

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION CURRICULUM AS A TOOL FOR EFFECTIVE PASTORAL COUNSELING FOR THE INTENDING COUPLES

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ABSTRACT

The paper discussed the Christian education curriculum as a tool for effective pastoral counseling for intending couples. The work exposed the need for a curriculum that is Christ-centered, Bible-based, and life applied for effective premarital counseling in the present-day society, as there is an increasing rate of divorce, separation, verbal abuse, and domestic violence among couples, which has its source in a lack of proper education and counseling prior to the period of marriage. From a pastoral care perspective, the author discussed the overview of Christian education Curriculum, concepts of Christian education and pastoral counseling, the necessity for Pastoral counseling to intending Couples, causes of ineffective Pastoral counseling, and prescribed a curriculum for effective Pastoral counseling for the Intending Couples. The paper used the Solution-focused theory as the theoretical framework and concludes that if intending couples are exposed to premarital counseling, couples will have an exciting marriage and drastically reduced divorce.

Keywords: Christian Education, Curriculum, Pastoral Counseling

Introduction

A Christ-centered, Bible-based, and life-applied curriculum is highly needed for effective counseling among intending couples in the present-day society. This is because of the increasing rate of divorce, separation, verbal abuse, and domestic violence among couples, which has its source in a lack of proper education and counseling before the period of marriage. It is disheartening that Christian homes are not immune to the periodic crises that many marriages are experiencing. Unmet expectations, lack of effective communication, unfulfilled sexual desires, and abuse of freedom are some of the reasons given for several divorces in many national dailies, some of which could have been averted through effective premarital counseling from competent hands, mainly when a Christian education curriculum is used. Moreover, most intending couples also often forget that marriage is a sacred institution founded by God, and having a successful and joyful one requires following the manual of the scripture, which is the primary tool of the Christian Education curriculum. Experiences in the past have shown that a good number of intending couples do not avail themselves of the opportunity of premarital counseling, especially if such marriages are not solemnized in the Church, and some others who do are counseled by their Church minister, who may not handle the counseling professionally, thereby causing the counseling to be ineffective.

Furthermore, many unqualified caregivers only impose directions on intending couples instead of handling the counseling sessions professionally. The writer has come across someone who prescribed to one intending couple that a period of six months observation of his own family is the required counseling needed for their marriage to be effective. Similarly, some ministers think that no premarital counseling is required once the intending couples are faithful Christians who have attended several Church seminars prior to the period of marriage. These and many more are why a Christian Education Curriculum is needed to achieve effective pastoral counseling among the intending couples.

On this note, this paper seeks to present the Christian Education Curriculum as a tool for Effective Pastoral counseling for intending couples. This will be achieved by discussing the overview of the Christian Education Curriculum. This paper will also attempt to explain the concepts of Christian education and pastoral counseling before exploring the necessity of pastoral counseling for intending couples. Causes of ineffective pastoral counseling will be identified, and a curriculum for effective pastoral counseling for the intending couples will be prescribed.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is solution-focused theory by Steve de Shazer and his associates, which is a strength-based approach that focuses on a couple's resources to develop a shared vision for the marriage and help intending couples build solutions that will produce a more positive quality of life. The approach aims to help couples build stable, satisfying marriages as it emphasizes clients' strengths and attempts to create desirable solutions to clients' presenting problems (Brief Family Therapy Center, 2003; Friedman & Lipchik, 1999; O'Connell, 1998). The solution-focused approach also focuses on clients' perceptions of problems rather than on objective facts, and individuals construct meanings about their experiences, relationships, and plans. Again, solution-focused therapy does not emphasize the past, except when it concerns present and future solutions (Friedman & Lipchik, 1999). In

addition, the solution-focused approach validates the resourcefulness of clients (Walter & Peller, 1992).

Similarly, change is a significant focus of the solution-focused approach, and change occurs when clients focus on solutions and competencies (Walter & Peller, 1992). Although change can occur at any time (Walter & Peller, 1992), the solutions that lead to change may not be directly or obviously related to problems (O'Connell, 1998). In the most basic terms, change occurs when intending couples do things differently. A solution-focused approach to premarital counseling helps couples activate the skills and resources they already possess (Hoyt & Berg, 1998b) to move toward their shared vision of their future (Friedman & Lipchik, 1999). In addition, the practitioner's primary function is to help link each partner's individual vision to facilitate the development of a shared vision (Hoyt & Berg, 1998a). In using a solution-focused approach for premarital counseling, practitioners must respect each couple's kind and each partner's unique resources and strengths.

