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Covenant Theological Seminary

**Conducting Marriage Enrichment
Programs in The Local Church**

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

By
Janming Hou

St. Louis, Missouri

2017

Covenant Theological Seminary

Conducting Marriage Enrichment Programs in The Local Church

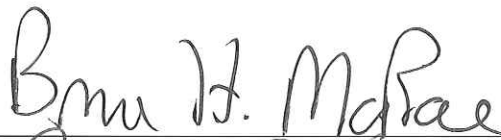
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Graduation Date May 19, 2017

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Abstract

Most pastors are not professionally trained counselors or therapists, but thanks to professionals who study the marital relationship, there are many well-established marriage enrichment programs that can help pastors. As a shepherd of the flock, pastors need to contextualize the program theologically and make adjustments that are sensitive to a local church's culture. To further the knowledge of the field, the purpose of this study is to investigate factors that would influence the learning experience of participants in a marriage education program that is led by the program participants' pastor in a local Chinese ethnic church in America.

In order to address this purpose, the researcher identified three main areas of literature that are central to establishing local church marriage education programs. These include marriage education programs, underpinning psychological theory, and theological appropriation of psychology. To examine these areas more closely, the following questions focused the research:

1. What pre-experiences influence the marriage enrichment program participants' learning experiences?
2. How does their pastor influence the participants' learning experience?
3. What logistics of the program influence the participants' learning experiences?

The study used the qualitative case study research technique, a subset of qualitative research. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with couples who participated in a local church's pastor-led marriage enrichment program.

Four themes emerged from the interviews which reveal what factors would impact the participants' learning experiences in a local, pastor-led marriage enrichment program:

a trustworthy pastor, ready participants, an effective program, and complementary practices. In light of the findings, pastors are well advised to engage in a church marriage education program. Five suggestions are given for pastors who pursue a marriage enrichment program in their church: clarify personal standings on how theology and psychology should be integrated, study to learn practical skills that can enrich marriage, practice learned skills to improve the pastor's own marriage – if applicable, design a marriage education program for the pastor's own church – if possible, and focus on the heart and hands—one's inner being and outer behavior.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Marriage is an institution facing increasing pressure in America. Divorce is increasingly common in United States. United Census Bureau, in 2002, published a study concluding that 43% of first marriages will end in separation or divorce in 15 years.¹ Evangelical Christians are not immune from these statistics. *Barna Research Group* released the results of their poll about divorce on December 21, 1999.² The report was based on random telephone interview of 3,854 adults in 48 states in the continental United States. The result shocked evangelical Christians, showing that divorce rates among conservative Christians were significantly higher than for other faith groups, and much higher than that of atheists and agnostics. Psychologist Keith Edwards concurs with Barna's finding and identifies how the pervasive secular culture has influenced the high level of divorce. Edwards believes "the self-centered, pleasure-oriented, individualistic, materialistic values propagated by advertising and programming in our media-saturated society" as the major causes.³ While the divorce rate in China remains low relative to the

¹ United States Census Bureau, *Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces* (Washington, DC: United States Census Bureau, 2002).

² Barna Research Group, "Christians are more likely to experience divorce than are non-Christians," <http://www.barna.org/>, December 21, 1999, accessed October 26, 2016, <http://www.adherents.com/>.

³ Keith J. Edwards, "It Takes a Village to Save a Marriage," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 31, no. 3 (2003): 190.

US,⁴ clergymen in Chinese immigrant churches feel the same pressure. Ronald Nydam's question catches the sentiment of many pastors:

... (W)e struggle to offer real hope to couples in our congregations whose marriages are plagued with conflict and suffering. Beyond preaching the theology of marriage that reflects the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:6, that no one be allowed "to separate what God has joined together," beyond rehearsing the importance of keeping covenant with each other, and beyond reminding parishioners of how difficult divorce may be for children, *how can we help?*⁵

The legalization of gay marriage in the United States caused much anxiety among Christians.⁶ Mark Woods, in an editorial piece for Christianity Today, encouraged Christians not to overestimate the impact and overreact to the legal decision. In that piece, Woods recognized the quickly shifting social and cultural attitude, saying,

In truth, whatever the result of the court's decision, the evangelical battle for public opinion was lost years ago. Opinion poll after opinion poll has shown Americans becoming more and more tolerant of homosexuality and more inclined to favor same-sex marriage if that was what would make people happy.⁷

Martin Saunders shared similar a sentiment to Woods' in another Christianity Today publication, arguing that what really undermined "traditional marriage" is not same-sex marriage. "Divorce rates," he asserts, "are the same inside the church as outside

⁴ Zeng Yi, and Wu Deqing, "Regional Analysis of divorce in China since 1980," *Demography* 37, no. 2 (May 2000): 215-219.

⁵ Ronald J. Nydam, "The Messiness of Marriage and the Knottiness of Divorce: A Call for a Higher Theology and a Tougher Ethic," *Calvin Theological Journal* 40 (2005): 211.

⁶ Robert Benne and Gerald McDermott, "Speaking Out: Why Gay Marriage Would Be Harmful," www.christianitytoday.com, February 16, 2004, accessed October 26, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/107/41.0.html>.

⁷ Mark Woods, "Gay Marriage Is Legal in the US. Try Not to Worry," www.christianitytoday.com, June 26, 2015, accessed October 26, 2016, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/gay.marriage.is.legal.in.the.us.try.not.to.worry/57286.htm>.

it. The real challenge to 'traditional marriage' is for it to start modeling something worth aspiring to.”⁸ Facing challenges within the church and within the culture, Christians need help with marriage.

One way Christian clergy can help parishioners is to provide marriage education. Christian education can fall under the categories of marriage enrichment education⁹ or couple relationship enrichment.¹⁰ Marriage education is a well-researched¹¹ and proven method for improving marital satisfaction.¹² Marriage education began in the 1950s when the Catholic Church offered couples structured, group education programs. From its early days, religious organizations in Jewish, Protestant and especially Catholic circles mostly promoted marriage education. At first these religious organizations designed marriage education to enrich the marriage experience of couples who did not suffer severe distress in their marriage. They later expanded programs to cover premarital education as well as helping couples with distressed marriages.

Numerous marriage education programs are readily available. Currently, there are several organizations devoted to marriage education. One prominent example is the

⁸ Martin Saunders, “Five Bad Reasons to Oppose Same-Sex Marriage... and Some Approaches that Might Make More Sense,” [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com/article/five.bad.reasons.to.oppose.same.sex.marriage.and.some.approaches.that.might.make.more.sense/57844.htm), July 2, 2015, accessed October 26, 2016, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/five.bad.reasons.to.oppose.same.sex.marriage.and.some.approaches.that.might.make.more.sense/57844.htm>.

⁹ Joshua N. Hook, Everett L. Worthington Jr., Jan P. Hook, Beth T. Miller, and Don E. Davis, “Marriage Matters: A Description and Initial Examination of a Church-Based Marital Education Program,” *Pastoral Psychology* 60 (2011): 869-875.

¹⁰ Preston Dyer, and Genie Dyer, “Planning and Promoting Marriage Enrichment in the Church,” *Journal of Family Ministry* 16, no. 3 (2002): 41-45.

¹¹ W. Kim Halford, H. J. Markman, S. Stanley, and G. H. Kline, “Best Practices in Couple Relationship Education,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 29 (2003): 469-476.

¹² W. Kim Halford, *Marriage and Relationship Education: What Works and How to Provide It* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011), 36-64.

Association of Couples for Marriage Enrichment (ACME). ACME was founded in 1973 and changed its organizational name to Better Marriages in 2010. Its vision is to “create a network of couples building healthy marriages by providing marriage education and enrichment opportunities in partnership with other public, private, and faith-based organizations.”¹³ Various denominations and people of religious faith have developed a prolific number of programs and materials for marriage enrichment.¹⁴ To make their material more accessible, psychologists and family therapists removed academic language from their material and produced popular self-help books in lay language for the general public’s consumption. There are various formats available for either individual or small group use. Resources available for clergy are abundant.

Difficulties, nevertheless, exist for clergy to develop their own marriage education program. Despite the wealth of material and available trainings, many Christian clergy still feel ill prepared to offer marriage education to their congregations. Research into the precise nature of these hindrances is scarce. Possible prohibitive factors include inadequate seminary preparation, clergy’s personal marital struggle, congregational expectations for clergy, participants’ low priority for marriage, and the negative assessments by clergy.¹⁵ The problem is further complicated by lack of ways to properly gauge the effectiveness of a given marriage education program.

¹³ Better Marriages, “Mission Statement,” [www.bettermarriages.org](http://www.bettermarriages.org/about/missionvision-statement/), accessed October 26, 2016, <http://www.bettermarriages.org/about/missionvision-statement/>.

¹⁴ Richard A. Hunt, Larry Hof, and Rita Demaria, *Marriage Enrichment* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, Inc., 1998).

¹⁵ Joe D. Wilmoth, and David G. Fourier, “Barriers to Providing Marriage Preparation,” *Journal of Family and Community Ministries* 22, no. 4 (2009): 31-41.

Regardless of inadequacy clergy might feel, they play an important role in parishioners' marriage life, possessing advantages that other helping professionals may not possess. A study published in 2001 found that clergy conduct 75% of first marriages in America.¹⁶ After reviewing earlier studies, David Benner concludes, "in spite of what often seems to be a diminishing sphere of influence for the church in society, a considerably higher percentage of people go to the clergy for help with personal problems than to any other helping profession."¹⁷ He proceeds to point out the four things that make pastoral counseling unique:¹⁸ First, pastors' symbolic role as a religious authority. Some people may find this to be a reason to avoid pastors, but many more are motivated to come to pastors because of it. Second, church is often seen as the context for counseling. In addition to a circle of trusting friends and networks, church provides a communal context of continual contacts of pastor and parishioners. Third, spiritual growth is the church's goal. Benner explains,

All problems have spiritual components because all of life is religious or spiritual. Furthermore, spiritual concerns emerge most clearly within the context of daily life experiences and struggles, and these are the natural focus of any counseling relationship.¹⁹

Fourth, the church uses religious resources. Prayer, Bible study, and sacraments are some of the resources a pastor can freely adopt. While Benner's comments are for pastoral

¹⁶ Scott M. Stanley, et. al. "Community-Based Premarital Prevention: Clergy and Lay Leaders on the Front Lines," *Family Relations* 50, (2001): 67-76.

¹⁷ David G. Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling: A Short-Term Structured Model*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992), 33.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33-39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

counseling, it is equally applicable to marriage education. Stanley et. al.,²⁰ from a different perspective, point out other advantages of religious institutions in conducting marriage education. These advantages include how religious leaders generally are more enthusiastic in helping to build strong marriage, how religious organizations already have a culture and infrastructure to support education effort and how clergy have greater contact and influence with ethnic minorities. Pastors' position in the faith community seems to place them in a good position to conduct marriage education, difficulties notwithstanding.

Chinese immigrant churches are a subset of the greater American church landscape. According to the 2009 US Census, 28% of all immigrants are Asians. Wu contends that marriage education in Chinese immigrant churches is urgently needed due to the increasing number of divorces and the rising amount of family crises among members.²¹

What does a pastor need to know about conducting marriage enrichment programs in a local church? The state of marriage in the US, as well as many other countries, posts serious pastoral challenges. The issue cannot be addressed by passing laws to define what legal marriage is, or by fierce preaching against divorce. These actions have their roles, but the heart of the matter is about grace. Asserting external controls to keep people legally married without extramarital affairs will have little effect, but transforming sin-infected, curse-manifested marriage relationships by the grace of

²⁰ Scott M. Stanley, Howard J. Markman, Michelle St. Peter, and B. Douglas Leber, "Strengthening Marriages and Preventing Divorce: New Directions in Prevention Research," *Family Relations* 44, no. 4 (October 1995): 397.

²¹ David Jihyoung Wu, "Developing and Implementing a Christian Marriage Enrich Program for Chinese Immigrants" (D. Min. diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 1999).

God in Jesus Christ can have great effect. The church needs pastors who help parishioners build happy, faithful, and lasting marriages. Marriage enrichment programs have proven helpful as a preventive and remedial measure in addressing marital issues. A wealth of literature exists in designing, practicing, process analyzing, and assessment of efficacy of various marriage enrichment programs. Almost all studies are on programs with predesigned material are run by well-trained professionals in a clinical environment. There is no literature found on pastor-designed (or adapted) programs run in the local church.

Purpose Statement

Most pastors are not professionally trained counselors or therapists. But thanks to professionals who study the marital relationship, there are many well-established marriage enrichment programs that can help pastors. As shepherds of the flock, pastors need to contextualize the program theologically and make adjustments that are sensitive to local church culture. Parishioners should expect a marriage enrichment program in their local church to be unique for their context. One contributing factor, for example, is how the relationship between pastors and their flocks differs from that of professional counselors and their clients. Publications on marriage enrichment programs have greatly benefited the church and society at large. Nevertheless, there is need to explore further the result of marriage enrichment programs' design and practice within local churches. To further the knowledge of the field, the purpose of this dissertation is to investigate factors that would influence the learning experience of participants in a marriage education program led by the program participants' pastor in a local Chinese ethnic church in America.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide this study:

1. What pre-existent experiences influence the participants' learning experiences?
2. How does the instructor – being their pastor – influence the participants' learning experience?
3. What logistics of the program influence the participants' learning experiences?

Significance of the Study

This study has significance primarily for pastors of local churches. It also has significance for educators and researchers.

Significance for Pastors of Local Churches

The result of the study will benefit local church pastors. Pastors are chosen by God as instruments to shepherd their flocks. The current social and cultural challenges to marriage relationships without and within the church are grave. Facing such challenges, pastors need to develop skills to deliver by any means the word of God to impact the world of God. More specifically, this study benefits local church pastors who do not have resources or access to a professional marriage counselor, or local church pastors who, for theological and cultural reasons, need to develop their own programs. Pastors are already overburdened with all kinds of ministry. In the United States, helping church members with their marriage should top a pastor's list of duties. The limitation of time and resources make a preformulated program or a contextualized study appealing for use in the local church. The study could also help pastors who wish to minister to Chinese communities in the United States.

Significance for Educators and Researchers

The study has significance for educators and researchers who want to help pastors in marriage and/or family ministries. Many people are called into a ministry that prepares pastors to fulfill the call of God in shepherding their flock. While their research and teaching are not meant to replace the need for pastors, seminaries and institutes train competent counselors and psychologists to provide a wonderful ministry to couples in need. The primary caretaker of a marriage ministry is still the pastor in local churches. In many cases, pastors are the best people to do so. To prepare pastors to meet the flock's need, it is necessary look into the practice of a marriage ministry, such as a marriage enrichment program, in the context of local churches by pastors of those churches.

This study should also have significance for educators and researchers beyond Christian circles. The majority of Americans still profess Christianity as their religious affiliation. Those educators and researchers who want to aid the general public with their marriages will benefit from better understanding of the dynamic of pastors and their parishioners in dealing marriage issues.

Definition of Terms

Marriage Education Program—An educational program that provides premarriage education, marriage education, and/or relationship enrichment for couples.

Marriage Enrichment Program—Synonym of Marriage Education Program

Attachment Theory—A theoretical account of the dynamics of long-term relationships between humans. Its primary premise is that an infant needs to develop a relationship with at least one primary caregiver in order to have normal social and emotional development. The theory is later expanded to include the need of attachment for adults.

Behavior Therapy—The treatment of neurotic symptoms by training the patient's reactions to stimuli.

Cognitive Behavior Therapy—A type of psychotherapy in which negative patterns of thought about the self and the world are challenged in order to alter unwanted behavior patterns or treat mood disorders such as depression.

Emotional-Focused Couple Therapy—A short-term psychotherapy approach for couples and families. Its theoretical ground includes attachment theory, experimental, person-centered, constructivist, and systems theory.

Theological Integration—To synthesize the results of theological and non-theological studies.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

A literature review is offered here on publications that are relevant to the exercise of marriage enrichment programs in the church. The review will be divided into two major sections: pastoral care and marriage education. In the first section, the role of pastor and local church is reviewed, followed by the theological framework to integrate biblical teaching and secular learning. In the second section, the history of marriage education program, its design frameworks, and its major underpinned psychological therapies will be discussed.

Pastoral Care

Fortifying and restoring relationships is an important task for pastoral care. In his 1997 groundbreaking book, *Connection: Healing for Ourselves and Our Relationships*, the famed and influential Christian psychologist Larry Crabb had an earthshaking shift of focus in his view of healing broken relationships and the personal psyche. He had this to say:

The greatest need in modern civilization in the development of communities – true communities where the heart of God is home, where the humble and wise learn to shepherd those on the path behind them, where trusting strugglers lock arms with others as together they journey on.²²

Crabb's concern highlights the importance of pastoral care in the ministry of healing relationships, and no other human relationship is more prominent than marriage.

²² Larry Crabb, *Connecting: Healing Ourselves and Our Relationships* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1997), 7.

To encourage pastors to nurture marital relationship of church members, Rogers notes:

Biblically, the marital relationship is the first social institution. We are convinced that health in this primary relationship is a foundation to healthy family living. To awaken hope for growth and to provide an opportunity to learn principles for growth in marriage is good pastoral care to families.²³

Marriage Education in Religious Context

Pastors are in a privileged position to offer marriage help. Several peer-reviewed studies showed that people affected by psychological stress tend to seek help from their religious leaders as often as or even more often than from other professionals.²⁴ This pattern is especially true for people with religious affiliation.²⁵ Marriage and family issues constitute a major part of pastoral counseling.²⁶ Despite a lack of traditional psychological training, pastors have provided help to enrich the family life and marriage life of millions.²⁷ Pastors are uniquely put in the faith community to build up successful marriages. Andrew J. Weaver et. al. speak for many when they conclude:

At a time of widespread concern about the demise of the family, it is especially important that pastors and their colleagues in ministry better understand how to help guide families through the passage of the life cycle. Despite limitations in training, clergy act as marriage and family counselors for millions of Americans. ... Clergy need

²³ W. H. Rogers and M. Rogers, "Marriage Enrichment Conferences for the Local Church," *Review and Expositor* 75 (1978): 42-43.

²⁴ M. Stanford and K. McAlister, "Perceptions of Serious Mental Illness in the Local Church," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 12 (2008): 144-153.

²⁵ Gayle Privette, Stephen Quackenbos, and Charles M. Bundrick, "Preferences for Religious or Nonreligious Counseling and Psychotherapy," *Psychological Reports* 75, no. 1 (August 1994): 539.

²⁶ Andrew J. Weaver, Harold G. Koenig, and David B. Larson, "Marriage and Family Therapists and the Clergy: A Need for Clinical Collaboration, Training, and Research," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 23, no. 1 (1997): 13.

²⁷ Andrew J. Weaver, Linda A. Revilla, and Harold G. Koenig, *Counseling Families Across the Stages of Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 19-30.

additional training in family counseling skills and pastors indicates high interest in continuing education in the area.²⁸

In addition to preference for religious orientation, evidence indicates that people of faith expect religious practices to be incorporated into counseling.²⁹ Additionally, highly religious people expect more religious behavior in counseling sessions even when working with a nonreligious counselor. Both moderately and highly religious people expect a nonreligious counselor to exhibit acceptance and tolerance of Christian beliefs.³⁰ A growing body of research in the past two decades demonstrates the effectiveness of incorporating religion/spirituality in psychotherapy for a number of clients.³¹

To religious people, their faith does more than merely influence their expectations of counselors: their faith and practice positively impact their relational dynamics. In a study of 316 college students in exclusive romantic relationship and 215 African-American married couples, partner-focused petitionary prayer has been shown to enhance relational satisfaction and the level of commitment for couples in both marital and non-marital romantic relationships.³² A study on the religious coping of romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance between heterosexual married couples revealed a clear

²⁸ Ibid., 25-26.

²⁹ D. Turdon, "Expectations of Counseling: A Comparison between Evangelical Christians and Non-evangelical Christians," *Pastoral Theology* 52, no. 6 (July 2004): 507-517.

³⁰ C. Belaire, and J. S. Young, "Conservative Christians' Expectations of Non-Christian Counselors," *Counseling and Values* 46 (2002): 175-187.

³¹ Brian Post, and Nathaniel G. Wade, "Religion and Spirituality in Psychotherapy: A Practice-Friendly Review of Research," *Journal of Clinical Psychology/In session* 65, no. 2 (2009): 131-146.

³² Frank D. Fincham, and Steven R. H. Beach, "Little Prayer for You: Praying for Partner Increases Commitment in Romantic Relationships," *Journal of Family Psychology* 28, no. 5 (2014): 587-593.

correlation.³³ Among 64 older couples, the wife's perception of marriage as a sacred commitment has a strong positive link with marital satisfaction of both spouses. These links were partially mediated by compassionate love.³⁴ In marital conflict, religiosity affects how couples handle conflicts in all its three phases: problem prevention, conflict resolution, and relationship reconciliation.³⁵ A desirable marriage needs more than skill in conflict resolutions; it needs meaningful connections. Data from a three-year longitudinal sample of 354 couples revealed a moderate but positive correlation between marital well-being and religiousness.³⁶ Further, the positive correlation between religiousness and healthy couple relationship gives further impetus to conduct pastoral-led marriage enrichment program in the context of the church. In such an arrangement, both the expectations of participants and the exercise of their faith aim to foster stronger marital relationships. Steven R. H. Beach, et al. highlights the potential importance of incorporating prayer in marital intervention.³⁷

³³ Sara E. Pollard, Shelley A. Riggs, and Joshua N. Hook, "Mutual Influence in Adult Romantic Attachment, Religious Coping, and Marital Adjustment," *Journal of Family Psychology* 28, no. 5 (2014): 615-624.

³⁴ Allen K. Sabey, Amy J. Rauer, and Jacob F. Jensen, "Compassionate Love as Mechanism Linking Sacred Qualities of Marriage to Older Couples' Marital Satisfaction," *Journal of Family Psychology* 28, no. 5 (2014): 594-603.

³⁵ Nathaniel M. Lambert, and David C. Dollahite, "How Religiosity Helps Couples Prevent, Resolve, and Overcome Marital Conflict," *Family Relations* 55 (2006): 439-449.

³⁶ Michael A. Goodman, David C. Collanhite, Loren D. Marks, and Emily Layton, "Religious Faith and Transformational Processes in Marriage," *Family Relations* 62 (2013): 808-823.

³⁷ Steven R. H. Beach, Frank D. Fincham, Tera R. Hurt, Lily M. McNair, and Scott M. Stanley, "Prayer and Marital Intervention: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 27, no. 7 (2008): 641-669.

