

Taking Marriage Seriously in Your Church



Why and How

- Family breakdown is endemic in the UK. Four of every ten marriages are now expected to end in divorce. Children, adults and society pay a high price for our failure to make marriage work and freedom to separate.
- UK Courses on their own and counselling have moderate track records at best. Yet US communities and churches are now having substantial success at strengthening marriages and cutting divorces.
- The common ingredients are a proactive comprehensive approach – a “marriage culture” in which “mentoring” is key. Marriage is valued publicly, and ongoing education and support are promoted as the healthy norm for all couples throughout the life-cycle – certainly well before trouble brews.
- This page outlines the case for a hopeful and positive way ahead. It concludes with a simple and practical guide to applying these principles.
- A really effective marriage ministry can now be set up in any UK church or group of churches.

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1. Family breakdown and family structure

Family breakdown in England and Wales

Current estimates are that some 42% of marriages are likely to break down. Put another way, there is nearly one divorce for every two marriages. Either way, far too many marriages aren't living up to the intended ideal of a lifelong partnership.

Perhaps as a response to this, fewer people are marrying. In 2011 159,000 couples married for the first time in England and Wales, less than half the number of first weddings in 1970. Yet even after a marriage breaks down, remarriage remains a popular choice. The number of remarriages was 82,000.

Marriages may be struggling but cohabitees fare a lot worse. Cohabitees split up at alarming rates, the average relationship lasting less than two years. Fewer than 10% of cohabitees manage to stay together for the long run compared to around 60% of married couples. Current received wisdom suggests that it is not marriage but children that make for stable relationships. This myth is exposed by a recent UK study. Within 5 years of the birth of their child, 52% of unmarried parents split up compared to just 8% of married parents. Of those who married within that 5 years, 25% split up.

- Significantly for the future, 47% of babies in the England and Wales are now born to unmarried parents – a group with extremely high break-up rates over short periods of time.

Consequences of family breakdown

Divorce causes dramatic effects on both adults and children. Divorced adults are twice as likely as married adults to experience behavioural and health problems, such as alcoholism, suicide or any mental health disorder at all. There are socio-economic effects as well. For example, research in the US finds that some 50% of all divorces take the family into immediate poverty. One of the most documented phenomena in social science is the married man's "wage premium" over unmarried men, regardless of age and education. This premium reflects greater work productivity and a salary typically 10-40% higher across the developed world. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this productivity and wage premium is eroded or eliminated altogether following divorce.

Children of divorce are far more likely to experience poor social outcomes. These include poverty, emotional problems, failure at school, likelihood of committing crime, becoming teen parents, and risk of suicide. When these children become adults, their problems crescendo as they are trapped between their own desire to succeed in a relationship and their fear that it will all go horribly wrong. Not surprisingly they are less likely to marry, more likely to divorce if they do, and more likely to cohabit. Communities with higher divorce rates have higher crime rates and more social disfunction.

Research on marriage & cohabitation

Research now finds unequivocally that married people are happier, healthier and wealthier. They also live longer and have better sex! A huge range of studies has now established that marriage is not just associated with various social benefits and protections but also causes them. Long-term studies typically start with the “baseline” data (age, health, race, marital status, education, income, etc) of large groups of randomly selected people. Over successive years, further data is collected about changes in marital, socio-economic and health status. Statistical tests can then discount the effects of these baseline differences. The act of marriage appears to cause social benefits and protections, and the act of divorce appears to cause social dysfunction.

Research is also clear that cohabitees tend to get few of the benefits of marriage and acquire many of the risks associated more commonly with divorce. For example, cohabitation is neither associated with nor improves health or the likelihood of living longer than singles. Although a wage premium does accrue to cohabitees, it is smaller than that of married men and does not rise over time. In terms of associated risks to well-being, cohabitees behave more like singles than married people in terms of their risk of suicide, alcoholism, or any mental health disorder.

Researchers find that “commitment” is what differentiates marriage from cohabitation. Public commitment, in terms of both internal “dedication” and external “constraints”, allows couples to take a long-term view. Specialisation of roles occurs more. Mutual support occurs more. Monitoring of potential alternative partners occurs less. “Specialisation” is a particularly helpful concept. Married couples tend to trust enough to allocate roles, thereby releasing each of them from the need to specialise in everything. However cohabiting couples tend to divide roles equally or double up. This essentially means that each partner must remain skilled and current in all areas of daily life, from tax returns to children’s clothes. This constrains opportunity in terms of resources employed - time and abilities - and increases daily stress. Children of married parents do better than those with unmarried parents partly because the parents have more time available to allocate them. Unmarried adults are far more likely to commit acts of violence to each other and abuse their children than married adults partly because they face the pressure of a greater number of roles to juggle.