Overview of Christian Education Curriculum

Education, as defined by Noah Webster (2015), is an act of comprehending a series of instruction and discipline intended to enlighten the understanding, correct the temper, form the manners and habits of learners, and fit them for usefulness in their future endeavours. Titilade (2019), on the other hand, sees education as the socially organized and regulated process of continuous transference of socially significant experience from previous knowledge. Etymologically, the word "Education" is derived from the Latin words "*educare*" and "*educere*". *Educare* refers to "to bring up" or "to nourish", whereas the word "*educere*" means "to bring forth" or "to drag out" (Moore, 1982, p. 56). Some others believe the word originated from another Latin word, "*educantum*," with two components. "E" implies a movement from inward to outward, and "duco" refers to developing or progressing (Hirst, 2004, p. 8). Analyses of these words reveal that education aims at providing a learner or an intending couple a nourishing environment to bring out and develop the latent potentiality hidden inside them and to help them become better partners for each other. Also, Christian education considers the biblical view of God, humanity, and the universe in its mutual relations. Christian education emphasizes the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ so that intending couples may be yielded to Him as their savior from sin and see in Christ the ultimate purpose and meaning of the whole universe and God's mandate for their homes. Christian education should be in the business of helping people make sense out of life (Wilhoit, 1986, p. 66). To lead intending couples to a more Christian view of life and the world of marriage, the Christian educators must understand the learners as they are, the goals they should be guided toward, and the best means to achieve these goals. Since a Christian education curriculum is the totality of what a student does in the class to gain knowledge, a Christian Education curriculum should help learners apply scriptural principles to the local situation, help in achieving balance between specificity and flexibility, and also bring to actualization what truth or lesson has been planned to be passed to the learner. (Lebar 2013, 23)

Christian Education and Pastoral Counseling

The Education that takes its worldview from the Bible is greatly needed by pastors for effective counseling of intending couples to help empower them to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals (Adeyemi, 2007, p. 14). As one of the cogent functions of pastoral counseling is educating the client, a pastoral counselor is expected to educate, teach

by instruction, and guide the counselee as he or she learns to cope with life's problems. Pastoral counseling through education helps the intending couples unlearn ineffective behavior and learn more efficient ways of acting in their marriage (Collins, 1980, p. 167). Such learning comes from giving instruction, utilizing the instruction, educating, and evaluating, which are all techniques of achieving the goals of Christian education. The counselor must encourage the client to help “launch out” and practice the new learning. At times, the pastoral counselor is also responsible for analyzing wrong attitudes that could result in marriage failure and help provide ways of avoiding such. The work of pastoral counseling cannot be practical without Christian education.

Moreover, Pastoral Counseling, according to Oyedele (2016, 67), is connected to education because it involves an extended conversation that focuses on the needs and concerns of a client seeking help from a counselor. Achieving this becomes easier through a person-to-person relationship in which one person helps another resolve an area of conflict or prepares to ensure a crisis-free environment. In his opinion, Komolafe (2016, 78) posits that counseling and education are interwoven as both involve a relationship between an instructor and a learner or a counselor and a client who are faced with problems that cannot be handled alone, and a professional worker whose training and experience qualify him to help others to arrive at solutions to various types of personal difficulties. Counseling becomes pastoral when modern psychological thought and method, with the traditional religious training of shepherding, are integrated to meet the needs of such a client. Pastoral counseling involves establishing a time-limited relationship structured to comfort troubled persons by enhancing their awareness of God’s grace and faithful presence, thereby increasing their ability to live their lives more fully in the light of these realizations (Oyedele, 2017, p. 23).