One important factor as to why religious beliefs and practices can positively impact marriage is their positive association with couples' commitment to marriage.³⁸ There are various ways to unpack the meaning and dimensions of marital commitment.³⁹ They all have to do, one way or another, with internal desire and external action in preserving and/or improving marriages. Galea's understanding is quite proper when he states that "[c]ommitment was seen both as a psychological attachment and a corresponding behavior intent to pursue the relationship."⁴⁰ Commitment provides motivations for couples to seek ways such as marriage education to nurture their marriage.⁴¹ Couple or client motivation is thought of as the most important factor in determining counseling outcome. In fact, Sprenkle et. al. declares:

... (W)e believe that client motivation is one of the - if not the most important variables in therapy, but therapist can do a great deal to influence client motivation, for better or for worse. Matching therapist behavior with client motivation, therefore, becomes one of the most paramount tasks of any therapeutic approach.⁴²

³⁸ Andrew J. Weaver, Linda A. Revilla, and Harold G. Koenig, *Counseling Families Across the Stages of Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 22-23; Michael A. Goodman, David C. Dollahite, Loren D. Marks and Emily Layton, "Religious Faith and Transformational Process in Marriage," *Family Relations* 62 (2013): 808-823; Judith A. Nelson, Amy Manning Kirk, Pedra Ane and Sheryl A. Serres, "Religious and Spiritual Values and Moral Commitment in Marriage: Untapped Resources in Couple Counseling?" *Counseling and Values* 55 (2011): 228-246.

³⁹ Judith A. Nelson, Amy Manning Kirk, Pedra Ane and Sheryl A. Serres, "Religious and Spiritual Values and Moral Commitment in Marriage: Untapped Resources in Couple Counseling?" *Counseling and Values* 55 (2011): 228; Richard A. Hunt, Larry Hof, and Rita DeMaria, *Marriage Enrichment: Preparation, Mentoring and Outreach* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 1998), 148; Lyle E. Larson and J. Walter Goltz, "Religious Participation and Marital Commitment," *Review of Religious Research* 30, no. 4 (June 1989): 387-388; Michael A. Goodman, David C. Dollahite, Loren D. Marks and Emily Layton, "Religious Faith and Transformational Process in Marriage," *Family Relations* 62 (2013): 810.

⁴⁰ Paul Galea, "Readiness for Commitment: Applying Psychological Constructs to Pastoral Issues in Marriage," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 61, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 211

⁴¹ Richard A. Hunt, Larry Hof, and Rita DeMaria, *Marriage Enrichment: Preparation, Mentoring and Outreach* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 1998), 147-150.

⁴² Douglas H. Sprenkle, Jay Lebow, and Sean D. Davis, *Common Factors In Couple and Family Therapy*. (New York: Guilford Press, 2009), 7.

Evidences also exist to suggest such is the case for marriage education program as well. For example, college-educated young adults who decide to attend premarital education voluntarily (i.e., self-motivated) show greater interest in the program⁴³. Higher relational commitment also correlates positively with effectiveness of marriage enrichment measured three months after the event.⁴⁴ Highly religious couples (Christian, Jewish and Islamic) who believe marriage is part of God's plan express religious motivation to grow their marriage.⁴⁵ Attendance of a premarital education program finds strong positive correlation with religious service attendance⁴⁶ and with being married in a religious setting.⁴⁷ These findings support Hunt et. al.'s assessment that

High commitment probably leads to greater motivation and willingness of both partners to participate in ME activities, yet may be less noticeable than with couples who begin with either lower commitment or with larger discrepancies in commitment between partners.⁴⁸

⁴³ Benjamin Silliman, Walter R. Schumm and Anthony P. Jurich, "Young Adults' Preferences For Premarital Preparation Program Designs: An Exploratory Study," *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal* 14 (1992): 89-100; Stephen F. Duncan, Gabrielle Box and Benjamin Silliman, "Racial And Gender Effects On Perceptions Of Marriage Preparation Programs Among College-Educated Young Adults," *Family Relations* 45, no. 1 (1996): 80-90.

⁴⁴ S. A. Cox, *Commitment And Couple Happiness Among Marriage Enrichment Participants*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Graduate School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary, (Pasadena, CA:1995)

⁴⁵ Michael A. Goodman and David C. Dollahite, "How Religious Couples Perceive The Influence Of God In Their Marriage," *Review of Religious Research* 48, no. 2 (2006): 141-155.

⁴⁶ W. Kim Halford, Charlotte O'Donnell, Alf Lizzio, and Keithia L. Wilson, "Do Couples At High Risk Of Relationship Problems Attend Premarriage Education?" *Journal of Family Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2006): 160 -163.

⁴⁷ Scott M. Stanley, Paul R. Amato, Christine A. Johnson and Howard J. Markman, "Premarital Education, Marital Quality, And Marital Stability: Findings From A Large, Random Household Survey," *Journal of Family Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2006): 117-126

⁴⁸ Richard A. Hunt, Larry Hof, and Rita Demaria, *Marriage Enrichment* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, Inc., 1998), 150.

Marriage education program designers and leaders are encouraged to tap into commitment to marriage out of religious faith to improve program effectiveness.

After considering participants' expectations and benefits of religious practices in marriage enrichment, this study will discuss the context of delivery. First it will review community-based marriage education in general. Then it will narrow the focus to the religious community.

Doherty and Anderson published a succinct assessment of community marriage initiatives.⁴⁹ There are several things worth noting from their paper. First, community marriage initiatives are influenced by greater social and cultural contexts. In the 1970s, under the influence of the "human potential" movement, marriage education shifted from programs led by marriage professionals to layman-led community efforts. This movement experienced its decline in the 1980s due to a combination of consumer culture, feminism marriage criticisms, the rise of alternative definitions of marriage, and a general lack of emphasis from both political and religious leaders. In the 1990s, marriage was again a point of interest as the social ramifications of rising divorce spurred great concern from society at large. Government at both the federal and local levels, academics, marriage and family professionals, and, importantly, local community leaders formed partnerships to establish many new community-based marriage initiatives. This particular movement had

⁴⁹ William J. Doherty, and Jared R. Anderson, "Community Marriage Initiatives," *Family Relations* 53 (2004): 425- 432.

an uneasy relationship with marriage professionals and academic researchers for various reasons.

In its early day, community marriage initiatives deliberately avoided academic and professional involvement. The ambivalent attitude of these groups toward the definition and benefit of marriage led to questions about the value of any marriage initiative. The lack of objective assessment regarding the effectiveness of community marriage initiatives also ignited skepticism. The contentious relationship changed somewhat in the mid 1990s with greater cooperation among academic, professional, and community marriage initiative proponents.

Community marriage initiatives are difficult to evaluate. To properly assess a program, one needs to evaluate both the process and the result. The myriad of active agents contributing to the process makes the program almost too complex to assess. In general, public agents engage in promotions through propaganda and information distribution; academics and professionals design and transmit programs to on-the-field trainers, and trainers disseminate the programs to participants in various contexts. The challenge is further complicated by difficulties in finding control groups with proper statistical significance. New theories and practices of evaluation are currently under development.

Interestingly, Marriage Savers, Healthy Marriage Grand Rapids, Families Northwest, First Thing First, and Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, effectively every single marriage initiative mentioned by Doherty and Anderson, rely heavily on the involvement of local churches or other faith-based congregations. Despite uncertainties, Doherty and

Anderson believe the convergence of community generated effort, faith-based initiatives, and professionally developed programs have great potential to improve marriage health.

Religious organizations have been recognized as the single largest array of institutions that have both the interest and motivation to deliver interventions preventing marital stress. As a major part of community marriage initiatives, Stanley et. al. give four reasons why religious organizations such as churches play such significant roles in providing marital and premarital interventions: (1) most couples still get married in religious organizations, (2) religious organizations readily agree with the goal of preventing marital stress, (3) religious organizations in general have traditions and infrastructures to deliver education programs, and (4) religious organizations are more deeply embedded in their respective cultures than other organizations.⁵⁰

Hawkins, et. al. lists three areas of strength religious organizations have in conducting marriage education. First, religious organizations have easy participant recruitment. Second, participants tend to continue their involvement in congregation life after any formal marriage education programs. These same participants can serve as an important support group for new participants. Third, the religious setting provides powerful learning support by combining ethical and moral domains into the marriage education program.⁵¹

Research supports the fact that religious organizations, through their strong commitment to marriage, context, and infrastructure, are promising avenues for marriage

⁵⁰ Scott M. Stanley, Howard J. Markman, Michael St. Peters, and B. Douglas Leber, "Strengthen Marriage and Preventing Divorce," *Family Relations* 44 (1995): 392-401.

⁵¹ Alan J. Hawkins, Jason S. Carroll, William J. Doherty, and Brian Willoughby, "A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education," *Family Relations* 53 (2004): 547-558.

education programs. Markman, et. al. have done a study on the dissemination of a professionally designed, empirically based premarital education program, the Prevention and Relational Enhancement Program (PREP), to clergy and lay leaders from 26 religious organizations.⁵² Five years after initial training, 82 percent of participants still use part of what they learned from the training curriculum. The audience is also extended to married couples (about 35 percent). Both facts indicate success in dissemination. The Stanley et. al. study confirms the effectiveness of pastors and lay leaders in conducting empirically based premarital programs.⁵³ They gathered 202 religious organizations covering a wide spectrum of Christian denominations with membership of 400 and up. The average age of clergy is 48 years old, with close to 15 years of education and helping couples. The lay leader's average age is slightly younger at 46.6 years old, but with more average years of education (17.2) and fewer years of experience in helping couples (10.3). Their finding, therefore, may not be transferable to most churches with much smaller congregation membership and younger pastors with less experience.

The church congregation's desired format for marriage education is not different from other educational activities in the church. To aid the development of marital and relationship ministry as a part of pastoral care, Akagi and Bergen did a study of eight faith communities in a Midwestern city to identify proper topics and delivery formats by congregants.⁵⁴ Their report indicates that the top four desired formats are evening

⁵² Howard J. Markman, et. al., "Use of an Empirically Based Marriage Education Program by Religious Organizations: Results of a Dissemination Trial," *Family Relations* 53 (2004): 504-512.

⁵³ Scott M. Stanley, et. al., "Community-Bases Premarital Prevention: Clergy and Lay Leaders on the Front Lines," *Family Relations* 50 (2001): 67-76.

⁵⁴ Cynthia G. Akagi, and M. Betsy Bergen, "Marital and Relationship Ministry (MRM) As a Tenant of Pastoral Care," *The Journey of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 58, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2004): 63-73.

seminars, weekend retreats, support groups, and Sunday school programs. These can all be considered structured group education programs.⁵⁵

In summary, marriage education can be part of the pastoral arsenal in helping members of their congregations to deal with marital issues. The church has social, cultural, and moral advantages, allowing it to serve as a place to conduct marriage education. Pastors and lay leaders can be effective agents in conducting these marriage education programs. Indeed, the declaration of Hawkins et. al. appears to be well founded:

For many who associate with a religious community and imbue marriage with spiritual meaning, a religious setting is an ideal place for marriage education.⁵⁶

Integrating Theology and Psychology

What makes such care uniquely pastoral and Christian? In a general sense, according to Allan H. Cole Jr., pastoral care has two foci: the “care of soul ... and care offered against the backdrop of ‘The Christian story,’ which is defined as:

the story of God’s creative, transformative, and redemptive acts throughout history, which Christians have most frequently recognized in the history of Israel; the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and ongoing work of the Spirit.⁵⁷

More specifically, Ripley and Worthington listed four unique themes of Christian couple therapy: (1) Marriage as a covenant, (2) the presence of the Spirit as the agent of change,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 66.

⁵⁶ Alan J. Hawkins, Jason S. Carroll, William J. Doherty, and Brian Willoughby, “A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education,” *Family Relations* 53 (2004): 550.

⁵⁷ Allan H. Cole, Jr., “What Makes Care Pastoral?” *Pastoral Psychology* 59 (2010): 711.

(3) the root cause for marriage distress as sin, and (4) the growth of a couple parallels their spiritual growth.

Marriage ministry as part of pastoral care must be offered with the view that the life stories of individuals and couples are only part of this Christian narrative.

To pastors and parishioners who are committed to the Reformation *sola scriptura*, the more specific issue of authority of the Scripture and psychology inevitably arises because pastoral care is often informed by psychotherapy. Shields and Bredfeldt offered a succinct summary of different Christian positions.⁵⁸ The three positions are briefly outlined here: In The Bible-Only Approach, the Bible is the only infallible and authoritative source of knowledge for counseling. It is the only sufficient source of knowledge. In this view, psychology must be rejected and avoided. In the Bible-And Approach, the Bible and psychology are treated as equal partners. Each has its own sphere of operation. Third is the Bible-Over Approach. Shields and Bredfeldt traced this approach to Calvin and Luther, and eventually to Augustine. This approach takes psychology as a source of true knowledge, but which must be put under the authority of Scripture. Psychological knowledge and practice can be useful for Christians after careful discernment from the biblical perspective. After arguing for the “Bible-Over” position, Shields and Bredfeldt provide guidelines to help pastors. In viewing a psychological concept or conclusion, pastors need to consider the answers to five questions:

Is it directly supported by Scripture?

Is it theologically consistent with Scripture?

Is it addressed by Scripture?

⁵⁸ Harry Shields, and Gary Bredfeldt, *Caring for Souls* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), 43-51.

Is it explicitly denied by Scripture?

Is it doubtfully consistent with Scripture?

Answering affirmatively to the first two indicates that the psychological concept or conclusion is valid. Conversely, answering affirmatively to the last two shows that it must be rejected. With regards to question three, if the answer is no and the scientific research is sound, then careful integration is recommended.

Eric Johnson has edited a book entitled *Psychology & Christianity – Five Views*, which provides a much more nuanced and comprehensive treatment of different perspectives for Christian responses to psychology.⁵⁹ Proponents of each view are invited to present their own and offer critiques to others. These five views are a level-of-explanation view, an integration view, a Christian psychology view, a transformational psychology view, and a biblical counseling view. These five views, based on their order, increasingly perceive secular psychology with skepticism and hostility. Their level of appropriation of secular psychology theory and practice decreases accordingly. Their arena of operation also moves more and more from the public sphere to a church context. Each view has no monolithic voices among its adherents. It is best to see them as a spectrum of Christian response to the rise of modern psychology. When compared with Shields and Bredfeldt's categorization, it is easy to see that the level-of-explanation view adopts the Bible-And approach, the biblical counseling view takes the Bible-Only approach, while the rest belong to the Bible-Over approach, with different perspectives on the complicated interplay between theology and psychology.

⁵⁹Eric L. Johnson, ed., *Psychology & Christianity: Five Views*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

A level-of-explanation sees psychology and theology operating in distinct levels of inquiries. Psychology and theology are two different disciplines seeking to understand different dimensions (or levels) of reality with their respective methodologies. These two perspectives of reality are essentially independent, with little overlap or mutual influence. Their boundaries should not be blurred. Proponents of this position do not deny the possibility of biased assumptions in psychology research but believe the best way to overcome these possible biases is by applying investigation via proper scientific method. They seriously consider the insights of psychology, something appreciated by many, but not all, who disagree with them. Critics question whether sharp separation of psychology and theology is warranted and whether their confidence in scientific research of psychology is overly optimistic.

The biblical counseling view treats psychology basically as anti-Christian. Like the level-of-explanation view, the proponents of biblical counseling tend to see psychology and theology as two sharply divided disciplines without common ground. Modern psychology, naturalistic deterministic theory, and human-centered practice render themselves incomparable with biblical faith and practice. Therefore, the Bible is sufficient for the spiritual needs of Christians. Biblical counseling heavily emphasizes the repentance of sin, believing sin to be the cause for most psychological problems. Christ must be the solution to these problems. A practitioner of biblical counseling should be the pastor and the context should be the church. While unintentional, its counselees are mostly restricted to Christians. Those who have been educated in modern psychology find the biblical counseling camp's dismissive attitude rather unpersuasive, and more

importantly, an improper use of the Bible. The misuse of Scripture by some supporters in biblical counseling has given rise to criticism.

Between these two schools of thought toward modern psychology lie the integration, Christian psychology, and transformational views. The integration view, like the level-of-explanation view, favorably appreciates the contribution of modern psychology. However, it does not believe there is a sharp distinction between the two disciplines. Both disciplines want to understand the nature, the development, and the causes of problems, with the ultimate intention of curing them. Proponents of this view believe that these two disciplines are related and therefore can be integrated. Some endeavor to combine the two disciplines while others want to replace the assumptions of modern psychology with biblical counterparts. Still others seek to integrate Christian worldviews with the theory and practice of psychology but do not believe psychology can inform Christian theology.

The Christian psychology view gives Christian beliefs a louder and more decisive voice. Proponents strive to develop psychology theories and practices based on Christian understandings of human beings. This view is self-identified as an active, engaging member within the general field of psychology, but the agenda of research and practice is set by Christian beliefs instead of modern psychology.

The transformational view moves the primary focus of integration away from the intellect, instead focusing on the personal, relational, and spiritual aspects of life. Christian psychology wants to build psychology around the Christian understanding of what it means to be a human being. This view puts Christians in psychology professions on at least equal footing with the Christian world view. Personal transformation is

emphasized in counselor training, theory formulation, and counseling practices.

Proponents look into ancient Christian soul care as a rich ground of resources. Modern psychology is one of many potential contributors to serve this purpose of personal transformation.

In summary, marriage education is properly part of pastoral care. Pastors can employ marriage education programs as an effective means to help parishioners with their marriages. Existing marriage education programs, whether in theory or practice, require pastoral discernment before implementation. Debate on how and to what extent Christians should incorporate modern psychology insights is still actively occurring. Pastors need to be aware of how different views inform the design and practice of marriage education programs and, in combination with his or her theological frame of reference, make an informed decision.

Another consideration of marriage education programs in religious context is the religious participant's perception of the role of psychology. Mutter et al. did an exploratory study on Christian perceptions of different pastoral approaches for marital therapy.⁶⁰ Five marriage education programs with a wide range of theological commitments were selected. They included a secular emotionally focused couple therapy, a theologically liberal experimental humanistic approach,⁶¹ a theological conservative cognitive-behavior approach by Wright,⁶² a theological conservative approach integrating

⁶⁰ Kelvin F. Mutter, Taiwo Ande, and Carel J. Hugo, "Christians' Perceptions of Hypothetical Case Studies of Five Pastoral Approaches to Marital Therapy: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 29, No. 4 (2010): 326-333.

⁶¹ Howard J. Clinebell, and Charlotte Clinebell, *The Intimate Marriage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

⁶² H. Norman Wright, *Marriage Counseling: A Practical Guide for Pastors and Counselors* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995).

psychodynamic and cognitive psychology by Crabb,⁶³ and a hope-focused model by Worthington⁶⁴ – a theologically conservative approach integrating cognitive psychology and the effective experience of the couple. Mutter et al. concluded that participants generally held positive attitudes toward education plans and processes. The theologically liberal approach, however, was consistently rated less favorably by participants who identified as Christian conservatives. Their findings are consistent with that of Belaire et al., who studied the attitude and expectation of religiously conservative Christians toward counseling. They found that the participants expected their own beliefs and values to be respected and multiple religious behaviors included in counseling.⁶⁵ The congregants are open to using psychology in marriage education as long so their own beliefs and practices can be expressed.

Marriage Education Programs

Marriage education programs are structured, relationship-focused, group education programs for couples. They were first offered by religious communities in the U.S. in the early 1950s.⁶⁶ For several decades, marriage education programs were used to help premarital couples prepare for their marriage and were thought to be preventive in

⁶³ Larry Crabb, *The Marriage Builder: A Blueprint for Couples and Counselors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982).

⁶⁴ Everett L. Worthington Jr., *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling: A Guide to Brief Therapy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999).

⁶⁵ Christine Belaire, J. Scott Young, and Anastasia Elder, "Inclusion of Religious Behavior and Attitudes in Counseling: Expectations of Conservative Christians," *Counseling and Values* 49, no. 2 (January 2005): 82.

⁶⁶ Richard A. Hunt, Larry Hof, and Rita DeMaria, *Marriage Enrichment: Preparation, Mentoring and Outreach* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, Inc., 1998).

purpose.⁶⁷ They were not considered to be an effective way to mediate distressed couples. However, such perception has been challenged in the past few years. Strong evidence exists to suggest that marriage education programs can and do help distressed couples. For example, in a study done by DeMaria on 129 couples who attended the same marriage education program, an astounding 93 percent of those couples were considered to be distressed. This study demonstrated the effectiveness of that program for distressed couples.

For the past sixty-some years, numerous marriage education programs, both religious and secular, have been formed. Demand to have programs that are theory driven and empirically validated is increasing. W. Kim Halford et al. suggested therapists better disseminate evidence-based relationship education programs from the academic world to clergy and religious organizations.⁶⁸ In this way, the clergy can utilize and implement theoretically sound and practically proven education programs.

From a theoretical perspective, Christensen and Heavey offered a succinct summary of different types of couples therapy and their effectiveness.⁶⁹ Behavior couple therapy (BCT) is grounded on a social learning theory of human behavior. The three major intervention avenues are behavior exchange, communication training, and problem solving training. In behavior exchange, couples identify and practice acts that they can do for each other and show appropriate, positive acknowledgement when receiving those

⁶⁷ Rony Berger, and Mo T. Hannah, *Preventive Approaches in Couples Therapy* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, Inc., 1999), 1-5.

⁶⁸ W. Kim Halford, Howard J. Markman, Galena H. Kline, and Scott M. Stanley, "Best Practice in Couple Relationship Education," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 29, no. 3 (July 2003): 398.

⁶⁹ A. Christensen, and C. L. Heavey, "Interventions for Couples," *Annual Review of Psychology* 50 (1999): 165-190.

acts. In communication training, couples learn to actively listen and communicate without blame or accusation. In problem-solving training, couples learn how to identify problems, generate potential solutions, negotiate differences, and implement those solutions. Cognitive-behavior couple therapy (CBCT) believes that behavior affects not only relationships but also the interpretation of that behavior. Thus, cognitive-restructuring of distressed couples figures heavily in CBCT. Emotionally focused couple therapy (EFCT) is based on attachment theory. It proposes that relationship distress is caused by losing a sense of secure attachment between partners. To aid the distressed couple, EFCT attempts to help couples access and reprocess emotional experience and to restructure their interaction patterns. At the time of their writing, a new therapy, integrative couple therapy (ICT), adds couple acceptance to BCT. Christensen and Heavey confessed that though each couple therapy approach has a body of evidence to support its effectiveness, there were not enough studies to draw conclusions on the relative effectiveness between different couple therapy approaches.

