

## Review of Ministries for Couples and Families: A Critical Analysis

Jennifer S. Ripley, Ph.D.

Premarital and Marital Enrichment programs are often used in churches as a way to strengthen marriages within the congregation. While the goal of most programs is to strengthen marriages and ultimately decrease the chances of divorce, they tend to be quite diverse in the way they seek to do so. Programs vary in aims techniques, leadership, time, and format. While a few programs that intertwine Biblical principles and research have originated and been implemented in church settings, many have been developed in university or community setting and adapted for use in the church. Furthermore, the programs vary in the religious components they possess, as well as the extent to which they have been researched and shown to be effective.

The current discussion reviews the leading religious programs and ministries for couples. Of particular emphasis are the religious elements and research outcomes of marital, including premarital, programs found in psychological journals and books.

### ***Great Start***

**Founders:** University of Chicago Divinity School directed by Don Browning

**Focus:** Premarital and Newly- married couples

**Format:** 4-5 weekly group sessions, 2 ½ hours each

The Great Start program ([Family-project@uchicago.edu](mailto:Family-project@uchicago.edu)) was developed in partnership with the Religion, Culture and Family Project of the University of Chicago Divinity School. The program is aimed at helping couples prepare realistically for marriage and prevent divorce by building a skilled, happy, and growing relationship. Great Start curriculum combines two published programs, Couple Communication Program (CCP; Miller, Wackman, & Nunnally, 1983) and Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Lewis, 1986; Markman,

Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994), with mainline theological principles for marriage. Elements derived from CCP include the teaching of effective speaking, listening, and conflict resolving skills, while PREP elements include couple assessments and feedback to assist couples in further developing their relationship skills. Each couple works with an instructor certified by both CCP and PREP who facilitates their participation, PREP inventories, conducts the program, and offers follow-up skill reinforcement. Great Start instructors generally work in the context of a church congregation as part of a pre-marriage or early-marriage ministry.

Great Start curriculum integrates biblical and theological principles and is designed to be adaptable to different faith traditions. Program materials include a guidebook and an optional book that addresses marriage from a Christian perspective.

While the Great Start program is comprised of PREP and CCP, two programs that have been highly evaluated and found to be effective in improving couple communication, no empirical evaluation of Great Start was located. An assessment of the program's impact on couple's marriages is needed to determine its effectiveness.

### ***Marriage Encounter***

**Founders:** Catholic Church

**Focus:** Married Couples

**Format:** Intensive weekend program, total of 44 hrs.

Marriage Encounter ([www.wwme.org](http://www.wwme.org)) is one of the pioneer marriage enrichment interventions conducted. Created by the Catholic church, this religiously-based intervention utilizes discussion groups and an experiential approach. Couples attend Marriage Encounter weekends held in a variety of geographical locations. Following each lecture session, couples are provided open-ended questions to discuss with an emphasis on expressing feelings. The aim of such exercises is increasing marital unity

through eliciting feelings within the couples that are similar to those the couple experienced when they first married. The culmination of the intensive weekend experience is a group renewal of marriage vows.

Religious elements of Marriage Encounter stem from its origins as it originated in the Catholic Church, then eventually developed into a separate entity and expanded to serve Jewish and Protestant couples (Doherty, McCable, & Ryder, 1978). Leaders include clergy and couples who had previously attended Marriage Encounter. The overarching goal of the program is unity, which is viewed as God's plan for marriage. Presentations are designed to promote unity through lecture and exercises.

As with many pioneer programs, it has experienced conflicting reports of effectiveness. Though the program has been reportedly beneficial to many couples, it appears to have been harmful to others (Lester & Doherty, 1983). Published experimental clinical trials have not been published and interest in investigating the approach appeared to wane after the 1980's. A more recent investigation of the program is warranted to understand Marriage Encounter's continued and current impact on marriages.

***Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program***

**Founders:** Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Lewis, 1986

**Focus:** Premarital and Marital Couples

**Format:** Weekly classes or intensive weekend session, total of 12-15 hours

Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP; Markman et al, 1986; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994; [www.prepinc.com](http://www.prepinc.com)) is a marital intervention aimed at building couple communication skills and preventing the development of maladaptive patterns of communication. Program elements designed to reach this aim include the presentation of structured models of communication that present clear rules concerning the communication process (Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995).

The learning of such models are thought to increase the chance a couple can successfully resolve a problem through communication. Additionally, PREP addresses each partner's relationship expectations, and encourages the sharing of expectations with one's spouse through couple exercises (Stanley et al, 1995). PREP seminars are led by instructors trained at a 2 or 3 day workshop. Given that there are no specific credentials required, clergy and lay-leaders can attend the training and lead the seminar at their church. A directory of previously trained PREP instructors is also available.