Again, the essence of pastoral counseling is helping troubled people bring their wounds, struggles, and anxieties into dynamic healing contact with God, the wonderful counselor (Banner, 2000, p. 44). In the opinion of Beck, as cited by Oyedele (2017, 15), “Pastoral counseling describes a major function of the pastor who provides counseling for parishioners as one of many services offered to them”. Varieties of healing methods are utilized in helping people handle their problems; thus, clients experience healing of their brokenness (Clinebell, 2008, p. 26). One of the duties of a pastor in counseling is to render help to intending couples to enlighten them on what they expect to meet in marriage and how to prepare for the challenges they will face as they get set to be married. This counsel is regarded as premarital counseling. The use of a Christian education curriculum makes this task easier and effective.

The Necessity for Effective Pastoral Counseling for Intending Couples

The rate at which marriages are breaking up and divorces are increasing is quite alarming. This could be traced to unmet expectations or marrying for the wrong reasons, which could have been solved through premarital counseling. Harway (2005, 46) defines premarital counseling as training that equips couples with the necessary skills to advance their relationships. Doria & Kennedy (2014, 12) posit that it is a training that helps prevent problems associated with courtship or marriage and any problems that could lead to conflicts in the relationship, and enhances the quality of the relationship. Premarital counseling, therefore, is the training given to intending couples by a professional counselor or trained minister, prior to the period of marriage, which exposes them to the rudiments of marriage and how to maintain a successful relationship in their union. A prospective bride and groom may come together for

all wrong reasons: to escape from a difficult home situation, to add excitement to their lives, to hide a pregnancy, to escape from loneliness, to get married like all their friends, to get ahead financially, or some fleeting motive that launches their marriages on a foundation that often is too flimsy to survive the pressures, challenges and storms of daily living. Despite the effectiveness of premarital programs, estimates suggest that only 30 percent of couples use these services, and of those who do, most get their premarital counseling from clergy in religious settings. (Ayodele 2016, 40).

Premarital counseling is primarily preventive. It comes before the problems arise rather than after. It focuses on education and giving information. It is less concerned about healing wounds that exist than about building a union that will survive future pressure (Aroyehun, 2018, p. 88). Adedayo (2015, 56) posits that since few people are enthusiastic about preventive counseling, there is a tendency to resist and sometimes to resent this help. Counselors can become disillusioned with premarital counseling, and many wonder if it is worth the effort. One experienced counselor concluded that premarital counseling was futile because most of the couples in his church approached the counseling with “amused tolerance” (Lebar, 2013, p. 56). So in that Church, the prospective brides and grooms must promise only to seek a competent marriage counselor at the first sign of a problem.

When a couple resists premarital counseling, however, it seems unlikely that they would seek counseling at the first sign of marital difficulty. As a result, many churches and religious leaders insist on premarital counseling before they will consent to perform a church wedding. The benefits of this counseling have been acknowledged later by many grateful and happily married couples.

Reasons for Premarital Counseling

There are different reasons for premarital counseling as asserted by Scott (2015, 16), it include: slowing couples down to spend more time in deliberation, sending the message that marriage matters, teaching couples where they can go for help if they need it later and providing certain kinds of training, relationship enhancement and communication skills that can lower the risks for later marital distress or divorce. Premarital counseling can also help people deal with the following when they arise:

1. **Unrealistic Expectations that can Lead to Disillusionment:** These unrealistic expectations, as highlighted by Scott (2001), include: a cure for loneliness, an escape from boredom, a rowdy sex romp, and an easy transition (17). Many intending couples entered into marriage with the thought that once they were married, their aforementioned problems would be solved, but many were disappointed after marriage. Premarital counseling helps couples express, discuss, and realistically modify their assumptions about what lies ahead. Conflicting expectations for a good marriage only become reality when there is mutual giving and consistent effort. Learning this slowly can help couples anticipate and sometimes avoid disillusionment that clouds the anticipated brightness of marriage.
2. **Personal Immaturity that leads to Insensitivity:** High school can offer courses to teach people what married life or parenting will be like, but courses cannot teach everything. Anthony (2004, 46) posits that people who are irresponsible before marriage tend to be irresponsible after marriage. While intending couples are dating and thinking enthusiastically about the future, differences tend to be overlooked. In his

opinion, Werner (2007, 22) believed that if one or both participants are self-centered, hypercritical, impatient, competitive, or insensitive, these immature traits may not be noticed, but will stain the marital stability later. When couples settle into daily routines after the honeymoon, each person's attitude, mannerisms, and sometimes troublesome characteristics begin to surface. The marriage builds and grows if these can be discussed, understood, and somehow resolved or accepted. However, the marriage begins to weaken when the differences are ignored, denied, or allowed to become the basis of arguments and criticism. Premarital counseling helps seek to uncover and discuss the self-centered tendencies that can put pressure on marriage (Chapman, 2010). The couple can be taught how to resolve differences and helped to develop the communication skills, sensitivity, and willingness to accept and meet each other's needs. However, if these skills are not learned before marriage, they can be the basis of more serious conflicts later.