Conclusion – the importance of marriage and family stability

For both adults and children, there are clear socio-economic advantages in getting and staying married. Whether these benefits and protections accrue to the ability to specialise, look out for one another, and commit, these characteristics are more likely to be present and sustained within the structure of marriage than within cohabitation. There is therefore a “prima facie” case for helping people to get and to stay married because it’s good for them and for society. An alternative approach would be to encourage the development of those key components of marriage that promote these benefits and protections.

For both adults and children, there are also clear socio-economic risks involved in cohabiting or getting divorced. There is little evidence that trying to discourage individual couples from either cohabiting or divorcing will have much effect on their life choices. Yet there is benefit in greater public awareness that cohabitation is not an equally valid alternative to marriage and that divorce rarely gives families the freedom to start afresh that they expect. Public awareness of these greater risks may at least lead to better informed choices of family structure in the future. For now, the important point is that cohabitation and divorce may be life choices within which individuals choose to live and do not wish to be judged. But research informs us clearly that these choices are not of equal or even similar validity to marriage.

2. Reducing family breakdown

What hasn't worked well enough

Preventive courses have limited effects. Some studies of marriage preparation and marriage enrichment courses have found benefits, at least for a few years, but other studies have failed to find significant differences in subsequent marital quality or divorce rates, compared to similarly matched couples who do not do courses. A series of studies on the PREP enrichment course found beneficial effects up to 5 years after the course. Yet these studies are open to criticism over problems of methodology – how they found their result. The biggest contentions are that people tend to bias their responses to self-report questionnaires in ways that are either favourable to themselves or to the expected aims of the experimenter. On the other hand some researchers are suspected of biasing their report towards what they hope to find. There are also concerns about selection effects – those couples that do courses may be those that need them least.

Preventive approaches have failed to penetrate their markets successfully. Marriage preparation and enhancement courses are currently in use almost exclusively by faith communities. Even within these communities, access and take-up is small.

Counselling also has a poor track record. Marital researcher Professor John Gottman reviewed studies of counselling in a major journal (Annual Review of Psychology, 1999). He concluded that, although half of all couples stick it out for around two years, only 20% are still together after four years – regardless of counselling method.

What appears to have worked

The Marriage Savers Community Marriage Policy. In the US, church leaders in 220 cities have signed up to a general “policy statement” that they will agree to promote marriage actively, prepare and support couples getting married or already married, and use mentoring. This public act alone appears to have had major knock-on effects for the wider community. An independent study by The Institute for research and Evaluation of the first 114 Community Marriage Policies found that on average, divorce rates fell 17.5% over seven years, nearly double the decline of very similar cities in each state. Although a modest difference, perhaps 1000,000 divorces have been averted. The Institute also found cohabitation fell, while it rose in similar cities.

Since the clergy of Modesto, California adopted the first Community Marriage Policy in 1986, not only has the divorce rate plunged 50%, but the number of marriages has nearly doubled. As thousands of marriages have been saved or created, children are faring much better. In a decade the teen birth rate fell 30%, double the US decline - and the school dropout rate fell 19%.

The Marriage Savers church policy. Many large churches claim to have now almost eliminated divorce entirely through applying principles outlined in the next paragraph. Two obvious objections to this claim are that churchgoers are somehow different to other populations and that these claims represent an anomaly unrepresentative of the wider population. However there is plenty of research to suggest that Christians and non-Christians have similar rates of marital problems and divorce rates. The large numbers of people involved also make it unlikely that these groups represent a mere anomaly.

Key principles for success

Where the claims of Marriage Savers deserve heeding is in the application of sound principles. Key to this is the promotion of a “culture of marriage”. What this means is that marriage is actively valued as a foundational building block of society - instead of as just one of a selection of choices. It also means that ongoing marriage education and support are considered the healthy norm – instead of as a last-minute rescue effort. Two essentials are crucial here: running educational courses that have either been researched or are based on sound research; and “mentoring” as the primary form of ongoing relationship support. Mentoring can be seen as the glue that sustains the knowledge learnt through education. In some respects, this replaces the role previously provided by “extended family”, where other family members made available friendly support and encouragement, their example as role models and their experience as sources of guidance and wisdom.