The original PREP curriculum includes two optional presentations that address the impact of spiritual values on the marriage relationship. Exercises center around the identification of each spouse's spiritual beliefs and values, and a dialogue regarding how each individual's beliefs can culminate in a shared world view for the couple. "Christian PREP" has also been developed based on the original PREP theory integrating Judeo-Christian principles for marriage (Stanley & Trathen, 1994). Skill-building interventions are employed as with the original PREP, while scripture is used to deepen the meaning of the material.

Overall, the PREP program is one of the most extensively researched programs reviewed. It has found to be effective in decreasing negative communication, increasing positive communication, and increasing levels of marital satisfaction in PREP participants when compared to control group at 4- and 5- year follow-up (Freedman, Low, Markman, & Stanley, 2002; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001; Markman et al., 1993). Despite questions of generalizability of the weekend version of the program due to many studies being conducted in Germany, PREP has shown itself to be beneficial in improving marriages, and has been revised based on conducted research. It is also among

the first of empirically-based programs that has been adapted to be used in community settings and led by community leaders.

***Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts***

**Founders:** Parrott & Parrott, 1995

**Focus:** Premarital and Newly-married couples

**Format:** Weekend-intensive program, 6 hours of curriculum

SYMBIS is a psychoeducational marital enrichment intervention that targets the improvement of relationships in effort to decrease chances of divorce (Parrott & Parrott, 1997). Elements designed to reach such aims include exercises that address the strong influence of each partner's family of origin. Individuals are viewed as a part of a transgenerational family system that influences the individual's marital expectations, perceptions of family roles, and "unconscious rules" that govern his or her behavior and interaction with his or her partner (Parrott & Parrott, 1997). A unique feature of SYMBIS is its use of a "marriage mentoring program" in which a newlywed couple is paired with a more "seasoned" couple for one year following the program in an effort to continue supporting the new marriage. SYMBIS curriculum and materials (including books, workbooks, and video) is disseminated in bookstores, intended for use as a couple or group. SYMBIS weekends are also available for couples to attend.

The SYMBIS program incorporates a discussion on building spiritual intimacy in its final module. Based on Christian principles, this module exposes couples to spiritual disciplines that can help strengthen their relationship. Exercises center around individual reflection on one's spiritual journey, as well as how one's religious principles can help the individual value his or her mate.

An initial evaluation of the SYMBIS program assessed the effects of the program on 402 participants (Ripley et al, 2000). The main analysis indicated that individuals

with low marital adjustment before the program showed significant improvement compared to those with high levels of adjustment. However, individuals with high beginning scores reported a decline in measures of marital satisfaction. Further evaluation will be useful in determining the long-term impact of the program on couples' relationships.

***Strategic Hope-Focused***

**Founders:** Worthington, 1999

**Focus:** Married couples

**Format:** Weekend-intensive program, 6 hours of curriculum

Strategic Hope-Focused marriage enrichment stems from Worthington's (1999) model of brief marriage counseling. The 6-hour program seeks to promote hope in the marriage as well as build couple skills in order to strengthen relationships and decrease divorce. Program content targets couple communication and problem-solving skills, increasing couple intimacy, and an emphasis on couple commitment. *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling* is available in bookstores and resources are available on the [www.mmatecenter.com](http://www.mmatecenter.com) website.

Hope-Focused marriage enrichment has at its heart the model of "faith working through love" as seen in Galatians 5:5-6. This model utilizes scripture and Biblical principles surrounding commitment, valuing one's spouse, as well as forgiveness in marriage. Only the assessment and feedback portion of the approach has been tested for Christian participants in a pilot project (Ripley & Worthington, 2002).

The Hope-Focused marriage counseling approach has shown to be quite effective in improving relationships in one study (Worthington et al., 1997). However, a weekend workshop that modified the program showed positive change only in observational

measures (Ripley & Worthington, 2002). Further evaluation is underway to determine long-term impact of the program.

***TIME for a Better Marriage***

**Founders:** Don Dinkmeyer and Jon Carlson, 1984

**Focus:** Marital Couples

**Format:** 10 weekly sessions

TIME (Training in Marriage Enrichment) for a Better Marriage(Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1984) is designed to help couples learn the skills needed to build loving and supportive relationships. The founders seek to teach couples how to encourage each other, communicate effectively, and maintain equality. A healthy marriage is viewed as a safe environment in which partners are equal or congruent -- free to be themselves, express their feelings, build their self-esteem, and, in turn, nourish their relationship. The basic principles of TIME for a Better Marriage include a recognition that marriages require time commitments and that small changes are important in bringing about large changes. It is recommended that group leaders be married couples who can effectively model appropriate marital interactions. *Time for a Better Marriage: Training in Marriage Enrichment* is available in bookstores.

Dinkmeyer and Carlson (1984) suggest that psychologists work in close alignment with clergy, designating spiritual matters to clergy while assessing personality/psychological issues in the TIME counseling format. The program has been suggested for use in church study groups, and a component of the program focuses on the compatibility of couples' priorities and values.