Since the mid-90s, many attempts have been made to evaluate the effectiveness of different marriage education programs. For example, Balswick and Balswick⁷⁰ offered a comprehensive evaluation. Both secular and Christian programs are evaluated against six criteria: the quality and research basis of the program, adequacy of leader guides, processing of exercise, user friendliness for teaching and application, view of gender roles, and degree of biblical and theological integration. They concluded that most reviewed programs lack empirical evaluation and assessment. It is especially important to

⁷⁰ J. K. Balswick, and J. O. Balswick, "Marital Enhancement Program Evaluation," *Journal of Family Ministry* 17, no. 1 (2003): 12-37.

note that most of them lack any integration between psychological findings and theological reflections.

The need of assessment and evaluation is confirmed by another review. Wanting to shed light on the effectiveness of marital education programs that do have empirical support, Jakubowski et al.⁷¹ review 13 programs based on seven criteria to assess their effectiveness. The results are mixed, and only four of them were considered effective. Three were labeled as “possibly” effective, and almost half (six) were thought to be “untested.” The scarcity of studies on the practical level of marriage enrichment programs is not unique; it appears to be the case among therapists as well.

Shaldish and Baldwin⁷² did a review of 20 meta-analyses of marital and family interventions. They concluded that marital and family interventions are clinically effective, but they also pointed out that data availability on cases with actual clinical settings were exceptions rather than the norm. These reviews demonstrated that marriage enrichment programs can be effective when designed and implemented properly. Most evaluations, however, are university-based investigations. It is important to look at marriage education programs in the context in which they are actually practiced.

Frameworks of Marriage Enrichment Programs

To assist marriage educators in developing proper programs, Hawkins et. al.⁷³ offered a comprehensive framework for the design of marriage enrichment programs.

⁷¹ S. F. Jakubowski, et al., “A Review of Empirically Supported Marital Enrichment Programs,” *Family Relations* 53, no. 5 (2004): 528-536.

⁷² W. R. Shadish, and S. A. Balwin, “Meta-Analysis of MFT Interventions,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 29, no. 4, (2003): 547-570.

⁷³ Alan J. Hawkins, Jason S. Carroll, William J. Doherty, and Brian Willoughby, “A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education,” *Family Relations* 53 (2004): 547-558.

Their insights will be briefly summarized here. Basically, seven dimensions should be considered in a marriage education program: content, intensity, methods, timing, setting, targets, and delivery.

Content has to do with what will be delivered. Three elements are included.

Relational skill deals with behavior, enabling participants to communicate better and resolve conflict more constructively, Cognitive understanding focuses on what constitutes a good marriage and what attitudes can help build it. One often neglected area is the importance of marriage to the community and society. Motivation and/or virtues deal with ethical aspects of couples that would encourage or promote healthy marriage.

Intensity has to do with effectiveness, cost, and the degree of participation. Too little intensity in intervention can be ineffective, and too much might be cost-inhibitive to both educators and target participants. Similarly, a very intense program might reach only a small number of people due to cost. There are no clear cut divisions between different intensity levels. Public media campaigns, for example, are on the side of low level intervention. A half-day marriage-enrichment seminar and flexible self-guided intervention are examples of mid-level intensity. High intensity interventions require time commitment, psychological security, and professional training of the leaders to help marriage partners explore deeply a wider range of issues.

Method is concerned with how the material is presented and learned. Good contents require good ways of teaching. As Hawkins et. al. put it: "Marriage educators need to give more attention to methods that can help participants maintain program benefits."⁷⁴ Three elements to consider are the instructor, the learning style, and

⁷⁴ Alan J. Hawkins, Jason S. Carroll, William J. Doherty, and Brian Willoughby, "A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education," *Family Relations* 53 (2004): 550.

maintenance. It is desirable for the instructor to teach people who share similar perspectives with their target audiences. Things to consider include economic status, cultural background (ethnic, religion, etc.), and gender. For example, a couple of faith is better served by instructors who can communicate in a way that addresses their culture, language, and practice of said faith.

Audience learning style is also an important consideration. To accommodate different learning styles, a host of approaches can be used, such as didactic teaching, multimedia presentation of examples, interactive discussion, and role-playing. Some prefer a more cognitive and didactic approach, others a more experiential and practical one. These considerations will impact how the material is presented.

Lastly, one needs to consider the method of maintenance. Marriage educators have long speculated that follow-ups or “booster” sessions can help people retain the benefit of what they have learned. There are various options for post-curricula maintenance. In addition to formal booster sessions, electronic communications can create post-curricula communities for continued support, or programs for graduates to become teachers themselves.

Timing deals with target audience’s season of life. Most marriage education focuses on engaged or recently married couples. It can be useful, however, to break down life into age-and-stage categories: adolescence, early adulthood, premarital and early marital, early parental, mid-parental, and late- and post-parental years. Also, the diversity of modern developmental paths to union makes marriage education more complicated. To serve all people, marriage education needs to take cohabitation, divorced, and remarried couples into consideration as well.

Setting considers the place of marriage education. Several possibilities include personal homes, neighborhood community, religious setting, education institutes, health care system, work place, mass media, and public services.

Target refers to the target audience which a given marriage education program wants to benefit. Several possible factors include certain economic statuses, ethnicities and races, and urban or rural groups.

Delivery is the final dimension to consider. Four types of delivery can be incorporated. The specialist marriage education is conducted by professionals with in depth knowledge and skill. It has an unavoidable limitation on the number of people it can reach due to the relatively limited numbers of specialists and their limited avenues to reach masses. The integrated marriage education approach will incorporate marriage education within a greater set of human services. In general, it is a less intense form of marriage education than those led by specialists. At the same time, it has the potential to affect many more people. Citizen marriage initiatives are grassroots efforts to provide education opportunities as well as create community environments in which marriage can flourish. The last approach is marriage culture setting. It promotes macro-cultural change, operating at a different level compared with other approaches. It uses tools such as mass media and public health to change and shape the attitude and values of society. Public policy, therefore, is critical to the success of this approach.

Richard et. al. offers similar considerations for marriage education programs. Eight dimensions for successful programs are discussed: program qualities, event qualities, program leader qualities, leader training, program elements and content, schedule and format, follow-up, and finally the program setting.

Program qualities can be assessed by observing how long a program has been in development, the values (for example, religious) behind it, the expected outcomes, and the quality and quantity of research done on the program. Event qualities relate to things like the types and purposes of marriage education or the demographic and perspectives of the targeted participants. Program leader qualities are affected by the differences in professional backgrounds, degrees of training, leadership type, and styles. Leader training is a critical criterion for assessment. The most important variable in the success of a marriage program is the leader's skill and relationship with the audience. Program elements and contents consider the substance and ways of teaching. The information focuses on relational skills which includes commitment enhancements, intimacy growth, conflict resolution, and communication techniques. Most programs will have both didactic and experiential elements. Schedule and formats relate to duration, frequency, and size of marriage education programs. A weekend retreat, for example, can be given in a short period of time to a lot of people. A multiweek workshop, on the other hand, may be spread over a longer period of time with a shorter duration per session. Follow-up is important when considering a marriage program. The unfamiliar skills learned in program events require follow-up support to maintain effectiveness. Setting is the logistic consideration of a program's location. Among these eight dimensions, the role of leaders receives special emphasis. As Hunt et. al. put it:

The need for highly qualified, trained leadership becomes evident when it is realized that the most important variable in the success of enrichment programs is identified as the quality of the leader's skills and relationships.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Richard A. Hunt, Larry Hof, and Rita DeMaria, *Marriage Enrichment: Preparation, Mentoring and Outreach* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 1998), 74.

This list of Hunt et. al. is similar to the framework of Hawkins et. al. described earlier. The major difference appears to be the social, cultural and political perspectives of Hawkins et. al.. Both findings can be categorized into four groups of considerations: the program setting, the program content, the program leaders and the program participants. The present research will take cues from many of their insights. But different from their works, the present research will focus on participants' perspective, as Spalding aptly advises the educator in adult learning:

In order to maximize learning, you must be able to see from the student's perspective.... You must imagine how students will engage your activities, your assignments and your subject as a whole.⁷⁶

Dominant Psychological Therapies

In this section, two major therapies will be discussed, the Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) and Emotional-Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT). The role of forgiveness is also discussed due to its importance to Christian understanding of reconciliation.

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is arguably the most researched and the most widely practiced therapy today.⁷⁷ It emerged out of behavior therapy⁷⁸ and very

⁷⁶ Dan Spalding, *How to Teach Adults* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 5.

⁷⁷ Nathan C. Thoma, and John J. Cecero, "Is Integrative Use of Techniques in Psychotherapy the Exception or the Rule? Results of a National Survey of Doctoral-level Practitioners," *Psychotherapy Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 46, no. 4 (2009): 405-417.

⁷⁸ Siang-Yang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 247.

basically is an integration of two therapies: behavior therapy (BT) and cognitive therapy (CT).

Behavior therapy was born in the 1950s from an interest in applying behaviorism to therapy. Behaviorism is the belief that the behavior of subjects (both human and animal) are governed by circumstances (environmental conditions) and learning history.⁷⁹ The work of Russian psychologist Ivan Pavlov (1849 - 1936) on dog behavior lent significant theoretical foundation to behaviorism. Pavlov noticed that dogs started salivating when they heard the steps of the dog keeper before the food was actually served. He started experiments on dog behavior by pairing what he termed an *unconditional stimulus* (the food) with a *conditional stimulus* (the bell) and found that the dogs learned to respond to the sounds of bell. This learning process is later known as *classical conditioning*. John Watson (1878 - 1958) extended the experiments to humans to understand the conditioning process. He is widely considered to be the father of behaviorism and believed that humans were born as blank slates, neither positive nor negative. Human behaviors, he theorized, were completely shaped by the environments. Edward Thorndike (1874 - 1949) furthered Watson's study and developed the idea that experiences after behavior shaped behavior patterns. If a behavior is followed by satisfying experience, that behavior tends to increase in frequency. On the other hand, if it is followed by adverse experience, then that behavior tends to happen more infrequently.⁸⁰

⁷⁹Michael D. Spiegler, "Behavior Therapy," in *Salem Press Encyclopedia of Health*, ed. Nancy A. Piotrowski (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 2014), 1:256.

⁸⁰Nathan Thoma, Brian Pilecki, and Dean McKay, "Contemporary Cognitive Behavior Therapy: A Review of Theory, History, and Evidence," *Psychodynamic Psychiatry* 43, No. 3 (2015): 423-461.

Behaviorism underlies behavior therapy, which assumes that problem behavior is maintained by environmental conditions (maintaining conditions). Maintaining conditions are found either in antecedents or consequences of a given problem behavior. Therefore, the problem behavior can be corrected by changing maintaining conditions.⁸¹ The three main thrusts in behavior therapy are counterconditioning, pioneered by Wolpe, contingency management by Skinner, and cognitive behavior modification by Meichenbaum.⁸²

Joseph Wolpe (1915 - 1997) conducted his conditioning experiments on cats. Caged cats were conditioned to exhibit anxiety by a buzzer associated with an electric shock. When cats were kept in the same experimental cages, the anxiety condition persisted for days despite stopping the shocks

Eating, however, cured the cat's anxiety. Some cats would not eat as long as they were kept in the same cages where they experienced the electric shocks. They were then put in an environment dissimilar to the cage, and in that new environment, they would eat. Then the new condition was gradually changed to become more and more like the original caged condition. Eventually, these cats would eat in the original cage condition without symptoms of anxiety. Wolpe termed this *counterconditioning* or *reciprocal inhibition*. Later, Wolpe developed the first behavior therapy technique, *systematic desensitization*, to treat phobias and anxiety problems.⁸³

⁸¹ Michael D. Spiegler, "Behavior Therapy," in *Salem Press Encyclopedia of Health*, ed. Nancy A. Piotrowski (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 2014), 1:253.

⁸² James O. Prochaska, and John C. Norcross, *Systems of Psychotherapy: A Transtheoretical Analysis*, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA: Brooks Cole, 2009).

⁸³ Joseph, Wolpe, "Pavlov's Contributions to Behavior Therapy: The Obvious and Not So Obvious," *American Psychologist* 52, no. 9 (September 1997): 966-972; Nathan Thoma, Brian Pilecki, and Dean McKay, "Contemporary Cognitive Behavior Therapy: A Review of Theory, History, and Evidence,"

Burrhus Frederick Skinner (1904 - 1990) was a radical behaviorist and did not believe in human free will at all. All human behaviors were governed by environmental factors, especially the consequences of a specific behavior. Positive consequences would maintain or reinforce behavior, while adverse consequences would discourage or eliminate behavior. Skinner coined this the *operant conditioning* technique accordingly. An operant is simply an intentional action that has effect on the surrounding environment. By manipulating the contingencies of the consequences, a given operant can become more likely to happen through reinforcement or less likely through punishment. Problem behaviors then can be thus modified.⁸⁴

Donald Meichenbaum (1940 -) is one of the key figures who helped develop behavior therapy into a broader cognitive-behavior therapy. He championed the use of *self-instruction*, personal dialogue within oneself, to regulate one's emotion and behavior. His *self-instruction training* and *stress inoculation training* are both important cognitive-behavior therapy techniques.⁸⁵

Behaviorism reached its peak in the 1960s. A new school of thought, cognitive psychology, started to emerge. Its tremendous impact led many in the field to reckon it as “psychology’s revolution.”⁸⁶ Many of the behavior therapy techniques were incorporated

Psychodynamic Psychiatry 43, no. 3 (2015): 423-461; Siang-Yang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 207-208.

⁸⁴ Siang-Yang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 210, 219-220.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁸⁶ Mark R. McMinn, and Clark D. Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 78-112.

into cognitive therapy.⁸⁷ Today, these blended body of techniques is collectively called Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT), and modern day behavior therapy has largely become cognitive-behavioral in orientation and approach.⁸⁸

Cognitive Therapy (CT) assumes that faulty thoughts are the root for problematic behaviors and feelings. This therapeutic approach is centered around reconstructing and correcting these thoughts. Like behaviorism, cognitive therapy views human as being born morally neutral. Unlike Skinner's radical behaviorism, however, cognitive therapy attributes a degree of free will to humanity. Humans are not inflexible and static; they are capable of changing beliefs and asserting self control over emotion.⁸⁹ Among the many thinkers behind the development of CT, Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck are widely considered to be most important. Ellis is the founder of rational-emotive therapy (RET). Beck is thought to be "the father of cognitive therapy."⁹⁰

Ellis believed that faulty thoughts stem from irrational beliefs, leading to emotional problems. To correct such problems, one needs to vigorously dispute these irrational beliefs in order to construct more rational beliefs, which then would lead to better emotional response.⁹¹ Ellis uses a mnemonic device, ABC, to describe how the

⁸⁷ Siang-Yang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 265-266.

⁸⁸ Nathan Thoma, Brian Pilecki, and Dean McKay, "Contemporary Cognitive Behavior Therapy: A Review of Theory, History, and Evidence," *Psychodynamic Psychiatry* 43, no. 3 (2015): 430; Siang-Yang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 247.

⁸⁹ Siang-Yang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 252-253.

⁹⁰ Alexis Trader, and H. Tristram Engelhardt, *Ancient Christian Wisdom and Aaron Beck's Cognitive Therapy: A Meeting of Minds*, 2nd ed. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2012), 3.

⁹¹ Siang-Yang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 253.

process works: A stands for *activating event*, B for *belief*, and C for *consequence emotion*. An activating event (A) is something that has happened to a client and triggers irrational beliefs (B). As a result, the client responds with unhealthy consequence emotions (C). Therefore, to treat the client properly, the therapist needs to help the client to restructure the irrational beliefs (B). Ellis adds DE to the ABC to finish this rational-emotive therapy (RET) process. D stands for disputing and E for effect. Vigorously disputing (D) those irrational beliefs is crucial in RET. Through D, rational beliefs are established and lead to the desired effect (E): a healthier emotional consequence (C) to the original activating event (A).⁹²

Beck holds a similar view with regard to how faulty thoughts negatively affect emotional responses. The assumption is that feelings are basically managed by thoughts. In responding to life circumstances, faulty thoughts make people feel worse than they should. Beck labeled these thoughts “automatic thoughts” because they emerge spontaneously and rapidly.⁹³ Later authors retermed them as “dysfunctional automatic thoughts, or DATs.”⁹⁴ Beck defines the irrational thought, which he called “maladaptive thought,” as “ideation that interferes with the ability to cope with life experiences, unnecessarily disrupts internal harmony, and produces inappropriate or excessive emotional reactions that are painful.”⁹⁵ The undesirable emotional state can be overcome

⁹² Ibid., 263; Mark R. McMinn, and Clark D. Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 80-81.

⁹³ Aaron Beck, *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders* (New York: Meridian, 1979), 33.

⁹⁴ Mark R. McMinn, and Clark D. Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 81.

⁹⁵ Aaron Beck, *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders* (New York: Meridian, 1979), 235.

if people replace DATs with more rational thoughts. Wanting to understand where DATs come from, he postulates that they arise out of a person's more foundational beliefs.

DATs lie on the surface of consciousness, are circumstance specific, and can be easily adjusted with evidence. Foundational beliefs, on the other hand, are less accessible to consciousness, less circumstance specific, and harder to be swayed by evidence. Beck proposed two levels of foundational beliefs: intermediate beliefs and core beliefs. Intermediate beliefs lie beneath DATs in consciousness and may include implicit rules, e.g. "I should not be angry with my parents;" if-then regulations, e.g. "If I work very hard, God will accept me;" or central goals, e.g. "I must not shame my family." Intermediate beliefs are supported by one's deepest beliefs -- the core beliefs -- which are foundational assumptions about one's self and the world. They are buried deep in the subconscious, operate at the most general level, and almost impossible to change with evidence. They are often related to self-image and the level of trust to the surrounding world. Beck assumes that core beliefs are embedded in cognitive structure called schema.

A life event triggers not the DATs, but the schema. Once a schema is activated, a ripple effect is transmitted to intermediate beliefs, then DATs, and eventually resulting in predictable emotional responses such as anxiety or fear. Once the life situation passes, the corresponding schema is deactivated. When a schema such as panic is triggered randomly or improperly, a psychological problem is presented.⁹⁶ Beckian treatments aim to help clients identify DATs and learn to respond in a more rational way. The first step is to label

⁹⁶Mark R. McMinn, and Clark D. Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 78-85.

the various cognitive distortions. Then the therapist and client will join to reconstruct those thoughts through homework such as journaling.⁹⁷

Since 1990s, a third wave development in CBT has developed, after BT and CT. Under the influence of Eastern religions and modern learning theories, a new element of mindfulness is introduced. Mindfulness focuses on the present moment of the client in a nonjudgmental and accepting way.⁹⁸

Evaluation of Cognitive-Behavior Therapy

This section will first review the strengths of CBT, followed by the weaknesses, and conclude with Christian adaptation of CBT. McMinn and Campbell list five commendable strengths⁹⁹ for CBT:

1. CBT is an easy-to-understand, common sense approach. The most basic premise of CBT is that words used to understand the world shape people's feelings and behaviors. Changing the words changes the experience of reality as well. Such practice is common in both society and personal experiences, so it is therefore easier for a therapist to explain and for clients to understand.
2. CBT is present goal-focused. A CBT therapist does not spend time probing the history or hidden emotions. Its focus is on clients' present difficulties. Clients can

⁹⁷ Nathan Thoma, Brian Pilecki, and Dean McKay, "Contemporary Cognitive Behavior Therapy: A Review of Theory, History, and Evidence," *Psychodynamic Psychiatry* 43, no. 3 (2015): 430.

⁹⁸ David Kingdom, and Anthony Dimech, "Cognitive and Behavioral Therapies: The State of the Art," *Psychiatry* 7, no. 5 (May 2008): 217-220; Nathan Thoma, Brian Pilecki, and Dean McKay, "Contemporary Cognitive Behavior Therapy: A Review of Theory, History, and Evidence," *Psychodynamic Psychiatry* 43, no. 3 (2015): 431-432.

⁹⁹ Mark R. McMinn, and Clark D. Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 89-92.

immediately see the connection between sessions and the problems that trouble them.

3. CBT is a time-limited therapy. A typical CBT consists of 12 to 20 sessions. It is a welcome quality for people who resist an open-ended therapy process or lack the time and resources to sustain a long treatment.
4. CBT can function alongside Christian thinking and practice. Unlike behaviorism, CBT and Christianity assume a limited degree of personal free-will and a partial determinism. Furthermore, Christians have a similar idea of the role of cognition in sanctification. Sanctification involves changing faulty ideas about God, self, others, and the world in order to change behavior.
5. CBT's effectiveness has been scientifically proven and focuses on measurable changes of clients. A large body of controlled scientific investigations proves the effectiveness of CBT in a wide variety of psychological dysfunctions, making CBT the most scientifically supported therapy.

Tan's evaluation of CBT shares similar assessment with a few more advantages.¹⁰⁰ They include:

1. CBT empowers the client. The treatment goals and approaches are decided by the collaboration of the therapist and the client.

¹⁰⁰ Siang-Yang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 263; Mark R. McMinn, and Clark D. Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 270-272.

2. CBT gives accountability. Because CBT focuses on measurable changes, the progress or the lack of it in treatment can be accessed.
3. CBT has a wide repertoire of therapy techniques.
4. CBT, with sensitivity, can be used in multicultural counseling context.
5. CBT can be helpful to clients with physical disabilities by modifying their irrational beliefs about their disabilities and limitations.

Cognitive Behavior Therapy is goal-focused, time limited, client-empowered, effective therapy which can be compatible with Christian beliefs and practices when integrated with discretion. Notwithstanding its manifold strengths, CBT has other weakness, especially when compared with a Christian perspective.

The most serious weakness in CBT, according to McMinn and Campbell, is its *pragmatic rationalism*.¹⁰¹ CBT is based on rationalism because it assumes that irrational thinking is the root of problem, and rational thinking is the cure. It is pragmatic because it is measured by how the client feels at the end of therapy. On one hand, CBT assumes true perception is found in rational thinking; but on the other hand, what constitutes right and rational thinking is defined, in the final analysis, by whether that thinking can make the client feel better. McMinn and Campbell point out five problems with CBT's pragmatic rationalism:

¹⁰¹ Mark R. McMinn, and Clark D. Campbell, *Integrative Psychotherapy: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 100-101.

1. The goal of rationality is disingenuous. Feeling happy is something worthy to pursue, but it is not the only goal God intends. CBT's goal may lead the client to create a cognitive construction of reality that does not align with godliness.
2. Pragmatic rationalism minimizes the importance of relationships. Both the relationship between the therapist and the client and the client's quality of relationships outside therapy sessions are minimized. Focusing too much on thought patterns results in neglecting relational aspects of the client life.
3. Culture and context. If the therapist lacks cultural and contextual awareness, he or she may impose personal ideas of what is rational to the client.
4. Rationality may not be the central problem of human plight. Though thinking properly and correctly is helpful, it does not appear to be the root problem for many human plights, sufferings, and follies. People tend to act irrationally when a close relationship is threatened or broken, which suggests relational wounds are the primary human problems.
5. Christian adaptation of CBT can be shallow. The Bible does teach the importance of the mind to perceive the reality correctly and properly (Phil. 4:8). While CBT has points that mesh well with Christianity, that does not mean they are completely compatible. It is insufficient to have a few biblical verses that resonate with CBT.