3. **Changing roles that leads to Confusion:** In earlier generations where the husband was the provider and the wife the home maker, there was little confusion about who would do what, especially in most African settings, the roles of husbands and wife were defined clearly and accepted widely throughout the community, however, this is no more true in many places again as things are now changing, most wives have their own careers and expect their husbands to be majorly involved in household duties. If the two do not discuss and agree upon who will do what, it will be a significant source of conflict in the early months of marriage (Lahaye, 2016). Similarly, Chapman (2010) corroborated this in his opinion when he says that confusion over roles is one of the most stressful aspects of contemporary marriages (90). Ekpo (2013, 23) added that confusion and conflict may follow when a man and woman come to marriage with unclear roles and vague expectations about their own and each other's responsibilities. Differences like these often come from different experiences of upbringing. A man who grew up in a home where the woman did all the domestic chores will expect his wife to do all the chores. Premarital counseling allows couples to begin this type of communication (Ajayi, 2017, p. 55). Together, they can learn to discuss their different role expectations and decide on areas of responsibility. Failure to do this can lead to confusion and conflict that can be avoided if the husband and wife operate in ways that assist each other, regardless of their custom or family traditions. In his opinion, Greendorf (2004, 34) maintains that role clarification must not ignore biblical teaching.
4. **Lowering Sexual Standards that leads to Immorality:** Sex before marriage is not new, neither is it rare even among Christians, what is newer is the increasing approval and acceptance of premarital sex, the widespread involvement of so many people in sex apart from marriage and flood of arguments that are used casually to justify sexual behavior that is condemned in scripture (Ajayi, 2015). Because of these attitudes, dating for many has become a time for exploring each other's bodies and genitals. Charles (2000, 56) described the modern day as a time when love is reduced to sex, there is no emphasis on respect, responsibility, understanding, care, and developing interpersonal relationships with people other than one's partner. What is assumed to be increasing sexual freedom in reality involves increasing bondage to the demands of one's physiological drives. By ignoring divine standards that free us from maximum life

fulfillment, many have cast away freedom and settled for biological enslavement. Premarital counseling allows discussing honestly, realistically, and biblically issues relating to sex and to learn how emotions are to be managed for a better home.

Causes of Ineffective Pastoral Counseling for Intending Couples

Over the years, research has shown that there are a good number of couples who went through premarital counseling and still had struggles in their marriages. One may be quick to ask whether the counseling sessions were practical. According to Anthony (2005), premarital counseling does not stop couples from facing life challenges in marriage. Instead, it empowers couples to deal with life situations, reduce stress, experience personal growth, and make well-informed, rational decisions. Counseling becomes effective when couples show signs of growth and handle their problem maturely by applying the training they have received. Ineffective Pastoral Counseling could be traced to the following reasons:

Unprofessional Counselor: As mentioned earlier in this research, their clergy counsel many Christian couples before their wedding. However, this writer maintains that being a pastor does not automatically make a person a professional counselor. When premarital counseling is handled unprofessionally, it often results in ineffectiveness. While reacting to this, Collins (2007) highlighted one common practice of informal caregivers, which may cause ineffectiveness in counseling, is “the act of giving advice.” he maintains that, rather than advising because a counselor had passed through similar cases, clients should be helped to develop tools and life skills needed in order to solve his or her problems. There was once a case of a couple frequently quarrelling, and the husband sought counsel from a pastor who handled the case as an untrained caregiver. The pastor asked the husband, Have you flogged your wife before? The husband answered No! Then the pastor said, Go and flog her very well and to the husband’s greatest surprise, the wife changed after being flogged. Although the counsel appears to have worked, such recommendations are not ethical for a good marriage.