Though TIME curriculum has been published and discussed (Carlson, 2003; Huber, 1986), no empirical evaluations of TIME were found.

***Traits of a Happy Couple***

**Founders:** Larry Halter, Ph.D., 1988

**Focus:** Marital Couples

**Format:** Five weekly 2-hour sessions, total of 10 hours

Traits of a Happy Couple (THC; Halter, 1988) is a psychoeducational program that seeks to build couple communication and problem solving skills, and overall enhance the marital relationship. Sessions consist of lecture and time to practice skills in areas such as common causes of conflict and ways to resolve it and practice in giving support to one's spouse. Couples are encouraged to practice learned skills and methods between each session. THC books are available through some book distributors, though the book is out of print.

THC curriculum combines skill-building material with explicit scripture and theological principles. Groups that are religiously-affiliated also discuss how material is consistent with their religious values.

An initial study evaluated the effects of THC on 290 church and non-church individuals. It was reported that both populations experienced an increase in marital adjustment in couples after attending the workshop (Noval, Combs, Wiinamaki, Bufford, & Halter, 1996). A later study (Combs, Bufford, Campbell, & Halter, 2000) found increases among the THC participants (13 couples) on measures of marital adjustment when compared to those who received no treatment. At six month follow-up, gains were held by the overall group scores, men, but not for women.

### **Researched Non-Religious Programs**

Additional programs that are worthy of mention are those marital enrichment programs that are well-researched, but do not have religious elements. For example, Couples Communication Program (CCP; Miller, Wackman, & Nunnally, 1983) is a well-



established program designed to strengthen communication skills. It is one of the most extensively researched communication skills programs with over 70 published studies. Overall findings report a very positive impact on communication following the program as well as increases in relationship satisfaction (Wampler, 1990; Knights, Schneider, & Denardo, 1985). Relationship Enhancement (RE; Buerney, 1977) is also a program designed to build communication skills, but targets not only married couples, but parents and children as well. Evaluations of the program have indicated that participants experienced gains in listening and self-disclosure skills (Ridley, Avery, Harrell, Haynes-Clements, & McCunney, 1981; Avery, Ridley, Leslie, & Miholland, 1980), relationship satisfaction, (Ross, Baker, & Guerny, 1985), as well as over-all communication skills (Ridley & Sladezeck, 1992; Ridley, Jorgensen, Morgan, & Avery, 1982). While these programs do not have biblical principles integrated in the curriculum, their strong research backing demonstrates utility as marriage enrichment programs. The integration of biblical principles may be an option that Instructors consider.

### **Additional Marriage and Family Ministries**

There is also a variety of well-known marriage and family ministries that are strong resources to church congregations, but do not actively disseminate research. Gary Smalley's ministry (<http://smalley.gospelcom.net>) provides monthly marriage simulcast conferences, as well as a variety of books and videos on marriage and family issues. Family Life Today with Dennis Ranney ([www.familylife.com](http://www.familylife.com)) is a ministry that focuses on different aspects of family relationships through its radio broadcasts, conferences, books, and videos. Another well-known ministry is Focus on the Family with James Dobson ([www.family.org](http://www.family.org)) that focuses on a variety of issues within the family through a

daily radio show, books, and other resources. Finally, Marriage Savers headed by Mike McManus ([www.marriagesavers.org](http://www.marriagesavers.org)) is an organization that seeks to equip local congregations through marriage enrichment seminars and the development of marriage mentor ministries.

### Challenging Situation: Blended families

Blended families are an area of burgeoning emphasis in today's society. With an estimated 50-67% of first-time marriages ending in divorce (Bumpass & Sweet, 1995) and second marriages having a 10% higher rate, the chances of this issue arising in families within a congregation are high.

The blended family faces many challenges, including adapting to a new family structure, living environment, and patterns of interaction. This complex adjustment is an ongoing process that takes place over time. Of particular difficulty in the process of "blending" together as a family are what Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) identify as "turning points." These include changes in household configuration, conflict, Holidays/Special events, quality time, and family crisis. Such developmental challenges are often reoccurring, therefore the family must grow and adjust to the changing needs that are presented.

What can clergy do to help families through this often painful transition? A place to begin may be by helping members become aware that this transition is a process with many layers of challenges. It is suggested that families set up firm, but flexible "rules" that define boundaries between parents and children as well as how the family operates (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). An area of interest in recent research is also the role that

developing rituals or new family traditions play in helping a blended family to become more cohesive (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998). Though there may seem to be a reoccurring tension between the “old and new families” in terms of family rituals, they can play an important role in creating the new, unique family and facilitate family adaptation. All in all, clergy can aid the blended family by helping to open communication between members and being a trusted source of support through the process.