Tan gives a list of ten weaknesses in CBT which largely overlap with McMinn and Campbell. Three more can be added. First, CBT tends to neglect the client's past resolved issues and painful experiences. Secondly, CBT does not pay enough attention to

unconscious processes such as transference and dreams. Finally, CBT assumes direct instruction is the best way to help the client to learn and change, which may not be true for all clients.¹⁰² One could also add that CBT's assumption about human nature is a major weakness: CBT views humans as basically neutral, born neither good or evil.¹⁰³ There exists a serious gap between Christian worldview of human beings and their relationships as compared with those of CBT. Christian adaptation of CBT is thus not straightforward. Christians appropriate CBT in their own practices in many ways.

Despite some conflicts with Christianity, CBT is the most popular therapy practiced among Christian counselors, according to an article published by American Association of Christian Counselors.¹⁰⁴

Various attempts have been made to incorporate CBT into Christian counseling practices. The most basic way is to use Christian Scripture as the cognitive truth that needs to replace the faulty thinking and restructure into the mind of the counseled.¹⁰⁵

As Edward D. Andrews puts it,

“Only with an active faith in Christ and a true understanding of our imperfection can we hope to function in an imperfect flesh, allow God to read our heart, and help us to **not** fall victim to our own desires of the eyes. (bold original)”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Siang-Yang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 272-274.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁰⁴ Ian F. Jones, Tim Clinton, and George Ohlschlager, “Christian Counseling and Essential Biblical Principles,” www.aacc.net, accessed December 17, 2015, <http://www.aacc.net/2006/07/18/christian-counseling-and-essential-biblical-principles/>.

¹⁰⁵ Siang-Yang Tan, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 108; Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Eric L. Johnson, Joshua N. Hook, and Jamie D. Aten, *Evidence-Based Practices for Christian Counseling and Psychology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013), 92.

¹⁰⁶ Edward D. Andrews, *For As I Think in My Heart - So I Am: Combining Biblical Counseling with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy* (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2013), 8.

Andrews' depends heavily on cognitive-behavioral technique of self-talk to break away from bent thinking.¹⁰⁷ Using biblical teaching as cognitive content and adding prayer to the mix, he proposed a six-step process to help Christians:¹⁰⁸

1. Identify and own one's bent (irrational) thinking.
2. Replace the bent thinking with rational thinking.
3. Keep records.
4. Let others know.
5. The most important key is to be practical and balanced.
6. Pray to God.

One can detect the use of typical CBT of journaling, feedback, and assessment in his approach.

The theological basis lies in Andrews' understanding of mind. He asserts

“The mind gives humans the capacity to think, understand, and reason. It is the center of consciousness, which generates thoughts, feelings, ideas, and perceptions, and stores knowledge and memories. This was a gift from God, which was abused by Adam's choice to rebel, and as a result, it functions imperfectly ...”¹⁰⁹

This imperfection of mind is the root of all kinds of destructive behavior, and when the mind is aligned with biblical teaching, many find solutions to their emotional problems.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 69-79.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 74-75.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 103.

The way to get there is to use cognitive behavior therapy techniques with biblical teaching as content.

Michael L. Free attempts to integrate Cognitive-Behavior Therapy with Christianity from a liberal leaning Christian perspective.¹¹⁰ Free points out the similarity between Jesus and psychotherapy: both are concerned with the verbal communication, core beliefs, and the proper functioning of the hearers. This strongly held view supports the use of Jesus' teaching in cognitive behavioral therapy.¹¹¹

However, it raises an important question: what is the teaching of Jesus? Free referred to "the most accurate representation of what the historical Jesus actually taught."¹¹² To Free, the authentic teachings of Jesus are not found in the canonical record. Rather, they are found through the supposed "historical Jesus" behind the Biblical record. Free relies heavily on the work of the Jesus Seminar and other scholars of the historical Jesus movement to discover from the Bible which teachings are actually from Jesus.¹¹³ The goal of CBT is to govern the use of these teachings in dealing with clients with Christianity orientation.¹¹⁴ Standard therapy technique based on Beck's schema cognitive theory are used in treatment.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Michael L. Free, *CBT and Christianity: Strategies and Resources for Reconciling Faith in Therapy* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

¹¹¹ Ibid., 3-11.

¹¹² Ibid., xvii.

¹¹³ Ibid., 131-173.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 175.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 177-234.

William Backus basically took the same approach of Michael Free and embraced CBT in both theory and practice but with a conservative Christian orientation. The goal is “to help you to possess the happiness you desire and to be the person you’d like to be.”¹¹⁶ Being happy is defined as “a continuous sense of well-being, a state of feeling good of life, others and self,” or as “the absence of mental and emotional discomfort,” in fact, as “being blessed” in the Bible. Backus called his version of CBT the “misbelief therapy”¹¹⁷ or “truth therapy”¹¹⁸ Adopting CBT procedure, Backus proposed a three-step process for a person to become happy ¹¹⁹:

1. Locate misbeliefs (the worldly wisdom)
2. Remove misbeliefs
3. Replace misbeliefs with truth (the biblical teaching)

Self-talk figures large in the way of both diagnosis and treatment of disbeliefs.

Alexis Trader and Engelhardt want to demonstrate how Christianity can inform and incorporate Beckian CBT into practice.¹²⁰ They believe that though CBT techniques are useful, one cannot simply put Christian content into the CBT framework. They noted a strong resemblance, though different in goal and content, between the teachings of early

¹¹⁶ William Backus, and Marie Chaplan, *Telling Yourself the Truth: Find Your Way Out of Depression, Anxiety, Fear, Anger, and Other Common Problems by Applying the Principles of Misbelief Therapy* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2014), 8.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 23.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 25.

¹²⁰ Alexis Trader, and H. Tristan Engelhardt, *Ancient Christian Wisdom and Aaron Beck's Cognitive Therapy: A Meeting of Minds* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), 83-84.

church fathers in spiritual formation and CBT. Both recognize irrational thoughts as the root of problems and utilize schema-modification as a way to solve those problems.

However, Trader contends that

Turning from a patristic anatomy of passionate thoughts culminating in sin to a cognitive anatomy of automatic thoughts leading to psychological dysfunction is like turning from a three-dimensional model to a two-dimensional diagram. With the loss of the spiritual dimension, linear relationship becomes clearer even as spatial relationships grow more illusory.¹²¹

CBT techniques are useful but inadequate in addressing the troubles of human souls.

Christian utilization of CBT theory and techniques must be value driven. The goal, content, and process are all different from CBT. The goal is more than psychological well being, but to conform to the likeness of God in Jesus Christ. In terms of content, they suggest that Christian therapists make use of patristic teachings on the virtuous life, the eight bad thoughts, and the Sermon on Mount in conjunction with CBT techniques. The process is not simply time-limited human effort. Rather, it is a lifelong process which needs to unceasingly invite God who alone can make such transformation possible.¹²²

McMinn and Campbell offered a somewhat similar integration model from Protestant perspective.¹²³ McMinn and Campbell believe that the Christian understanding of humans as the image of God provides a truer and better theoretical ground for CBT, while exposing its shortcomings as well.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 217-250.

¹²³ Mark R. McMinn, and Clark D. Campbell, *Integrated Psychotherapy: Toward a Comprehensive Christian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007).

Christians interpret the image of God functionally, substantively, and relationally. The functional aspect of the image of God is concerned with behavior, the substantive with human rationality and beliefs, the relational with human longing for relationship with God and other human beings. Sin has affected all three aspects. Therefore maladaptive behaviors, the irrational faulty beliefs, and broken relationship with emotional wounds are all aspects that need to be addressed in therapy. The former two correspond well to CBT's understanding of behavior and rational beliefs. The last one is missing from CBT. To McMinn and Campbell, CBT's goal and motivation need to be corrected by Christian faith. They propose an integrated therapy model which will adopt this modified form of CBT within a greater and more holistic approach to therapy.

In conclusion, CBT has high compatibility with Christian beliefs. Christian adaptation of CBT varies greatly depending on personal views of Christian beliefs and its relationship with psychology. Ways of adaptation include incorporating Christian beliefs and practices in sessions, practicing CBT techniques within the Christian context of sanctification, and/or utilizing CBT within the greater context of Christian therapy. The study will now turn its attention to Emotional Focused Couple Therapy.

Emotional Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT)

Emotional Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT hereafter) is a well-established program. Several books and training manuals have been written for therapists, counselors

and even lay people,¹²⁴ and a wealth of publications demonstrate its efficacy.¹²⁵ EFCT was developed by Greenberg and Johnson¹²⁶ in the late 1980s. Later, Johnson¹²⁷ incorporated attachment theory as a theoretical base to explain adult love. EFTC takes couple relationships from a perspective of system and affection, making it both interpersonal (relationship) and intrapersonal (personal affection or emotion).

The human being has a basic emotional need to be connected with others. When that bond is insecure, unsafe, or broken, human beings react in order to reestablish that bond. Often in marriage, couples react negatively (such as blaming, fighting, or avoiding) and further erode the desired bond. Marriage distress, then, is a symptom of unfulfilled emotional need and the solution is also tied to emotion; when couples recognize they depend on each other to fulfill that need, they will not perceive each other as a threat but rather as a necessary partner in fulfilling the emotional need for secure bonding. With this as a foundation, couples can begin to repair their relationship by owning, sharing, and supporting each other. As the repaired bond grows in strength, marriage satisfaction also grows.

¹²⁴ For examples, see S. M. Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004); S. M. Johnson, et al., *The Emotionally Focused Therapist Training Set: Becoming an Emotionally Focused Couple Therapist: The Workbook* (New York: Routledge, 2005); S. M. Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008).

¹²⁵ For examples, see Leslie S. Greenberg, "Emotion-Focus Therapy: A Clinical Synthesis," *Focus: The Journal of Lifelong Learning in Psychiatry* 8, no. 1 (2010): 32-44; N. Honarparvaran, et al., "The Efficacy of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT-C) Training with Regard to Reducing Sexual Dissatisfaction among Couples," *European Journal of Scientific Research* 43, no. 4 (2010): 538-545.

¹²⁶ I. S. Greenberg, and S. M. Johnson, *Emotional-Focused Marital Therapy for Couples* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1988).

¹²⁷ S. M. Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Marital Therapy, Creating Connection* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1996).

The primary philosophical presuppositions about human beings and human relationship are from neohumanism. Major tenets are that experience is central, that people are greater than the sum of separate parts, that people have the ability of self-determination, that there is an innate tendency for growth, and that therapists need to be authentic and present with the client in sessions.¹²⁸

EFT uses dialectical-constructivism to explain how people make sense of their emotions. The human self is constantly changing in organized “emotion schemes” -- permeable cognitive/affective structures. As human beings participate in dialogue with distinct aspects of themselves, others, and their environments, they create new meaning and understanding of their experiences through an ongoing circular process of symbolizing physical sensations in awareness and articulating them in language.

When meaning and understanding are repeated over and over again, the more enduring aspects of personality are developed. By changing the process of construction, character change then becomes possible. Therefore, the synthesis of emotion and reflection are key to change. The client is guided to partake in various internal dialectical processes to create internal self-challenge as a result of different internal voices. New synthesis of these voices through assimilation and accommodation leads to change.¹²⁹

Apart from the practical consideration of accessibility and efficacy, the EFCT’s emphasis on forgiveness resonates well with Christian thinking and can assist pastors in marriage enrichment programs.

¹²⁸ Todd Hardin, “Redeeming Emotion-Focused Therapy: A Christian Analysis of Its Worldview, Epistemology, and Emphasis,” *Religion* 5 (2014): 323-333.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 329-330.

EFCT View on Forgiveness in Marriage Education

Forgiveness as a conscious decision did not play a significant role in marriage education programs until less than 30 years ago. According to one estimate,¹³⁰ prior to 1985 there were only five studies about the significance of forgiveness in clinical and empirical publications. In the next 20 years, there was a 4000% increase in the number of studies.

Forgiveness has now become an important aspect of marital counseling and marriage education. In EFCT, forgiveness is an important step to heal attachment injuries. Johnson says, “Understanding attachment injuries and knowing that you can find and offer forgiveness if you need to gives you incredible power to create a resilient, lasting bond.”¹³¹

Meneses and Greenberg¹³² have provided a detailed study to construct a model for the process of EFCT. They defined forgiveness as “a process involving the transformation of a negative emotional state (e.g., anger; the desire for revenge) to an affiliative stance characterized by compassion and empathy toward the perpetrator.” By comparing video-taped sessions of both resolved and unresolved couples and using task analysis, they have identified five components that are exclusive to resolved couples. They are:

1. Injurer’s expression of nondefensive acceptance of responsibility

¹³⁰ Frank D. Fincham, Julie Hall, and Steven R. H. Beach, “Forgiveness in Marriage: Current Status and Future Directions,” *Family Relations* 55 (2006): 415-427.

¹³¹ Sue M. Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 184.

¹³² C. W. Meneses, and L. S. Greenberg, “The Construction of a Model of the Process of Couples’ Forgiveness in Emotion-Focused Therapy for Couples,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 37, No. 4 (2011): 491-502.

2. Injurer's expression of shame/emphatic distress
3. Injurer's heartfelt apology
4. Injured partner's shift in view of other
5. Injurer's expression of acceptance of forgiveness, relief, or contrition

Their understanding of forgiveness has some important implications. Firstly, forgiveness is a process. Forgiveness is not a product which you get after you pay a certain price or effort. Nor is forgiveness a zero-sum game, either 100% forgiving or there is not forgiveness at all. Instead of thinking of forgiveness as one clean-cut dramatic change of heart, one should think of it in more dynamic term. There are "degrees" of forgiveness which are subject to change with time and circumstance. Secondly, forgiveness has to do with emotion. It is diminishing negative feelings and increasing positive feelings. Before applying the insights of EFCT in ministry, pastors must assess it through theological reflection.

Evaluation of Emotional Focused Couple Therapy

In this section, the study will review the strengths and weaknesses of EFCT and its insight on injuries and forgiveness.

The value of person and the idea of human self-determining ability in neo-humanism are consistent with a Christian world view. There are, however, two qualities that Christians will have trouble with. First is the idea that human self-reflection is the unadulterated path to discover and ultimately brings healing to maladaptive emotions. Such notion ignores the effect of sin on the whole person; second is that the goal of EFT is completely devoid of ethical and spiritual dimensions.

For EFT, self-realization is the goal; for the Christians, Christ-likeness is. Therefore, Christian practitioners need to demonstrate Christ-likeness with humility to help clients in rewriting their personal narratives into new narratives within the context of Christ-redemptive Narrative.¹³³ The dialectical constructivism echoes in Christian belief systems, such as the inward battle of “old self” and “new self” as Paul described.¹³⁴ The exclusive focus of EFCT is on the temporal experiences within the human psyche, without touching upon eternal or spiritual.¹³⁵ EFCT’s emphasis on emotion offers an angle to understand the Christian idea of the heart or soul and related phenomena. The emotion scheme is largely consistent with a Christian understanding about the role of the emotion, as well as the process dynamic between emotion and environments and the idea that the emotional scheme is best accessed through the subconscious.¹³⁶ What is missing from Christian perspective is the necessity of incorporating Christian gospel as goals and resources, to provide “clients with a kerygmatic (see 1Cor 15:1 – 5) experience related to disowned emotional experiences.”¹³⁷

One of the seminal works on theology and psychology is by Browning.¹³⁸ Browning pointed out that psychology is not simply a descriptive science; it assumes

¹³³ Todd Hardin, “Redeeming Emotion-Focused Therapy: A Christian Analysis of Its Worldview, Epistemology, and Emphasis,” *Religion* 5 (2014): 327.

¹³⁴ Ephesians 4:22-24.

¹³⁵ Todd Hardin, “Redeeming Emotion-Focused Therapy: A Christian Analysis of Its Worldview, Epistemology, and Emphasis,” *Religion* 5 (2014): 330.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 330-331.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 331.

¹³⁸ Don Browning, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies: A Critical Conversation in the Theology of Culture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

ultimate meaning for life and prescribes a normative way of life. Thus, psychologies “are actually instances of religio-ethical thinking.” To any psychological school of thinking, probing questions must be asked in order to map out the unannounced assumption about what it means to be a human being and what is proper conduct as a human being.

Using Browning’s model, Versveldt examined EFCT.¹³⁹ He tried to answer three questions about the therapy. The first question is about the metaphor of ultimate meaning and foundation of life. The second question is on the definition of a good and virtuous person. The third and final question is on the fundamental needs and tendencies of human beings. After delineating answers from the EFCT perspective, he proceeded to offer Christian theological critique, having found aspects where EFCT is lacking. For example, there is really no idea of a God-given meaning to human beings, nor is there any mention of the impact of sin on human relationships. Interestingly, EFCT seems to be open to these ideas; it is not antispiritual. Its relational understanding of marriage and the need for emotional bindings is especially congruent with the Christian view. His conclusion suggests that EFCT, for the most part, can be used by the Christian community.

Mutter used a different theological model of evaluation and reached a similar conclusion that EFCT “fit” the Christian ministry context to a significant degree. In Mutter’s work, Ingram’s model of theological reflection was used. Ingram published his work of a complementarian model for theological integration in 1995.¹⁴⁰ The model is best thought of as a concentric circle with five layers, each representing complementary

¹³⁹ Johan P. Versveldt, “Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy: An Examination Using Browning’s (1987) Model,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 25, no. 3 (2006): 216-225.

¹⁴⁰ John A. Ingram, “Contemporary Issues and Christian Models of Integration: Into the Modern/Postmodern Age,” *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 25, no. 3 (1995): 3-14.

grounds or dimension of integration between theology and human cultural inventions (which includes psychology). From the innermost circle to the outermost, the layers are *theos* (the realm of spirituality), *logos* (the realm of meaning), *socius* (the realm of social conditioning), *bios* (the realm of biology), *physikos* (the realm of the physicals). These five dimensions are complementary and interdependent. Mutter applied Ingram's model to four core anthropological assumptions of EFCT that he identified:

1. The dignity and worth of human beings,
2. Human beings as relational beings,
3. Humanistic concepts of "growth" and "self-realization" extend to couple relationship, and
4. Nontheistic orientation.

Mutter concluded that the philosophical foundation (*theos*) of EFCT is not compatible with an evangelical worldview. Beyond that, however, there are many points of contact. One can fairly easily recast the first three assumptions of EFCT in the light of Christian theistic view. The high dignity of humanity is evidenced by being created as the image of God.¹⁴¹ They are created relational beings.¹⁴² They find fulfillment in

¹⁴¹ Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 215-222.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 221-222.

monogamous, heterosexual marriage.¹⁴³ Their need of growth is clearly implied in divine mandate of procreate, to rule the earth, and to guard and expand the garden.¹⁴⁴

On Injuries and Forgiveness

Attachment injuries and forgiveness play a central part in EFCT. For evangelical Christians, the redemptive power of Jesus Christ is centered on removing humanity's curse and granting forgiveness. To bring EFCT into a church context, it is essential to rethink the idea of attachment injuries and forgiveness. Instead of an exhaustive theological treaty, focus will be only on how the redemptive event of Jesus Christ affects EFCT's concepts of attachment injuries and forgiveness. Stephen Seamands' book on the healing power of the cross provides a good example of Christian perspective.¹⁴⁵ The basic premise is that the cross of Jesus Christ does bring healing to hurt (emotional wounds). In his suffering, Jesus did not simply pay the debt of sin, he also partook in humanity's suffering.

This means that Christ not only identifies with us completely in our suffering because he has had an experience like ours, he also participates in our suffering because our very own experience of suffering has mysteriously been laid upon him.¹⁴⁶

Seamands talks about emotional hurts such as being despised, rejected, disregarded, shamed, and forsaken, all of which are similarly experienced by those hurt by attachment injuries. The suffering of Christ in humanity's suffering, once grasped by

¹⁴³ Ibid., 237.

¹⁴⁴ David Bruce Hegeman, *Plowing in Hope: Toward a Biblical Theology of Culture*, 2nd ed. (Mosco, ID: Canon Press, 2007).

¹⁴⁵ Stephen Seamands, *Wounds that Heal: Bring Our Hurts to the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003).

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 18.

the sufferers, offers power to heal emotional wounds caused by attachment injuries, for Christ did not simply suffer; through his suffering, he brought healing. When the wounds are soothed, one can start to own the pain, bring that pain to the cross and draw strength to forgive. The process of forgiveness as laid out by Seamands is similar to that of EFCT. The critical difference is that through the cross of Jesus Christ, forgiveness can be granted even without the injurer's confession.

In conclusion, despite the inherent fallen-ness of a worldly system, EFCT as a theory and practice can be integrated with Christian worldview, theology, and practices. When applying EFCT, Christians need to reorient the therapy's goal and bring in Christian practices especially in the area of healing attachment injuries and granting forgiveness. The suffered and victorious Jesus Christ can be enthroned to his rightful place in pastoral marriage ministry.

Summary

In this chapter, literatures that are relevant in helping pastors develop and implement marriage education program in local church are reviewed.

The literature has shown that pastors are uniquely in a position to offer marriage help to congregations through marriage education programs. Marriage education programming has a long history with Christian communities. The incorporation of religious practices in marriage education programs is helpful to religious community. Various frameworks in designing and implementing marriage education programs are also reviewed. They provide pastors with things to consider when designing and implementing marriage education program in local churches. Two popular psychology therapies for marriage are reviewed. Both the Cognitive Behavior Therapy and

Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy are proven psychological therapies that help couples to improve their marriages. Their naturalistic and humanistic roots complicate their relationship with Christian thinking. A high degree of incompatibility exists in their views of human being, their relationships, and their goal of relationship. Different ways of integrating biblical teaching with secular science are presented to help pastors in their effort to develop marriage education programs.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand the dynamics involved as local churches offer marriage education programs by their own pastor. The study assumed that church members can contribute important principles for establishing marriage programs in local churches through their own experiences. In order to address this purpose, the researcher identified three main areas of focus that are central to establishing local church marriage education programs. These include marriage education programs, underpinning psychological theory, and theological appropriation of psychology. To examine these areas more closely, the following questions focused the qualitative research:

1. What pre-experiences influence the marriage enrichment program participants' learning experiences?
2. How does their pastor influence the participants' learning experience?
3. What logistics of the program influence the participants' learning experiences?

