session ranged from less than one hour to three hours (3hrs) with most of the sessions (41%) lasting one hour while 12% less than one hour. - This is perhaps too short considering that in most cases, the couple is counseled together. Very little would be covered in one hour or less. Gichinga (2003) suggests that each session should last between one and one and a half hours while Wright (1992) suggests that, each session should last one hour

3.4.5 Style of Counseling

On style of counseling, 38% of parish ministers combined both couple and individual sessions while 62% counseled the couple together. There was no uniform style that was recommended. The style to use was left to the discretion of each minister. Stahmann (1997) stated that the couple approach is favored since specific needs of the individual couples are addressed. Gichinga (2003) reported that the most effective style of premarital counseling is the individual approach in which the counselor meets with the couple.

3.5 Usefulness of the Counseling Sessions

When asked whether the counseling sessions were helpful, (90%) said they were helpful while 10% said they were not. Most helpful topics were sexuality (53%), income/finances (18%), relationship with in-laws (4%) and roles and responsibilities (12%), and communication (12%).

On suggestion for improving premarital counseling, (60%) of the respondents suggested an increase in number of sessions, 34% indicated use of professional counselors, 21% suggested that counseling should go on after marriage while 19% suggested inclusion of more topics during premarital counseling.

3.6 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Female Ministers should form part of the premarital counseling team to help address the female perspective.
2. The church should ensure that all the personnel involved in premarital counseling are adequately trained.
3. Premarital counseling sessions should begin at least three months before the wedding day and the sessions should be a minimum of five with each session lasting two hours.
4. The church reserve special rooms for counseling.
5. The content of premarital counseling should be expanded to include a wide range of topics such as communication, conflict resolution, commitment, financial management, expectations, partners' family of origin, family Background, anger and frustrations management, personality differences, honeymoon realities, and marriage vows.
6. Counseling should be done to the couple together so that they can be free to open up which may not be so during group counseling. In this way, topics can be personalized.
7. Couples should be given assignment in between sessions in order to be able to cover much more during the premarital counseling period.

8. The church should design a programme to follow up couples after they are married in the first couple of years so as to help and support them during the turbulent times of adjusting to each other.

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