Superiority Complex: Some youth felt they had read enough books on marriage that nobody could counsel them again, and they only attended premarital counseling sessions to fulfill the requirement for marriage by the church. One youth boastfully said in one interview session: My fiancé and I have read more than thirty books on marriage, what else do we need? We have in stock more than any counselor could give. People who receive counsel with this type of heart often lose the benefit of it and, as a result, become ineffective.

Lack of Confidentiality: Another reason for the ineffectiveness of premarital counseling is the failure on the part of the counselor to manage confidential information. When clients notice this on the part of the counselor, they lose confidence in the counsel given.

Engaging Christian Education Curriculum for Effective Premarital Counseling

As highlighted by Oyedele (2011, 35), the basic pastoral care and counseling functions must be applied when formulating a curriculum for premarital counseling. Aside from the pastoral functions of healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling, and nurturing, the curriculum should also educate and empower the intending couples by providing the necessary instructions for sustaining their home. The curriculum for premarital counseling should include the following lessons: A theology of marriage, communication, sexuality, money management, proper parenting, family relation management, forgiveness, genotype compatibility, and others. Six to eight sessions are recommended, considering the convenience of the counselor and the clients.

As Collins (2017) suggested, Counseling sessions should begin with a proper introduction of the counselor and the client. This will help enhance familiarity and better communication. The counseling process will involve reading, studying, listening, talking, and applying the lessons learnt. The theology of marriage should thoroughly study the scriptures on the concept of marriage. The principles of leaving and cleaving should also be explained. This will help the intending couples know God's requirement and learn ways of fulfilling God's expectation regarding fulfilling marital vows they are about to make. Moreover, the theology of communication will explain the necessity of communication for sustaining a Christian home. This will consider the love languages, personalities, and temperamental differences.

Christian Education Curriculum will serve as a tool for effective premarital counseling by engaging the pastoral care functions in the following ways:

Healing: Even though premarital counseling is preventive, intending couples are also healed of past hurts that may affect their future marriage. Healing involves overcoming some impairment by restoring a person to his/her previous condition (Clebsch and Jaekle, 33). It also involves binding wounds, repairing damages that have been done emotionally, or restoring the condition that has been lost. This purpose is achievable through proper education.

Sustaining: Through education, the intended couple gains ways of sustaining their homes in times of crisis. Intending couples receive instruction that will help them creatively and courageously endure difficult situations.

Guiding: Marriage involves making many decisions and choices. Christian Education helps pastoral counselors administer spiritual directions to intending couples. According to Clebsch and Jaekle (2013), the ministry's function is to arrive at some wisdom concerning what should be done when faced with the problem of choosing between various courses of thought or action (50). Oyedele (2011) maintains that guiding involves advice giving, listening, and deciding (37).

Reconciling means helping alienated persons establish or renew proper and fruitful relationships with God and neighbors (Ogundipe, 2015, p. 36). This pastoral care function stands alongside healing, sustaining, and guiding. It also involves forgiveness and discipline. Proper Christian education helps to achieve this aim.

Nurturing: Becoming a good parent involves the act of nurturing; both husband and wife must learn the principle of caring. Nurturing has to do with providing religious education to an intending couple. Nurturing aims to enable people to develop their God-given potentials throughout the life journey with all its valleys, peaks, and plateaus.

Conclusion

This paper has so far explained how the Christian Education Curriculum can be a tool for effective pastoral counseling for intending couples. The writer dealt with the overview of Christian education, the necessity for premarital counseling, and the causes of ineffective premarital counseling. Ways of engaging Christian education for effective premarital counseling using the five pastoral care functions were elucidated. The paper argues that being a pastor does not automatically confer a person a good counselor; instead a counselor is made through training to empower them help the clients to deal adequately with life situations and make rational decisions, hence, the theological schools should provide curriculum that will expose ministers to training that will make them a better counselor to properly guide intending couples on ways to having a fulfilling marriages.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are given:

1. All ministers should be equipped with adequate knowledge of the principles of pastoral counseling so that couples will receive adequate premarital counseling training.
2. Premarital counseling should be a significant requirement for every marriage, irrespective of where the consummation is done.
3. Couples who are not exposed to premarital counseling should go for post-marital counseling after their wedding.

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