Design of the Study

The present study adopted a qualitative research approach. Lisa M. Given, in her book *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research*, states that "Qualitative research is design to explore the human elements of a given topic ... typically used to explore new phenomena and to capture individuals' thoughts, feelings, or interpretations of meaning and process."¹⁴⁷ "Qualitative research," says Michael Quinn Patton, "inquires into,

¹⁴⁷ Lisa M. Given, "Introduction," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), xxix.

documents, and interprets the (human) meaning making process.”¹⁴⁸ In her book, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Sharan B. Merriam describes the goal of qualitative research: to understand “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.”¹⁴⁹ The nature of qualitative research suits this research project which requires deep exploration of participants’ experiences.

Merriam identifies four characteristics of qualitative research:¹⁵⁰ focus on meaning and understanding, researcher as the primary instrument, inductive process, and rich description. First, qualitative research focuses on meaning and understanding. As Merriam explains, “The overall purpose of qualitative research is to achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience.”¹⁵¹ Qualitative research seeks to understand the participants’ perspectives. Second, in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument in collecting and analyzing the data.¹⁵² The human author as an agent of research in meaning making has both advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, since understanding is the goal, a human researcher who is capable of understanding seems most appropriate. Researchers can collect and clarify

¹⁴⁸ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015), 48.

¹⁴⁹ Sharan B Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2009), 5.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 14-16.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁵² Ibid., 15.

the information through both verbal and nonverbal communications. Researchers can also adapt to situations to clarify and expand the inquiry with respect to participants' experiences and meaning making processes. Negatively, both the biases and shortcomings of the researcher will impact the study. Third, qualitative research is an inductive process.¹⁵³ Qualitative research does not start with theories and then test them with experiments. Rather, researchers look for larger themes from information gathered through various avenues such as observations, interviews, and documents. Qualitative researchers do not enter the investigation in a vacuum. Instead, they come to the subject of study with preunderstandings, presuppositions, and some framework of references that the field of study informs but does not test. Finally, qualitative research is richly descriptive.¹⁵⁴ From the data collected to the research report, descriptions rather than numbers are used to convey the shared experience and knowledge learned.

This study will use the qualitative case study research technique, a subset of qualitative research. Merriam defines the qualitative case study as: “(T)he unit of analysis, not the topic of investigation, characterizes a case study.”¹⁵⁵ A “case” is specific and a bounded system. A case can be a specific program, place, or people. In this study, the program, the people, and the place are all well defined. The program is a pastor-developed marriage enrichment program. The people are parishioners of the same local church who attend the program. The place is a Sunday school classroom in a church building.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 15-16.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 16.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 41.

Qualitative case research provides a way of discovering the most comprehensive, in-depth, and descriptive data from participant perspectives of the bounded system.¹⁵⁶ In utilizing the case study method, the variables are minimized in this research because all participants are part of the same local religious institution with similar cultural, religious, and economic backgrounds. Because the variables involved in the data analysis were more focused, the case study provided avenues for enhanced exploration of the intricacies of the possible factors affecting the teaching of marriage education in the local church by pastors. The case study is anchored in real-life situations which give it an additional advantage: it provides a rich and holistic account within the single context. Thus, the case study offers insights to expand readers' understanding and experiences.¹⁵⁷

The Marriage Enrichment Program

The program aims at teaching participants a biblical idea of marriage, communication skills, and conflict resolution skills. Contents and exercises in the latter two categories draw mostly from the writings of Sue Johnson,¹⁵⁸ John M. Gottman and Nan Silver,¹⁵⁹ and Susan Heitler and Abigail Hirsch.¹⁶⁰ Modifications were made based on cultural sensitive and theological convictions. The program initially consisted of eight one-hour sessions. Each session had four components: devotion, presentation, discussion,

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 51

¹⁵⁸ Sue M. Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008).

¹⁵⁹ John M. Gottman, and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1999).

¹⁶⁰ S. Heitler, and A. Hirsch, *The Power of Two Workbook: Communication Skills for a Strong & Loving Marriage* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2003).

and practices. Whenever possible, the program used readily available paper and/or electronic assessment tests and practices. They were modified only when they are culturally inappropriate and/or theologically questionable. The program went through a pilot run of four couples. From their initial response, the program contents were modified and stabilized, and then the program administration was adjusted. After the pilot, the program was reduced to six one-hour sessions. Exercises and contents with which the participants felt uncomfortable were eliminated. Most of the eliminated materials dealt with sharing of personal struggles and emotional hurt. The following briefly describes the final program.

The program consists of three parts. The first part is a one-hour session on the marriage covenant. The goal is to encourage hope about resolving marital issues and cultivate a willingness to work on their marriage. Two biblical themes are explained. First, God instituted marriage for the good of humanity. Second, the redemptive work of Christ means God desires to restore marriage to his original, intended state and purpose. Participants are encouraged to reflect on the fact that God will empower them to make their marriage better because he intended marriage to be essential and good for people. He has provided empowerment through the death and resurrection of Christ. Along with biblical teachings, the program discusses the damages of divorce. Statistics are present to show the negative impact of divorce on personal finance, mental, physical, and spiritual health, and children's well-being.¹⁶¹ This part finishes with a hands-on exercise. In the

¹⁶¹ John M. Gottman, and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1999), 4-6; Bob Burns, and Tom Whiteman, *The Fresh Start Divorce Recovery Workbook: A Step-by-Step Program for Those Who Are Divorced or Separated* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998); Judith S. Wallerstein, and Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances: Men, Women and Children a Decade After Divorce* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1990).

exercise, couples express their commitment to marriage verbally to each other and promise to work on their marriage, even when one partner would not put in an equal level of effort.

The second part of the program focuses on marriage connection. The desired goal is to increase the married couple's emotional attachment. The first hour focuses on the importance of emotional connection with exercises designed to help married couples connect emotionally in a positive way. In the beginning, the class is shown a YouTube video clip by Dr. John Gottman entitled, "John Gottman: How to Build Trust."¹⁶² In that video, Gottman addresses how spouses need to be attune to each other's emotional needs. When one spouse does not empathize with the other's emotional needs, there will be a sense of betrayal, and emotional connection will suffer. On the other hand, if each spouse learns to listen to the other's emotion signals and learns to be with the other emotionally, this forms a closer emotional bond. A group discussion follows the video presentation. Group members are instructed to share their take on the video, especially in what ways the video echoes their own experiences. Then, participants engage in hands-on exercises. The first exercise is creating a "Love Map"¹⁶³ in which participants ask trivial questions of their spouses to see how much they know and understand each other. Homework is given. The first homework is for participants to share with each other about their current friends and adversaries, stresses and hopes, important coming events and worries. The second homework involves a deeper emotional sharing. Each spouse shares with the

¹⁶² John Gottman, "How to Build Trust," accessed November 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgWnadSi91s>.

¹⁶³ John M. Gottman, and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1999), 52-54.

other about past successes, failures, emotional injuries, healings, family relationships, mission, and legacy.¹⁶⁴ In the second hour, the goal is to further enhance positive emotion connection – fondness and admiration. It begins with two exercises, followed by a video clip, and then closes with another exercise. The first exercise is entitled, “I appreciate ...”¹⁶⁵ For this exercise, participants pick from a list of adjectives which might describe their admiration of their spouse and then verbally express the admiration to each other. The next exercise is for participants to recall and share with their spouse the fun memories of their journey toward marriage. These two exercises are followed by a YouTube video entitled, “Dr. Phil and Robin's 4 Minute Rule – Dr. Phil.”¹⁶⁶ In it, Dr. Phil explains how he and his wife greet each other in the first four minutes of reuniting at the end of their work day. The video is followed by instructions on “The 4 Minute Marriage Habit.”¹⁶⁷ This second hour of the second part concludes with group discussing of the four-minute rule and has the participants practice greeting their spouses. The homework has participants identify the time of the day they meet their spouses after a separation, to think through how they should greet each other, and to put the plan into daily practice.

The third part of the program is three-hour session on marriage communication. The desired goal is for participants to gain communication skills in order to communicate in a way that is Christian, gracious, and edifying. The theological underpinning for this

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 54-59.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 68-68.

¹⁶⁶ Phil McGraw, “Dr. Phil and Robin’s 4 Minute Rule,” accessed November 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGY-kVF9Neo>.

¹⁶⁷ Phil McGraw, “The Four Minute Marriage Habit,” accessed, December 16, 2013, <http://www.aholyexperience.com/2012/01/the-4-minute-marriage-habit-how-to-make-2012-the-year-you-fall-madly-in-love-all-over-again/>.

part is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The first hour emphasizes identifying communication patterns. The first exercise begins with a YouTube video entitled, “Four Negative Patterns That Predict Divorce (Part 1).”¹⁶⁸ In the video, Dr. Gottman discusses four negative patterns in a relationship including criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling.¹⁶⁹ Group discussion follows, in which participants are encouraged to share their own experience in light of Gottman’s presentation. After, three communication types are presented: fight, flight, and cooperation.¹⁷⁰ Biblical teaching and examples are given to show that Christian couples need to pursue cooperative communication. The second hour also focuses on listening skills. The two major components in this hour are digestive listening and listening to emotions. The time is mostly spent practicing. The examples and exercises are drawn from the work of Susan Heitler and Abigail Hirsch.¹⁷¹ The third hour is on speaking skills. The emphasis is on “soft startup” in a conversation¹⁷² – to start an issue of tension with gentleness, showing willingness to listen, and with a genuine concern for the good of the other person. Most of the time is spent in practice. The examples and exercises are drawn from Gottman’s and Silver’s book.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ John M. Gottman, “Four Negative Patterns that Predict Divorce,” accessed November 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJDN3PKZ1KE>.

¹⁶⁹ John M. Gottman, Julie Schwartz Gottman, and Joan DeClairie, *10 Lessons to Transform Your Marriage* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 5.

¹⁷⁰ Suzan Heitler, *The Power of Two: Secrets to a Strong & Loving Marriage* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 1997), 9.

¹⁷¹ Susan Heitler, and Abigail Hirsch, *The Power of Two Workbook: Communication Skills for a Strong and Loving Marriage* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2003), 41-66.

¹⁷² John M. Gottman, and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1999), 27.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 157-170.

Participant Sample Selection

This research requires participants who can communicate their experience with the marriage education program and can volunteer information about their personal marriage experience when needed. Therefore, the criteria study sample consisted of a selection of people from 70 couples who attended the same church as the researcher.

Participants were intentionally chosen for variation within the sampling.¹⁷⁴

Participants were purposefully chosen to provide variation in years of marriage. They also varied in household income and number of children, which provides a representative spectrum of general members of their church. An additional criterion includes being a member of the church at least three years, to ensure a certain trust level toward the pastor. The final study was conducted through personal interviews with 12 married couples. They all were asked to participate, via personal invitation. Each couple was given a letter of invitation. The research spent time face-to-face, explaining the study in detail and answering questions raised by the participants. All participants gave written, informed consent to participate in this research.

Data Collection

The data will be collected through semi-structures interviews. A series of prepared questions will guide the interviews. However, the questions' wording and their sequence are not predetermined.¹⁷⁵ During the interview, questions will be asked to probe and clarify according to the situation. This allows the interviewer to explore any issues

¹⁷⁴ Sharan B Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2009), 76-78.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 90.

more thoroughly during the interview, whether a predetermined issue or a newly discovered issue. With this kind of interview, interviewees are encouraged to share and explore their experience. As a consequence, these deep and rich experiences can be mapped out more comprehensively. Thus, the common themes, similar concerns, and contrast views of the interviewees can be better discerned.

A pilot interview will be conducted first to clarify and evaluate the usefulness of the questions. Then, necessary adjustments will be made so that the questions can better elicit useful data. Prior to the interview, couples will receive a letter to explain the purpose, format and length of the interview. Confidentiality will also be addressed. Couples will be interviewed together. The interview will last about one hour to 90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted within two weeks after finishing the program. Interviews are scheduled in person or through a phone conversation, to ensure the interview can be finished in one setting without interruptions. The language of the interview will be either Chinese or English. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. When necessary, Chinese will be translated into English.

Data Analysis

All the recorded data are first transcribed, then the constant comparative analysis method of analysis will be used. The constant comparative analysis method is an iterative and inductive process of reducing the data through constant recoding.¹⁷⁶ It is an inductive method, not designed to validate proposed theories but to develop theory inductively

¹⁷⁶ B. G. Glaser, "The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis," *Social Problems* 12, no. 4 (1965): 436-445.

from the data.¹⁷⁷ It is a method of iteration. A segment of transcribed data is compared with an earlier segment of data to discern similarities and differences in order to discover patterns, topics, or themes. Those similarities and differences are categorized by coding. As the analysis proceeds, the results of comparison continue to evolve. As more data is processed, codes expand and themes or topics are identified. The process of comparing, coding, and identifying themes is not linear and can continue to the satisfaction of the researcher.¹⁷⁸

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. RQ1: What pre-experiences influence the marriage enrichment program participants' learning experiences?
 1. Did you attend other marriage enrichment programs before? If so, tell me what about the program that impresses you the most?
 2. What challenges do you expect in going through the program?
 3. What attracts you to the program?
 4. What issues do you want the program to address?
 5. What kind of people do you think might need to attend this program?
 6. Are there differences in your understanding of your marriage before and after the program?
2. RQ2: How does their pastor influence the participants' learning experience?
 1. In what ways do you think the instructor has been helpful? And unhelpful?
 2. What would you do differently if you are the instructor/pastor?
 3. What might be the differences if the instructor is a Christian and/or a

¹⁷⁷ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2009), 29.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

non-Christian expert that you do not know?

4. If you want to invite your neighbor to attend, how would you introduce the instructor who is your pastor?
5. What warning would you offer to others since the instructor is your pastor?
6. What are the advantages and disadvantages when the instructor is your pastor?
3. RQ3: What logistics of the program influence the participants' learning experiences?
 1. Are there uncomfortable moments during the program? What are they?
 2. Are there "yes" moments during the program that you think this is exactly what I want? What are they?
 3. In what ways do you think the practice and exercise have been helpful? And unhelpful?
 4. Which part of the program is most memorable?
 5. How would you change the time allotted to each element of instruction (teaching, video, group discussion, hand-on practice)?
 6. If I ask you to write an advertisement for the program, what would you write?
 7. What warnings do you want to offer to future participants regarding the program?
 8. What practices have you picked up that you want to continue?

Researcher Position

This section reveals personal biases that affect the researcher's stance. These biases are rooted in the researcher's commitment to the authority of the scripture. The researcher is an evangelical Christian pastor. The researcher is committed to the authority of the scripture. The researcher believes that because of human limitation and sinfulness, people have different perspectives on reality. Nevertheless, objective reality is not constructed by personal perception. The research is committed to a reformed worldview.

The integration of science and faith are both possible and necessary. However, in such integration, Scripture is the ultimate authority. The researcher believes that marriage is between one man and one woman. The researcher believes that God instituted marriage when he created man and woman.

Study Limitations

As stated in the previous section, participants interviewed for this study were limited to those who attend the same church with the pastor. Therefore, there are inherent limitations in applying the findings.

One major limitation is that all the participants are from one Chinese American church. Furthermore, they are all first-generation immigrants who were born in either Taiwan or Mainland China. Another limitation is that the county where the church is located is one of the richest counties in the US. The third limitation is that the interview is designed to assess immediate impact of the program. No attempt will be made to evaluate long-term impact. Readers who desire to generalize the findings to different contexts need to test the findings in their particular context. The responsibility to apply the findings in different contexts properly belongs to the readers.

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the learning experience of a marriage education program that is led by the program participants' pastor in a local Chinese American church. The following three interrelated research questions guided the study:

1. What pre-experiences influence the marriage enrichment participants' learning experiences?
 1. Their religious commitment as Christians?
 2. Their past experiences with other forms of marital help?
2. How does their pastor influence the learning experience?
 1. How do participants perceive a pastor impacting their learning experience?
 2. How does a pastor positively impact the learning experience?
 3. How does a pastor negatively impact the learning experience?
3. What program logistics influence the participants' learning experiences?
 1. The time aspect of the program?
 2. The other participants in the program?
 3. The content of the program?
 4. The methods of delivery of the program?

In the following, the participants of the study will be introduced briefly. Then, each couple's responses to the research questions will be summarized. The interviews were conducted mainly in Mandarin-Chinese for eleven couples. One interview was

conducted in English. The interview data quoted in this chapter are the author's translations with the primary goal being reader understanding. Nevertheless, some grammatical expressions may feel stiff but reflect the original spoken language intention to the author's best ability.

Participants

Each participant was given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. The researcher has selected 12 couples from the same church where the researcher is one of two pastors. In addition to being from the same church, the participants share three more characteristics: They are all in their first marriage. They are all evangelical Christians. They are all first-generation Chinese immigrants in America. The participants will be introduced below in pairs, according to the order of interview recording.

Adam and Abigale

Adam and Abigale are in their early forties. They have been married for about 15 years with two children. The elder child is in middle school while the younger is in elementary. They came to the US from China. They both have doctoral degrees. They both work and have very busy schedules. They are fluent in both Chinese and English.

Brian and Betty

Brian and Betty are approaching their fifties. They have been married for about 25 years and have two children. The elder child is a high school senior, and the younger is a high school freshman. They came to the US from Taiwan. Brian came to the US with a working visa two years after their marriage, and Betty joined him a year later. Ever since they came to the US, Brian has been the bread earner in the family and Betty has been a homemaker. They have a strong desire to pass Chinese culture and language onto their

children. In their home, Chinese is their default language. Their English proficiency is enough to handle their daily life but not completely fluent.

Chris and Carol

Chris and Carol are in their early fifties. They have been married for about 25 years and have two children. The elder child is a college freshman, and the younger is a high school freshman. Chris is from Malaysia and Carol is from Hong Kong. They met and married in Hong Kong. Chris is a business executive. His job takes him all over the world. Prior to coming to the US, he was stationed in Poland. After they settled in the US, Carol quit her job to focus on their family and children. Both of them are proficient in English. Their main language is Cantonese. Chris cannot speak Mandarin but can catch a phrase here and there when listening to Mandarin.

David and Diana

David and Diana are in their mid-forties. They have been married for about 20 years and have two children. The elder child is a high school freshman, and the younger is in middle school. Both David and Diana are from Taiwan. David works in IT for financial institutes and regularly works ten to 12 hours a day. Diana has been a homemaker ever since they married. Diana was college educated in Taiwan and has recently start working on another college degree in the US. David is fluent in English. Diana, however, struggles with English. Their main language is Mandarin.

Ethan and Evelyn

Ethan and Evelyn are in their early fifties. They have been married for about 25 years and have no children. Among all the couples, they are the only one without US citizenship. Ethan is the sole bread winner while Diana has been a homemaker ever since

they married. Ethan's company sent him to work in the US local branch office about 15 years ago. Because they are not US educated and do not have children, they associate themselves almost exclusively with the local Chinese community. A few years after arriving in the US, they became Christians. Since then, they have had almost no other social contacts apart from Chinese church community and Ethan's company. Ethan's company is a Chinese owned company, and his colleagues are all Chinese. Their English proficiency is enough to handle their daily life.

Frank and Fanny

Frank is in his early sixties. Fanny is more than 10 years his junior. They met and married in Taiwan and have been married for more than 25 years. They have two children. The elder is working in a different state. The younger is in her junior year at a college about one hour away from their home. She visits her parents on a weekly basis. Frank is an engineer with more than 40 years of experience. Fanny has worked part time for most of their marriage life. Fanny is very active in local Chinese communities and strongly believes in passing their cultural roots to her children. Both children speak Mandarin fluently. Frank and Fanny possess high English proficiency, even though they speak Mandarin in their house and with their children.

Glen and Gloria

Glen and Gloria are in their mid-forties. They have been married for less than 25 years and have two children. They came from Taiwan. The elder child attends an out of state college and does not come home often. The younger is in high school. Both Glen and Gloria were educated with college degrees in Taiwan. Among the participants, their level of education is among the lowest. The husband came to the US with a relative's

help. After obtaining permanent residency, he went back to Taiwan and married Gloria through an arranged marriage – the only couple among the participants who had an arranged marriage. Right after marriage, they moved to the US. Glen struggles to find steady jobs. At the time of the interview, he was between jobs. Gloria has worked in various part-time office positions. Financially, they are the least stable couple. Their English ability are poor, but Gloria's English is better than Glen's. They both can handle daily life business in English.

Howard and Hope

Howard and Hope are in early fifties. They have been married for about twenty-five years. They have one daughter who is in high school. Frank holds a US doctoral degree, and Hope holds a US master's degree. They came to the US from China. They both work and have very busy schedules. The wife appears to be even busier than the husband. They are well versed in both Chinese and English. At home, they speak mostly in Mandarin.

Ivan and Ivory

Ivan and Ivory are in their early fifties and have been married for about 25 years. They have three children, all of whom were born in Taiwan. They moved to the US when Ivan received a working visa. At that time, the eldest son was in middle school. At the time of interview, the eldest was working in a different state, the middle was in state college, and the youngest was in high school. Ivan is an engineer and has not changed his job since coming to the US. Ivory is a homemaker. Ivan has a fairly good handle of English, but Ivory does not. She relies on him for translation. Their social interactions are mainly with members of the church.

Jack and Jackie

Jack and Jackie are in their early fifties and have been married for about 25 years. They have three children. The eldest was born in China. At the time of interview, the eldest had been graduated from college and started working in a different state. The middle child was in high school, and the youngest was in junior high school. While both Jack and Jackie work, Jackie does not work for the financial stability of the family. Jack is very fluent in English but his wife is not. They mingle a lot with Chinese people inside and outside the church.

Kang and Kimberly

Kang and Kimberly are in their mid-forties and have been married for about 25 years. They have two children. They came from Taiwan. The elder child is in an out of state college and visits home often. The younger child is in high school. Both Kang and Kimberly were educated in Taiwan with college degrees. The husband came to the US through a working visa. He has stayed with the same company at the time of interview. The wife is a homemaker and has not worked outside the house as a conscientious decision to let the wife nurture the children. Both are proficient in English, with Kimberly better than Kang. They show a strong desire to pass Chinese culture and language to their children. Kimberly is very active in local Chinese communities. At the same time, she appears to be more attuned to American culture than her husband.

Larry and Lily

Larry and Lily are in their early fifties and have been married more than 25 years. They came from Taiwan and have two sons. The elder is working in a different state. The younger was graduated from college and plans to attend graduate school in a different

state. Larry and Lily work. Their working hours appear to be normal – around forty hours a week. They feel secure about their jobs. Larry, due to certain disabilities, relies on Lily for his transportation, which she does happily. They handle English well. While they speak to each other in Chinese, Larry and Lily converse with their children in mixed languages.

Preexisting Experiences

The researcher explored what pre-existing experiences influenced the learning experience in a pastor-led marital education program, specifically focusing on religious commitment as evangelical Christians and any prior experiences with marital help.