Conclusion – reducing family breakdown through education and mutual support

Current approaches to strengthening families tend to be either small-scale preventive approaches or late stage counselling, both of dubious impact on family breakdown. However there is now a strong body of evidence suggesting that research-driven relationship education can be combined effectively with ongoing support of mentoring to make a significant impact on family breakdown. These formal principles can be applied successfully to replace the informal social learning, role models and relational supports previously provided by “extended family”. This is a genuine attempt to rebuild family and community, couple by couple.

3. Context and principles for an effective church marriage policy

Building a comprehensive policy is easier than it sounds

The first priority is to take onboard the lessons from communities and churches that have succeeded in cutting divorce. We must learn this from outside the UK because there is currently no UK organisation with a credible claim to have reduced divorce effectively. This is not to devalue their sincere intent. Few marriage-related organisations take their lead from research about what actually causes good marriage or family breakdown. Nor do they evaluate their programmes or follow-up couples beyond basic feedback - a notoriously unreliable indicator of actual marital behaviour.

Both research and experience tell us that individual programmes in isolation have little long-term effect on divorce rates, if any. Practitioners are naturally biased towards remembering their winners and overlooking their losers. This is a well-established phenomenon. Although some couples are undoubtedly influenced dramatically by a single programme, this is not a sufficient basis on which to promote that single programme.

- So now we know that an effective marriage policy in a church, or group of churches, requires a coherent strategy offered to all couples throughout their life-span. This sounds intimidating but is in fact very simple to establish.

A “Marriage Culture”

The context into which courses and support fits can be described as “marriage culture”. A “culture” is the prevailing attitudes, beliefs and values that underlie social norms and patterns of behaviour.

The core principles necessary for a “marriage culture” are that:

- (a) marriage is valued actively and publicly by the church leadership
- (b) ongoing marriage enhancement is promoted and provided as normal and healthy
- (c) ongoing marriage support is promoted and provided as normal and healthy

Mentoring – the glue that holds it all together

Common to all the US churches that have succeeded in cutting divorce rates is the idea of “mentoring”. This is the glue that holds the courses and support together. In effect it provides what “extended family” used to do in terms of role models, a wealth of experience and practical wisdom, as well as being a trustworthy shoulder to lean on.

Mentors are ordinary married couples with experience of the ordinary ups and downs of marriage. The pre-requisites for a good mentor couple are these

- (a) At least 10 years of marriage, preferably with kids. Couples with less experience may be appropriate only if there is a local shortage.
- (b) A heart for families. Couples need to see that their mentors care.
- (c) Openness to work on their own marriage. Couples need to see that it’s OK to keep learning.
- (d) Openness to share their experiences appropriately. Couples learn from their real life ups and downs.

Churches in the UK with good ongoing marriage enhancement still appear to have a divorce problem. It seems most likely that genuinely high risk couples are not apparent in the church early enough. Mentoring provides such a couple with a safe relationship where they can talk freely well before problems get out of hand.

Mentoring is described more fully in this website’s page ‘Marriage Mentoring’.

4. Practical steps for any church or group of churches

It can't be emphasised enough that doing this well is easy.

These steps are based on how one particular church in Bristol has pioneered a UK version of the Marriage Savers. Other churches in Bristol are also now applying this model. Smaller churches may find it easier to work together with other churches.

Step 1 – Church leaders decide to value and help strengthen marriages

If the leaders don't promote this publicly, it won't happen. Perhaps the biggest objection is that it might alienate "singles". This is a poor excuse. The church must cater for singles separately as well. Most of them will be pleased that marriages are to be supported.

Step 2 – Lay married couple is appointed to take charge of the ministry, with support

There are good reasons for this. The best people to run a ministry ought to be those with most experience. Married couples have that experience. In contrast pastors may not be married or may feel fearful or hypocritical about their own marriage experience. Pastors are also overworked and hardly need an extra workload. Lay couples are usually better motivated to do the job. They are more approachable and there is no stigma attached to talking to them. There is also research that has found lay couples to be as good or better than professionals at delivering marriage enhancement.

The lay couple will also need prayer, support and encouragement. It is well worth forming a small "marriage team".

Step 3 – Tell the congregation what the church is doing and why

It is important that the congregation know what is going on and why. The existence of this manual could be publicised and made available. A short leaflet is also easy to produce. This needs to be publicised from the front.

Christian leaders are often fearful about making a stand for marriage. Yet the secular research overwhelmingly confirms what God says about marriage, cohabitation, and divorce.

