

The Development of A Pre-Marital Counseling Ministry

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The Context of a Pre-Marital Counseling Program of Cleveland State

Cleveland State Community College is a two year institution of higher education of the State University and Community College system of Tennessee and is one of ten such community colleges operated by the Board of Regents in the state.

Cleveland State attempts to provide educational experiences for all who can profit from them. It offers a two-year transfer program for students wanting to transfer to a four-year school and a two year terminal program for students wanting careers in business, industry, law enforcement, and health services. Cleveland State also offers a variety of evening division courses which are designed to meet the needs of those who cannot attend full time.¹

In dealing with the role of the community colleges, the Higher Education Commission stated, "The State's higher education system is obligated to provide the kinds of knowledge and experience which will enable its citizens to live effectively and enjoyably in a highly-complex society."² The Commission called for a strong academic program to meet the requirements of business and industry, but it also recognized the need for a well-rounded educational program to provide the type of citizens Tennessee needs. It called for the colleges to provide "all types" of educational opportunities, not just those to meet the specific degree requirements.³

The report also took note of the need for counseling and guidance. It stated, "The community college should provide good occupational and academic counseling and guidance programs for all students."⁴ It went on to say, "They (community college students) may need more counseling than students attending a four-year college."⁵

The need for some type of pre-marital counseling had been recognized for several years; but, principally because of lack of time, nothing had ever been initiated in this area. One of the school's counselors suggested that the Baptist campus minister might provide this ministry to the campus.

The Need for Pre-Marital Counseling at Cleveland State

In an effort to determine what need, if any, existed for a campus based pre-marital counseling program at Cleveland State, two surveys were conducted. One surveyed those doing counseling to see what and how much they were doing. The other surveyed recently married Cleveland State students as to their experience in pre-marital counseling.

An effort was first made to determine how much pre-marital counseling was being done in the Cleveland area and who was doing it. One obvious group was the clergy whose traditional role pre-marital counseling has been. Beyond that group only one other source of counseling was discovered, and that was offered only for students at Lee College through their counseling center.

Having discovered the clergy as the only major source of pre-marital counseling available to Cleveland State students, an effort was made to determine the extent of the counseling done by the ministers of the area served by Cleveland State. A questionnaire was devised and sent to ministers in Bradley County (Cleveland).

The questionnaire produced some interesting results. It showed that 52.6 percent of the respondents spent less than two hours each counseling a couple planning to marry and that only 26.6 percent spent as much as four hours with them. Of those who spent less than two hours counseling, 57.86 percent covered eight or more topics or areas. Of those 18.75 percent who spent two to four hours counseling, 75 percent dealt with nine or more topics. This means that three out of four pastors who did pre-marital counseling spent very little time on each subject dealt with. When asked about their training in counseling, 76.3 percent of the pastors reported some training, while only 36.6 percent reported specific training in marriage counseling by a seminary, college or graduate school.

The results of this survey show that the pastors reported that some level of counseling goes on with most couples, but that the amount of time spent with the majority of the couples would preclude much in-depth counseling.

Even more interesting than the pastors' survey is the survey of recently married Cleveland State students. This survey was conducted

The Content of a Campus-Based Pre-Marital Counseling Program

Any pre-marital counseling program ought to deal with both the pre-marital and post-marital issues which face the engaged couple.

Numerous studies have been conducted by sociologists into the problem areas of families. While most of these studies differ in the order of seriousness or frequency of appearance, a pattern of problems which consistently show up on the lists begins to emerge. to get the reactions of those students at Cleveland State who have been married within the last year.

These eighty-three couples were surveyed about their experience of pre-marital counseling, problems in their marriage, and what their interest in a campus-based pre-marital counseling program would have been. When asked about pre-marital counseling, 60.7 percent reported that they had not been counseled at all. Of the 39.3 percent who had had pre-marital counseling, 81.8 percent reported that it lasted less than two hours, and 88.9 percent of these reported that the counselor covered six or more topics in that two hours or less time period.

The reports indicated further that 64.3 percent of the respondents thought a campus-based program would have been helpful and 78.6 percent would have participated had one been available to them when they were students.

The student survey showed a far smaller amount of pre-marital counseling being done than did the pastors' survey.

In view of the small amount of pre-marital counseling being done and the indication of student interest, a campus-based program of pre-marital counseling is justified at Cleveland State.

The Goals of a Pre-Marital Counseling Program at Cleveland State

There are several goals which the program of pre-marital counseling at Cleveland State should accomplish. These are:

(1) The program should lead the couple to think seriously about the problem areas of marriage.

(2) The program should provide a context in which the couple can explore some of the options for their life together.

(3) The program should expose the couple to models of marital relationships which they have not considered before.

(4) The program should provide the couple with certain information and advice from resource persons in the problem areas which might not be otherwise readily available or convenient to them.