Religious Commitment as Evangelical Christians

When discussing the importance of their religious commitment in attending the marital education program, nearly all the participants expressed the importance of their evangelical Christian faith. Only one person did not think religious commitment mattered, and she also expressed a deep struggle with her faith at the time of the program and interview. For the other participants, the religious commitment manifested itself in marital commitment, the desire to attend Christian marital programs, and expectations of biblical teaching in marital programs.

Marital Commitment

In the beginning of each interview, participants were encouraged to share about the state of their marriage honestly. At the same time, the couples were informed that they need not share anything uncomfortable. Nevertheless, when discussing their expectations of this marriage program, the researcher collected plenty of information. Many

participants expressed how religion-based marital commitments have prompted their desire for marriage preservation and improvement.

Three couples expressed that they had pondered divorce seriously, yet they were still committed to their marriage. Betty expressed her deep frustration, “I really wonder if God has made a mistake to put two of us together. I know God does not like divorce. But I honestly felt that there is no other way. I just don’t know why he wants to marry me. This kind of marriage is not what I want.” At the same time, Betty repeatedly expressed her belief that God is not pleased with divorce and would want her to stay in her marriage. Two other couples echoed these paradoxical feelings of frustration and resolution.

Even for the other nine couples, expression of religious commitment to marriage is a common theme. Adam articulated the sentiment well, “Marriage is command by God, right? One wife, one husband, one life, and one marriage! Divorce is impossible. God does not put us together to divorce, right? ... We have many issues like other couples. We might have thought of divorce in our heart, but it is only a passing thought. Never speak of it. Can not let it stay in the heart.”

Such commitment prompted hope for a better marriage with God’s help and a desire to participate in marriage education. Adam continued to hope for a better marriage, “... you can not run away from marital problem. You must improve it. God’s grace is sufficient. Even if we could solve all the problems, like you say, we could improve it, right? ”

Christian Taught Marital Program

While the majority of participants believe that marital education should have Christian grounds, none completely reject non-Christian help. One couple, Larry and Lily, exhibited the greatest openness to secular marriage help. Nevertheless, they believe secular teaching must be adopted through a Christian lens. Ethan and Evelyn exemplify a more typical attitude among the participants. When asked whether they prefer a Christian or non-Christian marital education program, they responded,

Lily: I feel the value system is so critical if it is not from a Christian perspective. Even if it makes marriage better, the whole direction is still wrong ... I will not attend secular seminars.

Larry: My thought is similar ... if it is not grounded on Christian values, the solution might be helpful for a moment, but will not be lasting. I will not attend meetings offered by non-Christians.

Expectation of Biblical Teaching

The participants' religious commitment came with a strong expectation for marriage education programs to include biblical teaching. When asked about the importance of biblical teaching with regard to the marital covenant, all but one person expressed that strong biblical teaching was foundational for deep relational connection and communication techniques in marriage. The participants revealed this strong desire by wanting to have biblical teaching on the covenant to set the stage for the program and to have biblical texts used throughout the program. At the same time, participants expressed reservations about theoretical or dogmatic teachings.

Almost universally, with the exception of one person, participants wanted the program to begin with biblical teaching on the marriage covenant. Responding to a series of questions regarding the role of biblical teaching, Diana expressed her opinion, "(Every aspect of a marriage education program), I feel, needs to begin with the biblical angle...

It would be even better if the Bible is more involved to build a more holistic approach to marriage... Of course, this direction (of the present program) is very good. What I mean is that it must start with biblical foundation.”

David agrees with his wife, but with a modification, “I think it also depends on personal spirituality. If somebody who does not have a regular devotional life, and you give him too much biblical teaching could result in him been fed-up from the beginning.” Diana has her own reservation, “To be honest, every time when we have family fellowship meetings, the discussion about marriage offended my feeling. It is all dogmatic... legalistic. You need to do this, you just must do this. It does not matter if you understand it or not. It does not matter if it is against human nature. When it is all demanding, then we could not accept such approach.” David and Diana are not the only couple that explicitly pointed out their dislike of legalistic teaching. Larry and Lily also strongly reject legalistic use of scripture.

Prior Experiences of Marital Help

The participants were asked about what other prior marital help they had experienced. These helps can be in the form of sermons, peer sharing, conferences, workshops, pastoral counseling, or professional counseling. They were further asked to contrast their past experiences with their experience at the pastor-led marriage enrichment program. This line of questioning was designed to illuminate the possible impact of their past on the present and their assessment of present learning experiences. This session focuses on the possible impact of past experiences on the present. The participants’ assessment of the marriage enrichment program will be grouped with the last research question.

About half of the couples interviewed have not intentionally sought help to better their marriage. Among those who have, their help came from many different sources: extensive reading (one couple), conferences (two couples), professional counseling (one couple), and pastoral counseling (two couples). The present author provided the pastoral counseling to these two couples. None had taken a marriage education program before participating in this study. The most similar previous experiences were the marriage conferences. However, those conferences had more attendees, were not in a church, and were conducted in two or three consecutive days.

For most couples, prior experience in other Christian marital help did not have a discernible bearing on the present. Three couples' prior experiences have influenced their expectation from the program. Brian and Betty had several counseling sessions with the present author. Betty had a poor experience that made her skeptical about the marriage enrichment program. Brian, on the other hand, found counseling helpful and cited it as a reason for him to expect the marriage enrichment program to be useful. Glen and Gloria had a weekly meeting with the present author for about one year that did not significantly alter their interacting pattern. That experience helped shape Glen's attitude that the marriage enrichment program would do little to help. Gloria was less negative. Howard and Hope had weekly secular-professional counseling help that did not help them. Howard attributed the counseling's ineffectiveness to its secular orientation and cited it as the reason that he was eager to participate in the marriage enrichment program. That same experience had no impact on Hope's attitude toward the present program.

How Their Pastor Influences Their Learning Experience

The researcher explored how participants perceived the pastor's role in the marriage enrichment program, how the pastor positively impacted the participants' learning experiences, and how the pastor negatively impacted participants' learning experience. These areas of research are probed through questions pertaining to the advantages and disadvantages of local church pastors leading their own congregation in a marriage education program. A pastor can positively shape the learning experience by being a trusted authority, expressing authenticity, and helping create a trusting learning environment. Trustworthiness of the pastor was a common theme of the participants. In 11 of the 12 interviews, at least one spouse – if not both – mentioned the pastor's trustworthiness as the reason why a marriage program led by their own pastor was advantageous. Glen and Gloria are the only couple that differ. The pastor can serve as a trustworthy authority, exhibit authenticity, and contribute to a trusting learning environment.

Trustworthy Authority

Since the pastor is the church's authority figure, participants were open to learning from their own pastor. A deeper probing revealed that such trust in authority for marriage education stems from biblical soundness, relationship, experience, and knowledge of marriage help.

Trust

Many participants expressed that trust was the most essential ingredient that informed their positive learning experience. Larry believed that a pastor-led program "is easier to help members attach a greater faith in what is taught, which is very important. If

only a regular person, then people will think that he is not spiritual enough.” Lily was a lot more direct and personal. She felt that she was open to learn because “I am your fan.” Kang and Kimberly were equally blunt. Kimberly said, “I think it is a matter of trust. If a marriage workshop is offered by our own pastor, we will trust it more.” Ivan and Ivory thought that their pastor was more persuasive because people respect his position. Jack believed the same and noted that this perception made him more eager to attend the program. However, Jackie did not think knowing the pastor was a relevant factor for her motivation. Similarly, David showed trust in the teaching offered by his own pastor, while Diana did not.

The participants also expressed how trust was essential for accepting teachings (such as communication skills) that scripture does not explicitly command. For example, Kang and Kimberly refused to attend marriage help offered by a secular authority. When asked why they would accept many elements in the program that did not come from Christians, such as video by a Jewish secular psychologist, Kimberly forcefully replied, “Because I trust your faith. I have full trust in your beliefs. If you use that material, you must have filtered through the background of your faith already. I will not go to that person’s seminar. Because I have no clue who he is.”

Biblical Soundness

For many participants, the pastor’s authority was intertwined with scripture’s authority. Ethan affirmed that while people tend to implicitly trust a pastor’s words, “even pastor’s words need to be checked by the scripture.” At the same time, a pastor’s teaching can enhance trust in biblical teaching. Jack suggested that pastor’s teaching “is naturally biblical.” Adam expressed that a pastor’s teaching is more biblical. His wife, Abigale,

trusted the pastor's teaching more for one reason, "I believe he is under the Lord's governing."

Relationship

Fostering a good relationship with the participants reaffirmed their trust in pastoral authority. Several participants emphasized the necessity of a good relationship. Adams asserted, "We know you, we live together, laugh together, we know Betty (my wife). We know your family life and you know us. We can talk, we can share. Of course, pastor is different from outside speaker."

Because of the established relationship, several participants expressed how a pastor is in a better position to help church members with their marriage problems. Gloria said, "The advantage is that pastor knows us a lot better than people from outside. Therefore, the pastor knows better how to lead us. The outside speaker comes once and leaves, but our problems still need the pastor to help. As a whole, the pastor is better suited (to lead marriage education program)." Pastors know the members' marital problems already and that knowledge better equips them to design a marriage education program that directly addresses the needs before a problem escalates. As Kang and Kimberley expressed,

Kang: For pastors, one is from our own church, the other not, spiritually might be similar. The pastor of our own church, know each other much better, should be easier to communicate. Should be more effective than a pastor not from our own church.

Kimberley: ... You already work with families that have problem one on one. This workshop is (an extension) of what you are doing, to expand it. Don't wait till fire starts and then try to put off fire.

Some participants expressed how having a pastor lead the marriage enrichment program benefits the overall health of the church. As Evelyn put it, “It is good for the pastor to know what the sheep are doing at home. So for the pastor to lead is good for the church. Family is the basic unit, the healthier the family, the better contribution family can make to the church.”

Experiences

Many participants noted the importance of shared experiences with the pastor. It helped the participants when they knew that the pastor had similar marriage-life experience to theirs. Adam said, “Now the pastor lives with us, knows our habits of our life. One (potential) disadvantage is when the pastor does not live a similar life with us – single and not married. If such pastor speaks of marriage ... Mr. Hou (the author) fights with Betty (author’s wife) in home, right? All the things of marriage life, pastor has experiences ...” Diana expressed how a pastor needs to have experienced similar marital conflicts to hers to be really helpful. Carol cited that the instructor (as her own pastor) having similar experiences, as the most important advantage of the marriage enrichment program. Howard thought that a pastor must have his own experiences and integrate that experience with the Bible. His wife, Hope, ranked practical experience as having even more impact than biblical teaching. Fanny pointed out that she expected she could learn a great deal because the pastor “is our pastor and have experience handle members’ marital problems,” and “you are of similar age with similar marriage experiences.”

Knowledge

Several participants addressed the importance of the pastor's knowledge. The authority of the pastor also comes from the perception that the pastor has more expert knowledge in the area of marriage help. Spiritual maturity and biblical soundness are stressed, experiences are important, and a pastor is further expected to have been trained or have proper educational credentials in the area of marriage help. Ivory stated succinctly, "Pastor is more persuasive, because he has the proper training (in the area of marriage) and his position is respected." According to Chris, the most impressive point of this pastor leading the program was "the instructor (i.e. the pastor) had done his research and he knows the topic well."

Nonetheless, Brian and Betty shared the reservation they had for pastors who do not have proper training,

Brian: Pastor? Not because he is a pastor, so he naturally can lead such program! He must have some training, some professional understanding.

Betty: I feel that it is a must. He must have background in this area. We had pastors come and speak about this subject before. Special guest speakers. But they were ineffective.

Ivan and Ivory are equally direct,

Ivory: To do this, pastor needs some professional knowledge.

Ivan: At least we know you for more than a dozen years. We know you well. And you are working on your doctoral degree in this area. You must have some training.

David and Diana were even more blunt. David contended that to lead such a program, a pastor "must have credibility, a P.h.D., a certificate, or something like that." Diana echoed the sentiment by stressing how pastors must study or research in relevant areas that go beyond biblical teaching, such as communication

methods. Frank and Fanny both felt that adequate training may not be essential, but would be a helpful supplement

Authenticity

Along with trust, the participants said that a pastor can inform their learning experience by being authentic. The sharing of personal stories on marital struggle, if done with discretion, can positively help the participants. Responding to a series of questions regarding the pastor's impact when using personal stories, Adam and Abigale offered extensive comments. According to them, a pastor's authenticity can make them more comfortable and more hopeful.

Q: When I used personal stories, does it make a difference to you?

Adam: ... because your family's examples are very similar to ours ... Firstly, we naturally would think that our problems are unique. But they are not. These are problems that totally can be solved. These are concrete examples ... make us all feel near and dear.

Abigale: It can greatly shorten the relational distance between instructor and students... It makes us feel that Br. Hou (author) is just like us.

Adam: And we can see hope.

Q: If a pastor relates his own examples like these, would that hurt your trust in the pastor?

Adam: Neh. I think about this ... Well, first of all, pastor is a human, right? Definitely this kind of problem will happen. But the bible principles can solve these problem. We are not saying the pastor's family is without any issue. All have some issues. It's just that if these issues are resolved.

Abigale: I also feel this way. There is not perfect human being in the world. It's just that we have greater or lesser issues. About pastors, they know more about how to use biblical principles to resolve their issues. But this does not mean they can handle all their family issues well. I think giving one or two examples will increase trust because it makes us feel closer.

Furthermore, Adam and Abigale had prior experience with another pastor couple whose sharing and marriage life appeared ideal to them. Yet, they were discouraged by it—that a happy marriage seemed to belong to the “godly” realm and not their “earthly” realm. The participants did not expect the pastor to be perfect. As Jackie put it, “First of all, we are human beings, none of us are perfect. We do not expect the pastor to be perfect. We do not expect the pastor’s marriage to be problem free.” When the pastor shared his own struggle in marital life, it brought comfort and closeness during the program.

Nonetheless, pastors need to share more than their struggles; they need to share how to overcome those struggles. Many participants share these sentiments. Ivan and Ivory believed in the importance of the pastor’s testimony. Howard contended that pastors need to have had similar struggles which they overcame. Such experience would be truly helpful. Diana wanted the instructor to “have a testimony, to go through those same troubles, and come out of them. Then he or she can touch the difficulties in our hearts, to offer analysis and to find a constructive way forward.” Jackie expressed the same idea from a different angle,

You have shared a lot of your own examples of you and Betty (author’s wife). They are good. If we can have Betty to speak ... to speak for an hour or so, telling the same stuff ... that they really work. The methods that you talked about, how you did and how she did and that they really work. That is the bottom line, they really works for both of you.

Trusting Environment

Because couples share private thoughts and feelings with one another as well as with others in the program, many participants express the need for a trusting environment. A trusting environment is absolutely necessary to

encourage this kind of sharing, and the pastor plays a crucial role in creating such an environment.

Ethan pointed out that some people were not comfortable sharing private matters, especially if those matters pertain to marriage troubles. Howard and Hope both declared that they were sensitive to personal and emotional matters. Kang and Kimberly suggested that when conducting the program, pastors should take into consideration the highly personal nature of marriage. Larry asserted that to benefit from the program, one needed to overcome the challenge of sharing one's problems with others. Adam and Abigale believed that a trusting environment was needed because the issues in the program concerned more private matters. Similarly, David and Diana thought that the success of the program depended on a trusting environment because it touched on matters concerning personal privacy.

Participants also described the pastor's impact as one of the most important factors in fostering a trusting environment. Chris and Carol mentioned how the familiarity of their own pastor made them feel comfortable. In a like manner, Howard and Hope preferred the marriage program to be led by pastor whom they knew well because they would discuss personal and emotional matters in marriage only with someone whom they could really trust. Glen believed his own pastor was better suited to lead such program because "people are more willing to talk about their problems." Gloria said that it was not simply familiarity with the pastor that made people more open to learn and discuss, but

their trust in the pastor. According to Gloria, if people did not feel that the pastor was trustworthy, they would not open up even if they knew the pastor well.

Logistics and The Learning Experience

The researcher is further interested in exploring how the program's logistics influenced the participants' learning experience. Specifically, four aspects of the program are investigated: time, participants, content, and delivery methods. This area of interest is probed through questions pertaining to attendee assessments of each aspect and any suggested changes to the program. The participants' responses are summarized as follows.

The Time Aspect

The program was scheduled for two successive Saturday mornings. The participants agreed to this arrangement in advance. When time arrived, however, three people missed portions of the class, and two couples missed the second session completely, needing to schedule a make-up time.

While most couples found such arrangements acceptable, opinions varied widely as to the preferred time schedule. Adam missed part of the first session because he needed to drive his 10-year-old child to an event. He explained his thoughts,

I certainly understand this time. You plan for three hours per session because it was hard to get everybody together, but the best way is to have eight one-hour sessions. And every class, we have follow-up. Like Sunday school. It would be better. ... Because, to be honest, three-hour straight session, you need to remember many things, practice many things. But you can remember, you can only remember a few major points. Maybe a few more times and with build-in review will be better... It is very challenging to schedule a three-hour time slot on Saturday.

His wife, Abigale, also explained the challenge for them to have sessions on Saturday: “It is simply an issue of scheduling. We know on every Sunday, every night, there is always something. Every weekend, from morning to night, we have full schedule (for my child). One concern to have a three-hour class on Saturday is that we need to be drivers (for my child).” Howard and Hope also felt that the program can be put in the Sunday school schedule so it would have the least impact on people’s schedules.

Other couples shared the concern that a three-hour session gives too much information to be absorbed in one sitting. David and Diana worried about not being able to remember all the information but offered a very different solution: an intensive course in a two-day or three-day retreat. Jack complained that “class was too compressed.” Diana talked about the time that the separation between the two sessions “was too long” because “we already forgot what happened last week.” Therefore, Diana suggested, “It is best to have classes on successive days.”

Several couples found Saturday sessions completely acceptable. Larry and Lily were perfectly happy about having a three-hour class on Saturday. They did point out that their children had left the house and worried that Saturday might not be good for those whose children stayed with them. Jack and Jackie wanted to have one more Saturday session. Ethan and Evelyn, who are childless, thought Saturday classes are fine. They preferred no more than four sessions, worrying that too many sessions would affect attendance. They welcomed more information in one session, feeling that a one-hour session would not be

sufficient. They thought each session should be at least two hours, but three-hour sessions were good too.

Several couples wanted a longer program. They felt that spending six total hours was simply inadequate. David and Diana felt that at least ten hours was needed to properly handle the material. Ethan and Evelyn wanted to add another two to four hours. Adam and Abigale also considered a few more hours were needed, though they did not give a concrete number.

The business of life affected more than scheduling. It also contributed to participants' inability to complete homework assignments. None of the couples finished homework assignments completely. Only one-third finished homework partially. Among them, only one couple only finished as much as 25% of the assignments. 10 of 12 couples indicated that need of time is one the major reasons they did not complete their homework assignments. Fanny's explanation was typical: even though both she and her husband found assignments interesting and helpful, they found themselves unable to complete them simply due to lack of time since the homework requires engagement from both husband and wife. Even if only one of the spouses lacks time, the couple cannot finish the assignment. Ivan and Ivory were a good example. Ivory had both the time and desire to do homework assignments, but her husband was too busy.

Time management during the class was also investigated. About half of the couples found that time allotted for in-class assignments was insufficient. Kimberly mentioned that some of the assignments required thoughtful answers that demanded more time than was given. David considered in-class assignment

important exercises, and wanted to have one and a half more sessions (four to five hours) devoted to them. Adam and Abigale complained that the time allotted left no room for the husband and wife to share with each other, which was part of the exercise. Frank and Fanny contended that they rushed through the assignments and felt they would benefit more with greater time to digest. Several times during the interview, Ivan and Ivory expressed their desire to have more time to finish in-class assignments.

Several couples mentioned how the participants' attitude could help them find time to do homework, saying that it is a matter of prioritizing the marital relationship over other parts of daily life. Frank mentioned making marriage the priority of his life. Howard asserted the need for commitment. Brian believed that he and Betty could find time to do homework if Betty was willing, which she was not. Conversely, Glen and Gloria did not believe their troubled marriage can be improved, nor did they find those in-class assignments helpful. As a result, there was very little desire to complete the homework.

The Participants

The interview data showed that the participants' expectations regarding the program's effectiveness varied according to their backgrounds. From the very diverse opinions, several potential factors can be discerned: their numbers/groupings, religious background, cultural background, life situation, familiarity with each other, and seriousness of marital troubles.

The program divided couples into small groups of three couples each for the sharing that some class activities required. Ethan and Evelyn shared their concern for

such a program designed for couples with serious marital issues. Ethan believed that a proper number of couples would suit the present program, explaining, “I don’t think only one couple will be good. Too many will be bad too. Too many couples will cause the program to be longer. If there is only one couple, there will be no comparison of experiences with other couples. I think you need at least two to three couples. But not too many, because of time concerns.” Ivan agreed that a smaller group of three couples was a good size so that everyone has the opportunity to share, and there would be sufficient variety of opinions. Too many people in one sharing group might result in too many opinions and therefore too much time consumption.

With regard to religious background, Ethan and Evelyn did not think changes were needed to accommodate non-Christians. To the contrary, Christians’ testimonies of how they could deal with marital issues better with God’s help can draw non-Christians toward God. Glen also thought accommodation was not needed. First, no change would especially entice people of a different religious persuasion. Second, for people of no religious persuasion, Glen felt that Christians would have opportunities to share biblical insight. Adam and Abigale both pointed out that non-Christians shared similar family issues with Christians that made this program useful to non-Christians as well. In fact, Adam contended that this program could be a good avenue for evangelism, offering opportunities for non-Christians to learn Christian teachings. Both of them, however, had reservations about a non-Christian’s capacity to understand Christian terminology. Adam said, “One issue ... if it is not a Christian. Where does the Bible come from? What does it mean? He would not understand. To us, we understand. To them, a different case.” Abigale offered a solution – the pastor needed to offer more explanation and persuasion,

I recommend the program to non-Christians. But I would expect some issues. Many issues need explanation. Why this word of God is right. To Christians, this is a given. This is the foundation which I would not question. ... But to non-Christians, they might have a lot of doubts. I remembered when I was a non-believer, when I heard brothers and sisters from church talk about the headship of husband, I just ... you know, I just ... (could not accept). ... So pastor needs to help them to understand Bible says this, says that, it is what God says, it is the truth. This needs to help them. The content itself, I see no problem.

Similarly, Larry suggested not to use overly Christian language in the presence of non-Christians.