Step 4 – Active promotion of good marriage preparation

All couples getting married should be encouraged to do marriage preparation as a matter of course. An excellent seven minute DVD which will help them to see the value of it is

available for £10.00 including p&p from Chris Grimshaw, Sharpham Barton, Totnes, South Devon, TQ9 7DX (tel. 01803 732278). Almost all couples feel apprehensive before they do a course. Yet afterwards, almost all couples also say they enjoyed it more than they expected.

The primary aims of marriage preparation should be to establish that it is “OK to learn” and it is “OK to talk to others” about marriage. The easiest way to achieve this is to use an inventory (“questionnaire”), either PREPARE, which can be administered by any married “mentor couple” with a short training, or the Couple Survey in the Holy Trinity, Brompton Marriage Preparation Course. In this way, the couple covers issues that are directly relevant to them and have another couple to whom they can turn without stigma or fear. Basic skills education in communication, conflict resolution and commitment should be added. Both PREPARE and the HTB Marriage Preparation Course provide material on this. Marriage preparation can then be seen as the first step of an ongoing process of learning as marriage goes through various fairly typical and normal stages. For more details on PREPARE and the HTB Course and for other preparation courses, see the page ‘Marriage Preparation’ on this website.

Possible “mentor couples” should be identified by the lay couple and pastor. They can then be invited and trained if they accept. However since mentoring is really good for the mentors' own marriage, it is important that selection errs more on the side of risk and less on the side of safety. Of course some couples will be eminently unsuitable. But if there is doubt about a couple's suitability, they should be invited. Their marriage will benefit. Give them the chance.

Step 5 – Active promotion of ongoing marriage enhancement for all couples

Once a year, all couples in the church should be actively encouraged to participate in a short course of marriage enhancement as something healthy and normal. By promoting it to all couples in the church, the stigma of “needing help” and “failure” is removed. In order to encourage couples to come again, ring the changes on the course used every few years.

A range of courses is available, ranging from research-informed to intuitive, from secular to Biblical Christian. It's best to use research-informed if possible and add a Christian overlay. Details of courses and how to run them can be obtained from the page ‘Marriage Enhancement’ on this website.

Step 6 – Help for rebuilding marriages in trouble

The ideal way to establish a really effective resource for couples in trouble is by asking those who have “been there” and survived. Many churches will have this kind of couple who have much to offer but have probably never been asked or even considered. The minister can simply announce during a service that he/she wants to talk privately to any “back from the brink” couples and that they should get in contact.

It is probably less important what kind of programme is used and more important that the couple who have “been there” share their story. There are two reasons for this. First, some studies of couple counselling tend to find very similar but limited effects at preventing divorce, regardless of type of therapy. Second, the only programmes which have very

successful track records at preventing divorce use ordinary “back from the brink” couples rather than counselling professionals.

Couples can use ENRICH, a questionnaire similar to PREPARE, available from the same source. Couples can then be mentored in exactly the same way as they are for marriage preparation.

For other ideas, see the page ‘Helping Marriages in Difficulties’ on this website.

As a fall back, it may be sensible to direct couples to counselling. However there can be major pitfalls here. Some counsellors focus on the value of individual happiness. What is really needed however is a counsellor, or even better a husband and wife pair of counsellors, who focus on the value of the marriage relationship. The counsellors need to be able to deliver practical skills that build the marriage up for the future. Few marriage counsellors have this kind of skills training. Nor are many aware of the research showing that unhappiness is very often a temporary phase experienced by one individual and not a permanent state of the marriage. Unhappiness is most often improved by the simple passage of time and most often made worse by divorce. So check carefully beforehand. There is an interesting and readable paper on the risks of marital counselling available on the website www.smartmarriages.com entitled “How therapy can be hazardous to your marital health”. It applies to some Christian counsellors as well as to secular counsellors.

When a plan has been made, a church should run a Marriage First Aiding Training session for **all** its adult members – married, single, divorced or widowed. Most people with marriage difficulties confide first in a friend, relation or work colleague. Marriage First Aiding Training helps people to respond to such confidences and to encourage those in difficulties to seek appropriate help. The evening can be adapted to inform about what means of help are available locally. Details of how to run one are on this website.

Step 7 – Support for Stepfamilies

As with “back from the brink” couples, the best people to help stepfamilies are those with practical experience, i.e. other stepfamilies. The simplest way ahead is to set up a support group, monitor that it is being organised and not just allowed to die out after one or two meetings. It should then largely be able to sustain itself.

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