These problems are financial and economic, sexual, role expectation, communication (personality conflict, jealousy), work, religion, parenthood, and in-laws. Several researchers reported such categories

as mental cruelty, disgust, abuse, and lack of love which seem to stem from more underlying problems and causes.

The Development of a Format for Pre-Marital Counseling

The question of a format for a program of pre-marital counseling is an extremely important one. No matter how good, how necessary, or how important a program might be, if it is not available to the student in a form in which he is willing to participate in it, it does no good.

The Examination of Possible Formats

In current usage there are two predominant types of formats for pre-marital counseling. These are the individual couple to counselor approach and the group approach. Of course, it is readily apparent that there are numerous variations of these two formats.

Each of these formats has its strengths and its weaknesses; likewise, each situation has its own uniqueness which requires special treatment.

The Counselor and Individual Couple Format

The most traditional format for pre-marital counseling is the counselor and individual couple format. Prior to the early 1960's this was about the only format that was used.

In this format the counselor meets with each couple on an individual basis. The process of counseling is on a very personal basis with as much attention being focused on each area as is needed.

There are two different styles of counseling which this format may take. One style is to be very directive with the counselor satisfying himself that the couple is sufficiently prepared in each area before going to another point. The other style is non-directive allowing the couple to raise whatever questions or subjects about which they feel uneasy or unsure.

The Group Format

In many areas there has been a dramatic rise in the use of group counseling in the last fifteen years. This is particularly true of pre-marital counseling. This is so much the case that Aaron Rutledge contends that "Group counseling is the method of choice for most engaged couples . . ."

Styles of group counseling. Although the term group counseling is used as if it narrowly defines the subject, it does not necessarily do so. There are a great many styles of group counseling. While there seem to be about as many variations as there are counselors who lead groups, there are three major styles or types of group

formats. These are the lecture format, the predetermined agenda format and the open agenda format.

As with anything there are both strengths and weaknesses in the group approach to pre-marital counseling.

Strengths.

- (1) Group counseling expands the outreach of the counselor.
- (2) Group counseling expands the time each person is counseled.
- (3) Much of the counseling is done by his peers.
- (4) Group counseling will tend to cut down on such problems as dependency, projection and transference on the counselor.
- (5) Group counseling offers a freedom of expression which other forms of counseling do not.
- (6) Group counseling offers what Raymond J. Corsini calls "spectator therapy."

Weaknesses.

- (1) Groups can "swallow" certain individuals.
- (2) Group counseling requires a counselor with special training and skills.
- (3) Some people will not become a part of a group.
- (4) Some people need to be counseled privately because of personality disorders or other unusual reasons.

A Proposal for a Format at Cleveland State

The choice of formats is a decision which is important to the success of the program. Both the group format and the individual couple format have their places and will be used in ministering to the needs of students; however, the group format is the method of choice because of its inherent qualities as an educational tool. The group format facilitates the members to share and learn from each other, allows the person to deal with his feelings in a supportive group, allows for the use of outside resources, and makes the most efficient use of the time of both the counselor and the program. The existing growth group program in the Student Personnel Department and the group format's wider appeal to the campus at large are additional factors in the Cleveland State situation which make the group format the more logical choice.

The Operation of the Program

The program was set up to be done during the Spring quarter. Because of situations peculiar to the campus it was called a Pre-Marital Counseling Seminar. The seminar was to run for eight weeks. The following agenda was followed:

First Meeting	Organization
Second Meeting	Marriage — What does it mean?
Third Meeting	Roles in marriage
Fourth Meeting	Communication — Conflict Resolution
Fifth Meeting	Work, Money, In-laws
Sixth Meeting	Sexual Relationships — Birth Control
Seventh Meeting	Parenthood — Faith
Eighth Meeting	The Ceremony and Honeymoon

Evaluation

Overall, the author felt very good about the project. The goals for the program (as stated above) were substantially met. The student evaluations rated most parts of the experience high. Of course, parts have been reshaped each time the program has been repeated.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the experience has been a very valuable one to both counselor and students. It has forced the counselor to rethink and restudy his own marriage as well as to sharpen his skills in group work and counseling. For the students it has provided a growing and learning experience which can help shape and contribute to their married life for years to come.

Footnotes

- 1 *Higher Education for Tennessee's Future* (Nashville: Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 1973), p. 41.
- 2 *Higher Education for Tennessee's Future*, p. 4.
- 3 *Higher Education for Tennessee's Future*, p. 4.
- 4 *Higher Education for Tennessee's Future*, p. 46.
- 5 *Higher Education for Tennessee's Future*, p. 46.
- 6 Aaron Rutledge, *Pre-Marital Counseling* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1966), p. 120.
- 7 Raymond J. Corsini, *Methods of Group Psychotherapy* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., Inc., 1957), p. 41.

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