Cultural background, for most couples, was not a factor. Some noted the role of cultural background in learning. Ethan talked about the impact of perceived cultural differences, saying, “I feel that because of the personality of Asians, discussion was not as lively as Americans, even though I had not attended their discussions. For example, the air of meeting of Chinese tends to be more subdued. Like words of compliment, we will only say them in private, but not in public.” Larry and Lily attributed the lack of lively discussion to Chinese cultural upbringing as well. Howard and Hope, on the other hand, reminded the author to be sensitive in using ethnic stereotypical descriptions that people might find offensive. Larry also thought cultural understanding could color biblical teachings.

The most pressing cultural concern was language. Glen and Gloria found the material in English (some assignments and all three video clips) hard to understand. Both Jackie and Ivory depended on their husband to explain the English contents to them, which hindered their inability to finish some of the in-class assignments. Larry, Lily, Frank, Fanny, and Ivan recommended using

Chinese captions on the videos to facilitate comprehension. Jack believed that the videos would be more relevant if they used Chinese persons and situations.

The couple's life situation – whether or not they have live-in, young children – was mentioned as a factor in learning. Adam and Abigale were extremely concerned about the program scheduling, as their children were in elementary and middle schools. Howard and Hope would have preferred grouping couples of similar ages together, for younger couples might have different issues of concern. In contrast, Frank was delighted to have couples both with and without live-in children present. He believed that discussion would be enriching, and elder couples might have opportunities to help the younger couples through their experiences.

The participants frequently mentioned their familiarity with one another as a factor in their learning experience. Familiarity had a great impact on Diana, but not on her husband, David. Diana said, “I feel that when you share and you know your group, you like your group, then you feel relaxed. If you are not familiar with people in the group or when they have a total different religion, sharing under this kind of condition, you would ask yourself how would people feel when I share this? You would have more reservation. This is how I feel.” Adam and Abigale expressed similar feeling. Adam said, “To me, all brothers and sisters, all know each other. All are familiar and friendly with one another. We can joke around without worry. Other would not share, if not in front of people who know each other very well. In a strange environment, we will not speak freely.”

Ivan and Ivory shared this sentiment. Ivan liked the participants to be from the same church so that “we can speak more openly, more relaxed.” Sharing with

strangers would have made Ivan “uncomfortable” and given Ivory an “awkward feeling.” Jack provided more insight into the dynamic, “the relationship with Frank, Fanny, Brian and Betty is very good. We do not have any issues. When something is said, no one takes offense. We can all talk to our wives casually in front of others. We do not know if other groups have this kind of relationship.” Larry and Lily also found sharing easy because they knew their group mates so well.

Everyone, however, did not share this experience. Hope emphatically disagreed with her husband and declared that she would rather share with strangers who would not spread any rumors. Fanny also differed with her husband in this regard for a slightly different reason. She felt it was more embarrassing to open up about her marital issues before those who knew her in the church, and worried about how that would affect her image.

Because participants knew each other so well, some believed that for deeply stressed marriages, the current program is not suitable. Evelyn said, “I feel that it really depends on individual’s marital situation. For some marriages, if the issues are too deep, then they can not discuss in public.” Ethan added, “I think for marriage in deep trouble, my personal suggestion is that it will not be good to discuss in public. It is better to have separate counseling first, then have a joined counseling.” Evelyn concluded, “The present format is just not suitable.”

Gloria expressed that the current program did not address her marital problems because she and her husband had a much deeper issue. Glen thought the program actually made their problem worse. He felt some common marital issues addressed in

the program reinforced Gloria's idea that he had a problematic behavior, something that he asserted was not a problem. It became a problem; because the current program made it so.

The Content

The program consists of three major parts: Covenant, Connection, and Communication. Covenant intends to address the cognitive dimension of learning, to provide biblical grounds for marriage, and to encourage couples through the grace of God. Connection intends to address the emotional/relational dimension of learning, to reduce marital animosity, and to increase good will between the spouses. Communication intends to address the behavioral dimension of learners, to identify communication patterns, and to learn communication skills that promote healthy marriages.

Participants were asked a series of questions to assess the perceived influences of each part. In general, all but one couple – Glen and Gloria – found the program as a whole helpful at the time of the interview but not all participants could articulate beyond a general impression. Many offered illuminating insight on the order of the program and on each major component.

With regard to the order of the program, all but one person agreed that Covenant should be the first component, laying a solid, biblical ground for whatever followed. Chris' explanation is representative, "For a Christian couple, the covenant should be the foundation of the marriage. Just like a house, if the foundation is strong, then you can add more rooms there. If covenant foundation is there, then you talk about connection, communication, redemption, therefore the big picture starts to make sense."

About half of the people did not have opinion whether Connection or Communication should follow. Fanny thought Communication should come before Connection. Her husband, Frank, had a different opinion which was shared by most people, saying, “the order is proper. Because connection is the foundation of communication. If we are not emotionally connected, I don’t even want to speak to you.” Adam and Abigale offered the most complete elaboration on their perceived logic of the order,

Abigale: I feel the order should be such. The first is the foundation, right? Then we have to be well connected to know how to communicate ... connection reminds us that the marriage relationship is a cooperative relationship, not a power struggle, right? Not opposing each other. Then on this foundation, communication concerns about practical matters ... the first two parts, I feel, deal with our thinking and mind. Communication is how we operate.

Adam: About these three, Covenant is like a principle, answers “why.” Why we do what we do. Connection is “what.” What couple relationship should be. And communication is about “how,” right?

Covenant, people in general agreed, had priority in the program. Its influence on participants can be seen in three ways: reminding them of biblical truths, gaining new understanding, and increasing commitment. By far, the most common response to what Covenant achieved was reminding participants about biblical teaching. Chris exemplified such response. He said, “The Covenant content reminded us that we do have a covenant with God also. Sometimes we just take things for granted.” Both he and his wife thought that their concept about God’s redemptive presence in marriage was greatly enhanced. Larry and Lily also felt that this session helped them to see more clearly.

David and Diana could not think of any impact from this session other than being a good reminder. They offered some explanation as to why there was no impact beyond

being reminded: they knew the teaching well and their mutual commitment was strong. Frank and Fanny expressed the same idea. Fanny said that she could not say this section was helpful because she already believed deeply in the things being taught.

While most people found the teaching basic and a good reminder, some were really impacted. Adam and Abigale found their concept about marriage being greatly enriched. Abigale said, “I have never thought about marriage from this angle. Marriage is more than daily chores. We need to look at marriage from a higher perspective.” Several people also said that this part of the program deepened or renewed their commitment to work on their marriage.

Nonetheless, there were two examples of negative impact as well. Glen and Gloria felt that their marriage problem was unresolvable. These teachings made them feel that they had so many problems that they did not even notice. Betty found it hard to commit to her marriage even though she believed in the authority of biblical teaching, and she wondered if God had made a mistake in joining her and her husband as one.

The responses to Connection varied widely, ranging from positive changes to outright hurtful behavior. The intent of Connection was to foster intimacy. It encouraged participants to attune to their spouse’s emotional signals, to share relational life, and to inspire each other. Most participants would describe the Connection section as illuminating but with limited or no impact on behavior. Frank’s response was representative, “This is a reminder. But in reality, when I am stirred up, I always show my impulsive, direct response.” One person, Jackie, found the video and in-class exercises confusing (because of language barrier).

Several people offered explanation as to why they found it hard to translate principles to practices. Adam and Abigale both felt that their focus was on their children and not on each other. They did not spend time in trying to understand the interests or social life of their spouse. Diana bluntly stated that her mind was fully occupied with the affairs of their children and that she was not interested in knowing more about her husband's life and concerns. David agreed and felt the need to make remedy even when Diana could not. David and Diana had gone through the in-class assignment, but they could not emotionally engage. Frank and Fanny wanted exercises and/or examples because they found it hard to know how to attune to their spouse's emotions. Kang and Kimberly suggested having a case study to mimic a real life situation. Similarly, Chris found it hard to implement the principles in real life. Jack thought it especially hard for couples with a bad relationship – if the relationship is not already good, the couple could not engage with their spouse's emotion. Hope's opinion was the same as Jack's.

Finally, it is worth noting that three persons, all wives, felt hurt when doing in-class assignments. Evelyn found it difficult to do the in-class assignment. She explained, "If I want to answer honestly, it would hurt me. It is like open up the old wounds again. The issue is not, do it or not do it. The difficulty in facing it is the real issue." Betty expressed similar feeling but more collectively. Gloria felt that the whole program, including this part, just made her realize how bad and hopeless her marriage was.

The final part was Communication. In this part, harmful communication patterns and biblical communication patterns were presented. The participants learned to identify their harmful communication patterns and learned new skills that would help them move toward a healthier, more biblical communication pattern. Among the three parts, this had

the most interest. More people identified it as the most helpful, and more people (though still a small portion) put the result into practice. Evelyn thought this part was the easiest to put into practice. Ethan agreed but felt that his personality made it difficult to put the learned method into practice. Kang and Kimberly both said that their relationship improved after the Communication session, but not after Connection. Chris identified Communication as the most important part of his learning. Carol, his wife, gave the honor to Connection. David and Diana had both put what they learned into practice, but they admitted that it had yet to improve their communication. They recognized it would be a long process.

Adam and Abigale wanted to have a longer session on communication and desired to have more practices in class. They also tried to implement some of what they learned into daily life. Howard and Hope found this part practical and reflective of their own life situation. Both had applied what they learned in their communication. Howard said that he had done it only slightly. Hope seemed to give a more thorough effort. Brian and Betty picked Communication as the part with which they would want more time. Frank and Fanny shared the same opinion. Larry and Lily believed the Communication part had changed their communication behavior.

However, not all participants found the Communication part useful. Jack and Jackie did not think it had much influence, for they already practiced those principles. Glen and Gloria, as they had in other parts of the program, gave a negative assessment, feeling that it caused them to realize they had more unsolvable problems than they had realized.

Communication appeared to have the most relative impact on behavior and relationships, but the impact appeared to be small in both quantity and quality. Many participants mentioned that habits were hard to break. Frank recognized his tone was often accusative and angry, but he considered it part of his being. Adam said that it would require at least 21 days to form a new habit, and wanted some external pressure to keep him on track. Both David and Diana admitted the gap between what they knew and what they did. New knowledge did not create new behavior.

Methods of Delivery

The program content was delivered through four methods: pastoral instruction, video clips with discussion, in-class assignments for couples, and small group sharing. The participants' assessments are summarized in the following.

There were no negative comments on pastoral instruction. It should be noted that the instructor is the pastor of the participants and this same pastor conducted the interview. The participants' interview data on pastoral instruction was previously summarized under the heading **How Their Pastor Influenced Their Learning Experience**. There are two things of note. First, the pastor was perceived as a trustworthy authority. Second, the participants considered the pastor's sharing of personal experiences a positive influence in creating a healthy learning environment.

The use of video clips had received very positive responses, with a few exceptions. Most people thought the videos were well selected, had a clear point, and were memorable. Some felt the videos needed better presentation to ensure understanding. Kang believed among the four methods of delivery, video "gives me the most impact, because it has chosen a best example to illustrate one certain thing. From

video, you can hear what is taught.” Kimberly agreed, but she added that “the sound should be louder and need to be shown at least twice.” Furthermore, she said, “you need well designed discussion questions to complement it.” Diana suggested that a summary needed to follow a video because of her poor English. Adam cited a video clip as one of two most memorable things. Both he and his wife reported that the practice taught in that video had impacted their interactions the most. Betty was most impressed by one video and remembered it the most among all that was taught. Frank and Fanny thought the videos fit in with the program perfectly well. Jack and Jackie pointed out the need of translation for the videos as Jackie could not understand English well enough. Lily said that the videos were well selected and were very helpful yet her husband could not benefit from them because of his eye disease. They thought the video presentation needed better sound quality and Chinese caption.

Finally, with regard to in-class assignments, only 50% of the assignments were done in the first session and only about 25% were done in the second session, exposing an issue in program design. Participants did share some important insights. Some assignments required spouses to show commitment and affection. While several couples found this easy, others had difficulties. Ethan and Evelyn felt awkward. Betty could not do it, for she thought she could not do it with honesty. Glen and Gloria simply were unwilling to say such things to each other. Another assignment asked spouses to share their general daily concerns, daily social circle and general preference for mundane matters. Many couples found them interesting. Larry and Lily actually continued that exercise at home for a whole week. Frank and Fanny also found that exercise a fun way to better connect. Several couples found disappointments and were emotionally hurt.

Gloria, Betty, and Evelyn all felt hurt to one degree or another. The inadequacy in mutual understanding aroused a deep dissatisfaction about the state of their marriage.

Finally, with regard to small group discussion, the data was summarized under the sub-heading, *Participants*. Two major points are reiterated here. First, sharing from other couples generally helped participants to learn better. Second, the interpersonal relationships among group members impacted the quality of discussion.

Summary

In this chapter, interview data are reported. The interviews were guided by research questions to explore the impact of pre-existent experience, their own pastor as instructor and the logistics, on their learning experiences. All participants are from the same church with the same Chinese ethnicity. They are all in their first marriage without expectation of divorce. Their ages, years of marriage, number of children, education and current level of marriage satisfaction do differ. From the interview data, participants' prior commitment to evangelical faith exerts profound impact in their learning experience. It helped participants stay in marriage, to seek marital education from a Christian perspective and to expect Christian teaching as well as Christian practices in their learning. Participants' prior experience of other forms of marital education programs, for the most part, had no discernable impact on their current learning experience. Participants expressed several advantages to have education programs led by their own pastor. The core issue appears to be the matter of trust. The trust was built through their constant interactions with the pastor in both church and regular life settings. Such trust opens up participants' hearts and ears to the teaching of the program and helps to foster a trusting learning environment. The logistics of programs impact the

learning experience from various aspects. The most important concern for the participants is time. Busy daily life makes it hard to schedule proper time slots to attend and even harder to do homework assignments. Contents need to be biblical, logical and applicable. Type and number of people who would attend is also a consideration. Various ways of content delivery are appreciated. Well-chosen video clips appear to leave the deepest impression.

In Chapter Five, these interview data will be organized into several themes for pastors to consider in designing and implementing marriage education program in local church. Comparison and contrast will be made with published data, and practical suggestions will be given.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors that would influence the learning experience of a marriage education program, led by the program participants' pastor, in a local, Chinese American church. The following three interrelated research questions guided the study:

1. What pre-experiences influence the marriage enrichment participants' learning experiences?
 1. Their religious commitment as Christians?
 2. Their past experiences with other forms of marital help?
2. How does their pastor influence the learning experience?
 1. How do participants perceive a pastor impacting their learning experience?
 2. How does a pastor positively impact the learning experience?
 3. How does a pastor negatively impact the learning experience?
3. What program logistics influence the participants' learning experiences?
 1. The time aspect of the program?
 2. The other participants in the program?
 3. The content of the program?
 4. The methods of delivery of the program?

In order to answer these questions, literature was reviewed, field work was performed, and data was summarized in the previous three chapters. In Chapter Two, three relevant areas of research were reviewed. These three areas are religious practice

and marriage education, theology and psychology integration, and the framework of marriage education. In Chapter Three, methodology in this research was described in which the research's qualitative nature, the field work's design, the approach to data collection and analysis were given. In Chapter Four, the data collected through interviews was reported. This chapter summarizes the study and findings, discusses the findings, offers recommendations for practice, and recommends future study.

Summary of the Study and Findings

The purpose of this study is to investigate factors that would influence the learning experience of a marriage education program led by the program participants' pastor in a local Chinese American church. The literature affirms that the church can properly be a place for marriage education and that the incorporation of religious practices in marriage education is beneficial. It also shows that there exist several different Christian ways of integrating theology and psychology for pastors to consider. Finally, practical frameworks in designing and implementing a marriage education program were reviewed. The field work built upon the literature review by designing a marriage education program and having a local pastor conduct it. Then, interviews were done to discern participants' responses to the said program in order to identify factors that would enhance learning experiences. In the following, the major themes that emerged from the study will be discussed.

Discussion of Findings

God sets pastors up in the church to build up his people for the advancement of His kingdom. The negatively shifting societal attitude toward marriage and the unhappy state of many Christian marriages makes nurturing family life in a congregation a great

challenge for pastors. Yet, such work is so essential to the spiritual health of the church and its witness to the world.¹⁷⁹ Andrew J. Weaver et. al. speak for many when they conclude:

At a time of widespread concern about the demise of the family, it is especially important that pastors and their colleague in ministry better understand how to help guide families through the passage of the life cycle. Despite limitations in training, clergy act as marriage and family counselors for millions of Americans. ... Clergy need additional training in family counseling skills, and pastors indicate high interest in continuing education in the area.¹⁸⁰

The findings in this research shed light on factors gleaned from the participants' perspectives that would contribute to a positive learning experience of church-based marriage education.

Many researchers in the field of marriage education share the same concern: wanting to help pastors, churches, and Christians equip married couples to cope with severe challenges within and without their family and wanting to infuse hope and perseverance into such a difficult environment.¹⁸¹ Their effort lies in bridging the findings and works of experts in the field with the need of local congregations under the

¹⁷⁹ Andrew J. Weaver, Harold G. Koenig, and David B. Larson, "Marriage and Family Therapists and the Clergy: A Need for Clinical Collaboration, Training, and Research," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 23, no. 1 (1997): 13; Andrew J. Weaver, Linda A. Revilla, and Harold G. Koenig, *Counseling Families Across the Stages of Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 19-30; Scott M. Stanley, Howard J. Markman, Lydia M. Prado, P. Antonio Olmos-Gallo, Laurie Tonelli, Michelle St. Peters, B. Douglas Leber, Michelle Bobulinski, Allan Cordova, and Sarah W. Whitton, "Community-Bases Premarital Prevention: Clergy and Lay Leaders on the Front Lines," *Family Relations* 50 (2001): 67-76.

¹⁸⁰ Andrew J. Weaver, Linda A. Revilla, and Harold G. Koenig, *Counseling Families Across the Stages of Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 25-26.

¹⁸¹ Scott M. Stanley, Howard J. Markman, Michael St. Peters, and B. Douglas Leber, "Strengthen Marriage and Preventing Divorce," *Family Relations* 44 (1995): 392-401; Alan J. Hawkins, Jason S. Carroll, William J. Doherty and Brian Willoughby, "A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education," *Family Relations* 53 (2004): 547-558.

care of local pastors. Broadly speaking, helpful and successful efforts were done for two correlated purposes.¹⁸² One is to validate the effectiveness of an expertly designed program. The other is to gain insights for ways to distribute such programs to local churches, as well as to the greater general population. Efforts started and driven by academic researchers help pastors, local congregations, and the general public.

The present study attempts to make a contribution to the study in this field. It is marked by three distinct perspectives: First, it is driven by a local church. Second, it is concerned with the perspective of participants. Third, it is qualitative in nature. Differing from other research,¹⁸³ the present research represents an effort completely driven by a local church, from planning and designing to implementing. Rather than a program designed by experts and then passed to the local church, the local church pastor's judgment determined the program's content. Though outside materials are used, they are evaluated, selected, modified, and put together from the perspective of a local church. The dominant driver of the program lies in the local church – its pastor and its congregation. The program designed makes no claim to have better quality than an expertly designed program. Most pastors' sermons are not on par with that of Spurgeon's. Pastors, nevertheless, are deemed divinely duty-bound to preach their own sermons.

¹⁸² Howard J. Markman, Sarah W. Whitton, Galena H. Kline, Scott M. Stanley, Huethe Thompson, Michelle St. Peters, Douglas B. Leber, P. Antonio Olmos-Gallo, Lydia Prado, Tamara Williams, Katy Gilbert, Laurie Tonelli, Michelle Bobulinski, and Allen Gordova, "Use of an Empirically Based Marriage Education Program by Religious Organizations: Results of a Dissemination Trial," *Family Relations* 53 (2004): 504-512.

¹⁸³ Scott M. Stanley, Howard J. Markman, Lydia M. Prado, P. Antonio Olmos-Gallo, Laurie Tonelli, Michelle St. Peters, B. Douglas Leber, Michelle Bobulinski, Allan Cordova, and Sarah W. Whitton, "Community-Bases Premarital Prevention: Clergy and Lay Leaders on the Front Lines," *Family Relations* 50 (2001): 67-76.

Similarly, pastors are divinely appointed to care for the marriages of their flocks even when they are not the best family counselors.

The second important difference is that this research focuses solely from the subjective perspective of the participants; the research's primary interest is the perceived reality of the participants. The present research treats the study subjects as a dynamic event with interactions happening among the instructor, the material, and the participants. The goal lies in understanding and separating these complicated social phenomena from the subjective perspectives of the participants. Such perspective, when understood, can greatly enhance pastors' ability in designing and implementing a marriage education program in local churches.

This goal led to the final difference: the qualitative nature of the research. Aided by qualitative methodology, the data of rich experiential descriptions obtained from interviews with participants were analyzed. The results are not statistically significant parameters as in a quantitative study, but themes emerged which reveal what factors would impact the participants' learning experiences in a local, pastor-led marriage enrichment program. These themes emerged from interview data. The following section will report and discuss them. There are four broad themes which will be discussed in order: a trustworthy pastor, ready participants, an effective program, and complementary practices.

Trustworthy Pastor

The first important theme that emerged from this study is participants' trust for the pastor. The critical importance of leader to the success of marriage program is well captured by Richard A. Hunt et. al.:

The need for highly qualified, trained leadership becomes evident when it is realized that the most important variable in the success of enrichment programs is identified as the quality of the leader's skills and relationships.¹⁸⁴

Trust is an intangible factor that opened up the participants' hearts to learn. Repeatedly, participants expressed that they can trust the pastor to provide something positive to their lives. When participants trust the pastor, they are more receptive to the pastor's teachings and therefore to having their mind reformed. This process of change is similar to that of the cognitive-behavior psychology perspective. In cognitive-behavior therapy, human behavioral change is the result of cognitive change. It is reasonable to believe that a more receptive heart to the program contents will positively influence behavioral change.

Furthermore, because trust is not given, but earned, the familiarity between this study's pastor and his congregation with regards to their personal and family lives is a precious avenue on which such trust can be earned. In this regard, pastors have a distinct advantage over other marriage experts. Trust is also an issue the literature addresses. Objectively, people tend to trust a program when great effort has been spent in validating the effectiveness of a marriage education program.¹⁸⁵ This type of trust is built through empirical evidence, as opposed to the present study in which trust is personal and relational. Of course, these two types of trust are not mutually exclusive.

¹⁸⁴ Richard A. Hunt, Larry Hof, and Rita Demaria, *Marriage Enrichment* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, Inc., 1998), 74.

¹⁸⁵ J. K. Balswick, and J. O. Balswick, "Marital Enhancement Program Evaluation," *Journal of Family Ministry* 17, no. 1 (2003): 12-37; S. F. Jakubowski, E. P. Milne, et al., "A Review of Empirically Supported Marital Enrichment Programs," *Family Relations* 53, no. 5 (2004): 528-536.

Further analysis of this trust by the participants in the pastor leads to three interrelated subthemes. These are discussed in the following.

Trust in the Pastor's Faith

The most important and fundamental aspect of trust comes from the participants' trust that the pastor shares their same faith. The interview data clearly showed that the participants greatly value their Christian faith. They wanted more than just a way to make marriage better; they wanted God's way. Participants wanted their lives to conform to the will of God as revealed in the word of God, and it was very important for them to have marriage education in the context of their Christian faith. In a marriage education program, they wanted to hear the words of God and wanted to experience the healing power of God through prayer and meditation. The desire to have Christian practices is well recognized in the literature, and the present study is consistent with that finding.

When the participants understood, or at least perceived, that the pastor expounds God's word in a trustworthy way, they believed the teachings carry, at least to some degree, divine authority. Participants have faith in their pastor's teaching, but that faith is not blind. Pastors absolutely need to take care of their own spirituality to ensure the authenticity of their teachings.

Participants' trust in a shared faith is not uniquely applied to the pastor. They were very much open to other programs offered by other people, and with minor exceptions, they also wanted those programs to be Christian oriented and be conducted by Christians. What is unique for the pastor is that such trust has been tried and proven true in real life. The participants have heard the pastor's preaching and teaching for a long time. More importantly, that trust is tried through many small moments of daily life

and interactions. They have seen, for better and for worse, their pastor's faith in action. Therefore, they trust the pastor's person.

Trust in the Pastor's Person

One of the unexpected findings is how a pastor's personal life and marriage affects the learning experience within the marriage enrichment program. Participants need to trust both the teachings and the personal character of the pastor. Though it is hard to discern which one is the cause and which one is the effect, it seems most likely that the teachings and the character form a symbiotic relationship.

Participants wanted to hear their pastor's personal family experiences because this created a trusting bond. They asked for authenticity and vulnerability. When the pastor was courageous enough to share his own struggles in marriage, which are similar to the participants, the participants described how he created a bond. But this was not enough for them. They were not satisfied with stories of their pastor's family struggles; they wanted to hear stories of overcoming and triumphing over adversity. They wanted to know that their pastor knew and shared their experience. The participants wanted their pastor to show them by example that the power of God actually made his marriage better. The pastor's personal stories gave credibility to the corresponding teaching, evidencing that these learned skills work when applied. Some participants actually wanted the pastor's wife to be there to share her part of the stories so they could see how the skills taught in the program inform the marital relationship. Many research publications on marriage education programs prove the effectiveness of the program and persuade the intended audience that the programs actually work. Without statistics or measurable parameters, these personal evidences of the pastor's own struggles and resolutions in

marriage encourage trust from the participants. Their hearts and ears were more open to the teachings as a result.

Trusting in the Pastor's Wisdom

While it is important for participants to trust that the pastor's teachings are biblically sound and the pastor's character reflects the teaching, this study also found that the participants wanted the pastor to have practical skills in helping married couples. There was a strong voice wanting the pastor to be trained professionally, though the exact nature of that training was not clearly identified. In this research, the participants found the fact that this author is working on a dissertation about marriage education to be sufficient. The point is clear that because the pastor had some kind of validated credentials, participants felt more confident about the learning process.

A collaborating evidence is that participants voiced their trust in the pastor's ability to integrate biblical principles and practical skills for them. For this particular evangelical church, there existed a fundamental mistrust of secular knowledge. Many participants were skeptical of any teachings originating from secular sources. They maintained that those secular skills must be heavily tailored by the Christian faith. They wanted a marriage education program that is more than a superficial mix of biblical proof texts plus therapeutic techniques. They wanted a program that has its source in the scripture and all practical skills are well informed and argued for by the scripture. Pastors should be careful not to betray their trust. Pastors must have a clear conviction, vision, and ability to integrate biblical and secular teachings about marriage.

Ready Participants

The second important theme that emerged from this study was the participants' readiness. The participants' readiness to actively participate in the marriage program ties to their mutual commitment to improve their marriage. "Commitment," according to Paul Galea¹⁸⁶, "was seen both as a psychological attachment and a corresponding behavior intent to pursue the relationship." The participants who were committed to their marriage, showed at least some emotional attachment to their partners and prepared to put in the necessary effort to improve their marriage had a better learning experience in the marriage education program. The motivation of the participants to change is something needed to be considered carefully by the program designer and leader. They can take the cue from therapists:

... we believe that client motivation is one of the – if not *the* most – important variables in therapy, but therapist can do a great deal to influence client motivation, for better or for worse. Matching therapist behavior with client motivation, therefore, becomes one of the most paramount tasks of any therapeutic approach.¹⁸⁷

It seemed apparent that readiness to stay in their marriage inspired the participants' desires to learn and to change. The participants' religious commitment was translated into their commitment to marriage. If a couple refused to divorce no matter what, then there is a marriage to save and to improve. As one of the participants pointed out, divorce is out of question and the only way forward is to try to improve the marriage. It should be noted that even though there were highly stressed couples among the

¹⁸⁶ Paul Galea, "Readiness for Commitment: Applying Psychological Constructs to Pastoral Issues in Marriage," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 61, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 211.

¹⁸⁷ Douglas H. Sprenkle, Jay Lebow, and Sean D. Davis, *Common Factors In Couple And Family Therapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 2009), 72.

participants, none of them had abusive or adulterous relationships. Furthermore, the participants were so chosen because they were married couples, and none of the couples had a divorce experience. In their present state, none ever sought divorce even though some had thoughts about getting divorce.

The literature data suggested that the divorce rate among evangelicals roughly follows that of the general public.¹⁸⁸ It is hard to draw conclusions from such data on the relationship of religious commitment and divorce. Because religious commitment is an ambiguous term and difficult to define, the findings of the present study cannot be used to conclude that religious commitment must translate to nondivorce, or that divorce must imply low or no religious commitment. The present study claims that, to some Christians, religious commitment to marriage gives them a stronger desire to learn in a marriage education program in order to make their marriage life better. This is in line with Hunt et al.'s assessment that

High commitment probably leads to greater motivation and willingness of both partners to participate in ME activities, yet may be less noticeable than with couples who begin with either lower commitment or with larger discrepancies in commitment between partners.¹⁸⁹

Yet, among the participants, a simple desire to stay in their marriages was insufficient. The participants who were ready to improve marriages seemed to benefit from the present marriage education program. Several participants pointed out their desire to improve their marriage as one of the reason they attended the present program.

¹⁸⁸ Barna Research Group, "Christians Are More Likely to Experience Divorce Than Are Non-Christians," <http://www.barna.org/>, December 21, 1999, accessed November 1, 2016, <http://www.adherents.com/>.

¹⁸⁹ Richard A. Hunt, Larry Hof, and Rita Demaria, *Marriage Enrichment* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, Inc., 1998), 150.

Interview data also showed that those who felt that their marriages were beyond improvement found the program least helpful. When they gave up their desire to improve their marriage, they dismissed the whole or part of the program. This is consistent with literature findings that point out the role of hope in the effectiveness of a marriage education program. Even those who wanted to and believed they could improve their marriage voiced their struggles in changing stubborn interacting patterns which hurt their marital relationship.

The participants who were ready to put in effort to improve marriages had a greater positive impact from the program. They needed to face the reality that marriage improvement is hard work and be ready to tackle it. There are two areas that particularly require this kind of effort. First, the couple had to attend the program. This is not a trivial matter, especially for those who have younger children. Parents typically filled their free time with children and family activities and attending this program meant extra scheduling considerations for parents. Even for couples without children who live home, many struggled to find time to attend the program due to their busy work lives. Second, the participants needed to practice the taught skills. As mentioned earlier, many participants recognized their unhelpful habitual interacting patterns. To overwrite those harmful patterns with a more Christian, gracious, edifying pattern takes serious effort. Behaviorism demands a regimen with external inducement. Cognitive therapy needs reformation of faulty beliefs. Emotional-focused therapy takes an often painful process to heal past emotional wounds. Whatever one's theoretical orientation might be, breaking old habits to form new ones requires significant commitment of time, energy, discipline, and emotional fortitude. In their current life circumstances, many participants in this

study found it hard to invest the needed effort. The homework assignments were designed for participants to replace old habit with new. Most of them did not do any homework. They attributed their failure mostly to lack of time. They were tied up in various responsibilities and felt that they could not afford the time and energy needed to complete the homework assignments, even though they fully understood they needed to do them in order to develop a new pattern of interacting.

Effective Program

The third important theme that emerged from this study was the perceived effectiveness of the program. A program can be led by a trustworthy pastor with participants eager to put in the effort to learn, and yet may still result in a poor learning experience if participants do not perceive that a good program had been put together in a way that effectively addresses their needs. The advice Spalding aptly gives to educators in adult learning is equally applicable to pastors:

In order to maximize learning, you must be able to see from the student's perspective.... You must imagine how students will engage your activities, your assignments and your subject as a whole¹⁹⁰.

There are three aspects of a program: logistics, content, and delivery. These affect the participants' perception of the whole program. When the participants felt good about these three aspects, they felt good about the whole program. It is not the purpose of present study to give an exhaustive treatment of each aspect, but rather to suggest important factors from participants' perspective.

¹⁹⁰ Dan Spalding, *How to Teach Adults*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 5.

Good Logistics

A program with well-thought out logistics enables the participants to learn better. The where, who, and when questions will be discussed here.

With regards to where the program is held, the literature points out that churches have pre-existing education infrastructure in which a marriage education program can draw. The present program was held in a Sunday school classroom. There was minimal hassle in obtaining the right to use the room at desired time slots, and as the participants were from the church already, communicating the location was effortless. A church is indeed a good place to have a marriage education program. Hawkins et. al. say it well: “For many who associate with a religious community and imbue marriage with spiritual meaning, a religious setting is an ideal place for marriage education.”¹⁹¹

With regard to who attends the program, these questions needed a lot more consideration than first envisioned. The number of people attending affected the quality of sharing and discussion. Whether the groups were too small or too large could make sharing difficult. The interview data did not provide a specific number of attendance which all participants recognized as the good number. The present program had twelve couples which was a number that participants, in general, found satisfactory. A minimum of two to three couples was suggested.

In addition to the number in attendance, the type of people also required great discernment. The present program had Christian couples without a prior divorce and who have never actively sought divorce in the past. Interviews revealed a general concern that if non-Christian couples attended, the program would need modification to address their

¹⁹¹ Alan J. Hawkins, Jason S. Carroll, William J. Doherty, and Brian Willoughby, “A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education,” *Family Relations* 53 (2004): 550.

needs. There were suggestions also that different lengths of marriages would result in different needs. One can further envision that participants who are single, engaged, or have prior divorces would impact how the program should be conducted. Therefore, pastors need to decide how homogeneous the participants should be. Careful consideration must be given to who attends the program when designing and implementing a marriage education program.

The final question to consider is when the program should be conducted. The two major criteria were participant availability and adequacy of the program. Since a great program without attendance is a useless program, the former is emphasized. For couples with live-in children, the schedule needed to be less intrusive to family life. Using a time slot for existing, regular church meetings, such as Sunday school or family meetings, may work well. For couples without live-in children, Saturdays are good schedule candidates. An outside retreat is also possible. However, retreats were extremely difficult for the present group in this study.

Next to participant availability, pastors need to think through the impact of time on the effectiveness of the program. Adequate time is needed for preprogram preparation, actual program meetings, and post-program follow-up meetings. Participants also must spend time doing homework between meetings, and the schedule must accommodate homework. The present program's failure to consider this need resulted in participants not doing homework assignments.

How long the program should last is another consideration. Since new habits take time to form, a program that lasts three to four weeks was suggested as sensible.

Good Content

For participants to consider a program good, it was necessary to have sound, biblical teaching and practical, skill building exercises. Almost all participants wanted explicit biblical teachings incorporated into the program. They desired more than proof texts here and there. They desired a biblical theology of marriage that gave them a foundation for the divine purpose of marriage and an inspiring hope that comes from God's partnership with them in Christ to make marriage better. They also wanted the program to teach them skills which were actionable and effective in improving their marriage relationship. All the participants deemed the first part of the program – that provides a biblical theology of marriage – a necessary starting point. They also commented on the usefulness of the practical skills in parts two and three. Most marriage programs focus on skill building, either communication skills, conflict resolution, or both. Indeed, the participants spoke of these skills as important to them, but they also expressed a desire for the skill building exercises to be biblical as well. The exact nature of being biblical is not their primary concern. They could not provide a concrete definition. Rather, they left integrating theology and psychology to the pastor.

Good Delivery

The third and final element of a good program is that of good delivery – the ways or methods through which content was communicated to the participants. There were four methods that asserted positive influence on participants' learning experience: video, personal anecdotes, skill building exercises, and small group discussion. The instructions and activities in the program require other means to help participants to learn and to retain what were communicated. Pastors should take heed to the exhortation of Hawkins

et. al.: “Marriage educators need to give more attention to methods that can help participants maintain program benefits.”¹⁹²

The use of video left a powerful and lasting impression on the participants. At the interviews, participants could still recall parts or all of the video clips. Interview discussion showed some important consideration for video usage. Video clips used need to tie to specific points of discussion. The sound and picture quality should be good. Translation and explanation should be added when needed to ensure participants understand. Discussion questions should follow the video to reinforce learning.

The second influential factor is the pastor’s use of personal anecdotes. Good examples included authentic and daily marital issues that the pastor and participants shared. They also contained elements about how pastors use the skills taught in the program to improve or resolve those marital issues. It is important to point out God’s gracious work in resolving marital issues. Examples that make the pastor into a hard-working moral model or convey that all the participants need is to follow the pastor’s example should be avoided. A more detailed discussion was made in the section *Trustworthy Pastor*.

The use of exercises is the third delivery strategy that asserted positive influence. Exercises aimed at specific goals for learning. As the interviews revealed, time management was critical. Participants needed enough time to finish the exercises in class.

Finally, the use of small group discussion was a two-edged sword. It facilitated learning when participants were willing to share both their marital problems and how they handled them. However, it also hindered the disclosure of deeper emotional hurts

¹⁹² Alan J. Hawkins, Jason S. Carroll, William J. Doherty, and Brian Willoughby, “A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education,” *Family Relations* 53 (2004): 550.

and marital troubles. Pastors need to be sensitive to the design of discussion questions. Another issue for a pastor to consider is group dynamics. When dividing into small groups the pastor should, if possible, consider the relationship and personality of small group members to improve the probability of good discussions.

Complementary Practices

The fourth important theme that emerged from this study is the complementary practices of the program. In interviews, the participants were asked about what can be done to improve the program. They gave illuminating responses, suggesting the present program can be greatly enhanced by three levels of the complementary practices: the immediate feedback in the class, the continuous support between classes, and pastoral mentoring beyond the class.

The first level is immediate feedback in the class. This was mentioned as a way to improve learning. This is mainly about in-class exercises. The feedback could be from the pastor, other participants, or both. The purpose of feedback is to clarify any confusion that arose during the exercises and to reinforce the desired goal of the exercises.

The second level is continuous support between classes. For some participants, there was not enough external pressure and/or incentive to find time in their busy schedules to do the assigned homework. The form of support can be creative. It could be as simple as a daily email reminder, a midweek conference with the pastor, or small group members discussing and addressing any questions. Whatever the form, the goal is to encourage participants to stay accountable and get the most out of homework and exercises.

Finally, the third level is pastoral mentorship beyond the class. The present marriage education program may not be suitable for high stressed marriage. It was suggested that the pastor needed to provide one-on-one help in addition to the present program. The literature has mentorship as part of a more comprehensive marriage education program. In the present context, participants felt that pastor should be the one who mentors struggling couples.

These three levels of practices were perceived as helpful to the participants for a better learning experience. These are the points pastors need to consider based on participants' responses to the marriage enrichment program. Surprisingly, they are very similar to the suggested framework of marriage education program in the literatures,¹⁹³ though the aforementioned subthemes are grouped differently in the literature.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of the described findings, pastors are well advised to engage in a church marriage education program. Five suggestions are given and examined here: clarify personal standings on how theology and psychology should be integrated, study to learn practical skills that can enrich marriage, practice learned skills to improve the pastor's own marriage – if applicable and if possible, design a marriage education program for the pastor's own church, and focus on the heart and hands – one's inner being and outer behavior.

¹⁹³ Alan J. Hawkins, Jason S. Carroll, William J. Doherty, and Brian Willoughby, "A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education," *Family Relations* 53 (2004) 547-558; Richard A. Hunt, Larry Hof, and Rita DeMaria, *Marriage Enrichment: Preparation, Mentoring and Outreach* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 1998), 145-161.

First, I recommend that pastors clarify their personal stand on how theology and psychology should be integrated. The marriage education movement is deeply influenced by marriage counseling, which in turn is rooted scientifically in psychology. Different models of theology-psychology integration affect the theory and practice of a marriage education program. For example, a strict separation of theology and psychology could result in leaving a marriage education program in the hands of psychology. Or, to another extreme, pastors could design a marriage education program with no more than a series of sermons on marriage, with sporadic tips as applications.

There is another reason why pastors need to know how to integrate theology and psychology: the trust that the congregants have in the pastor. If a marriage education program contains elements which are derived from the insights of psychology, the pastor needs to make sure that those elements are theologically consistent with the position of the church.

Second, I recommend that pastors study to learn practical skills that can enrich marriages. Theory needs to be in practice and theology needs to be lived. Most pastors are not psychologists or professional marriage counselors. Therefore, they do not know many exercises for couples that would help their marriages. However, pastors do not need to know many practical skills to develop a good marriage education program. Instead, pastors need enough exercises that could help regular parishioners make their marriage more biblical. There are many good books that can serve pastors well in this regard.

There are two more suggestions for selecting resources. First, searching the Internet for information is good, but caution must be exercised. Easy accessibility does

not equal quality. It is advisable to look beyond Christian resources. Discretion is a must, but that is true even for Christian resources. For his purposes, this author found secular resources illuminating.

Third, I recommend pastors learn and practice skills to improve their own marriages. Pastors' experience in their own marriages can tremendously help those who partake in the education program. Pastors do not need to have a problem-free marriage, but they should model a marriage that continues to grow in the direction of God's design and desire. By actively practicing and applying learned skills, pastors can also gain a good sense of their value and how to incorporate those things into the program. Additionally, if pastors have experienced success with these learned skills, it can inspire the participants to use them in their own marriages.

Fourth, I recommend that pastors design a marriage education for their own church, if possible. Pastors know their flock the best. A cookie-cutter program has merit and can be very helpful, but at the same time, pastors who are more familiar with the church and members under their care can best design a marriage education program which is sensitive to the congregation's needs.

Fifth, I recommend pastors use their marriage enrichment program to focus on hearts and hands. Most education programs emphasize skill training for a reason. When a pastor designs and implements a marriage education program, practical exercises that help the relationship must be part of the program. However, Christian marriage education ultimately is part of discipleship. Its aim is not only happy marriages but godly marriages. Certainly these two are not mutually exclusive, and indeed some would argue that one fosters the other. Christian marriage education programs are duty bound to go beyond

behavior modification. They must address the root cause of misbehavior and misalignment in marriage – sinful human hearts. These programs must depend upon the Spirit of God, and utilize effective methods to deliver biblically sound content that addresses both sinful hearts and sinful behaviors. In doing so, a pastor can make a lasting impact for God’s name and kingdom. The humble wish of the present author is to aid pastors in a small way to fulfill the calling to care for the families. In the words of the Rogers almost forty years ago:

Biblically, the marital relationship is the first social institution. We are convinced that health in this primary relationship is a foundation to healthy family living. To awaken hope for growth and to provide an opportunity to learn principles for growth in marriage is good pastoral care to families¹⁹⁴.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on a marriage education program led by a pastor of a local church. As with any study, there are limitations to the focus’ extent. Therefore, further study in the following areas could be highly valuable for the field of marriage education and pastoral ministry.

First, it is valuable to study the program’s impact on groups in different stages of married life. This study revealed that participants with live-in children had different concerns about the program than those without live-in children. Some participants also suggested that things might be different to newlywed couples and couples who have been married for a long time. It will be useful to do multiple studies where the duration of marriage is the primary cohort.

¹⁹⁴ W. H. Rogers And Rogers, M. “Marriage Enrichment Conferences for the Local Church.” *Review and Expositio*, 75 (1978): 42-43.

Second, the present study focused on Chinese immigrants who have resided in the US for a long period of time. With the exception of one couple, all are US citizens. The participants' responses have revealed the possibility of cultural influence on the program. It is valuable to study the potential effects of cultural influence. One possible example is studying how participants in China who do not have US living experience would respond to this program. The result might better help churches in that cultural context.

Third, the present study has not considered the role of gender in learning. For example, no questions were asked to inquire about the role of gender in marriage. Incidentally, the three people who expressed how they were emotionally hurt during the program were female. This seems to suggest that gender plays a role in the learning experience of the current program. Another angle of study, in addition to the gender of participants, is the gender of the instructor. Would the gender of the pastor make a difference? This might be a good question to investigate.

Fourth, most of the participants of this study are not in a high-stress marriage. There was only one couple who would be categorized as high stress, and they were on the verge of breaking down. Two couples confessed that they had considered divorce. This study supports the view that this kind of program will not be effective in dealing with high-stress marriages. It would be illuminating to perform a study on high-stress married couples.

Fifth, one area of critique from participants of the present study was the lack of support during and after the program. It will be valuable to study marriage education programs which positively incorporate supporting elements. One possibility is to add mentor couples to the present marriage program and do a similar study.

Sixth, the present study focused on participants' responses. It is a study from the perspective of the learner. It would be helpful to do a similar study from the perspective of the pastor. Studies on pastors who have designed, planned, and executed marriage education programs would have great potential to benefit both pastors and congregations in building better marriages in and through local churches.

Summary

In this chapter, the themes drawn from interviews as reported in chapter four is presented. The three major themes to consider when designing and implementing a marriage education program in local church are a trustworthy pastor, ready participants and good program. The trustworthy pastor theme includes the pastor's faith, person and wisdom. The ready participants theme touches on the readiness of the participants to stay in the marriage, to improve their marriage and to actually put in the effort to do so. The final theme, good program, covers aspects in logistics in planning and implementing, in content of the program, in class delivery of the program and in complementary practices outside the main program. These findings resonate well with what are reported in the literature, with two major differences: they are categorized differently, and they focus on programs designed by education and counseling professionals. Recommendations are given to aid pastors to prepare their own marriage education program for their churches. Finally, suggestions are given to future research in order to further the understanding of marriage education in local churches and to better equip pastors to better fulfill their pastoral duty in building up healthy and godly marriages in the local churches.

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