

MARRIAGE MENTORING



Introduction

Many couples enter marriage confident of their prospects. They know other couples whose marriages have broken down but they think it certainly will not happen to them. However, a few months down the line they hit a bumpy patch; they struggle with it. Some win through, others begin to wonder if they have made a big mistake.

It would help to have someone with whom to talk - not their parents and not a busy professional, but an older couple whose confidence they trust. How few take the step of finding such a couple. But suppose they already had a supporting couple, a pair of Mentors

Dictionaries tell us that a mentor is "a wise giver of advice", "an experienced and trusted adviser".

The general principle of older men and women helping younger is found in Scripture in the Apostle Paul's Letter to Titus, Chapter 2.

Marriage Mentoring is the linking up of a couple who have been married for ideally around five years or more with an engaged couple or a couple who have been married only a few years. The Mentor couple meet with the younger couple, say, twice a year, ideally over a meal and share their wisdom and experience. A Mentor couple only normally take on one or a few younger couples, so this is not burdensome. Those who are doing it have found it fun and that it helps their own marriage to become even better.

For the younger couple, it is like giving their marriage a six-monthly service which, as years go by, could perhaps stretch to a yearly service.

Mentors' Experience

One Mentor has said, "We have enjoyed this as much as anything. The two of us working as a couple has made it the most rewarding work."

Another Mentor said that one of the questionnaires was "very helpful to our couple. The feedback was the gist of our sessions together and a good springboard to a number of other issues. It supports sharing our own experiences without being pontifical or pious."

The latter Mentor's wife of 30 plus years added, "In our experience of being a Mentor couple, one of the best parts is getting to know your own relationship. It forces you to analyse what makes your husband/wife relationship work. In taking the questionnaire ourselves it confirmed some of our own areas of compatibility - and differences which keep life interesting."

Another Mentor has said, "The engaged see that we are open and willing to be vulnerable and to tell them about our private life. That in turn allows them to open up more themselves."

The above quotations are taken from "Insuring Marriage: 25 Proven Ways to Prevent Divorce" by Michael McManus, with his kind permission. He writes, "It is valuable to have both a male and female perspective. Harriet is always sensitive to emotional issues that escape me but I pick up on male frustrations she doesn't see. I tend to focus on the ideas being expressed but she picks up on the feelings and body language, every bit as important as verbal communication."

Couples tend to stick at mentoring because it is so relaxed and enjoyable.

How to Start

Research has shown that ordinary couples are as good as or better than professionals at mentoring.

If a church decides to encourage mentoring, it may be best to explain the scheme publicly, so that all know what is happening.

Mentoring could begin with a church leader pairing up young married couples with older volunteers. At their meetings the younger couple set the agenda, and are encouraged to chat freely about their ups and downs, hopes and fears, but the older couple also have some questions ready to ask.

It is best not to ask for volunteers - not every older couple will be suitable. Rather someone in a leadership role needs to invite suitable couples to be Mentors. Some couples may feel that their own marriage is not good enough. Encourage them by assuring them that no marriage is perfect but you think they could be of help to others. However be alert to the possibility that their marriage might be in difficulties of which you were not aware.

However, in practice it is often difficult to find enough volunteer Mentors. So it may be necessary to ask the younger couples to find their own mentors: an older couple whom they respect.

It would be best whenever possible for the Mentors to begin by sharing in the younger couples' marriage preparation, particularly if that preparation involves getting to know the issues on which the young couple do not see eye to eye. This enables the Mentors to ask relevant questions in the years to come.

When a couple from different cultural backgrounds (eg different countries) are preparing for marriage it would be good if they could have Mentors who have a cross-cultural marriage.

Methods

One good method of marriage preparation is use of the premarital questionnaires, PREPARE or FOCCUS. (The are actually called 'Inventories'.) Prospective Mentor couples can be trained in one day to be PREPARE Practitioners or FOCCUS Facilitators. Then, at a meeting with them, the young couple are each given a questionnaire to complete without reference to the other. It begins with a series of questions about themselves and their backgrounds, and continues with a much longer list of statements on a wide range of relevant matters, which the couple are asked to tick indicating whether they agree, are undecided, or disagree.

The completed questionnaires are sent away for comparing and for sorting into categories such as expectations, communication, money, sex, friends, religion, etc. The couple meet again with the Practitioners/ Facilitators two or three weeks later to discuss their responses, category by category with them, and to be commended for their strengths and be helped to address the areas where growth is needed.

In some cases the couple's answers will have shown that their views are in conflict in a significant number of areas, and they may decide to postpone their wedding until they have worked on these. A minority of couples subsequently decide that they find differences they are unable to resolve together and cancel their wedding. Research comparison with other similarly conflicted couples who have proceeded to marriage has shown a high rate of breakdown.

The couple can also be given a workbook containing exercises in communication, resolving conflict, couple relationship and families of origin, budgeting and setting goals. Some of the exercises can be done with the Practitioners/Facilitators during further sessions and others at home.

The first part of the questionnaire will have revealed whether either person is bringing some "enduring vulnerabilities" to the marriage, e.g. abuse, addictions, parental divorce, etc. (see above). This gives the Practitioners/Facilitators the opportunity to help the person address those vulnerabilities or to refer him or her on to somebody else equipped to do that.

PREPARE and FOCCUS are suitable for people of any faith or none. The only questions in them about religion are concerned with exploring the couple's agreement or disagreement on the subject.

There are separate editions of PREPARE for couples already cohabiting (PREPARE CC) and couples who have children from a previous relationship (PREPARE MC). There is yet another, ENRICH, developed for enrichment for married couples but which can be used for marriage preparation for couples who have either cohabited for two years or more, or who have already produced children in their own relationship.

In addition to the general edition of FOCCUS, there are separate editions for Catholics, members of other Christian denominations and those with learning difficulties or who have English as their second language. FOCCUS has optional sections for inter-faith marriages, second marriages and cohabiters.

Details about training for PREPARE can be obtained from their website: www.prepare-enrich.co.uk . Details about training for FOCCUS can be obtained from their website: www.foccus.org.uk .

Couples' Experience

Harry Benson has kindly provided the following quotations from couples who have been mentored using a questionnaire in their marriage preparation course:
"What we found most helpful was that our mentors were open and honest about their own marriage. They ...encouraged us to talk about some of the more difficult things we would normally put under the carpet or end up at loggerheads over. Having that experience gives us confidence even two years later that we can deal with anything that crops up, whether big or small. We did it then. We can do it now."

"Recently we were shocked to hear that three of our friends' marriages had failed within 18 months. Looking back we realise how fortunate we were to have gone through the course, to

have a safe space to think about all aspects of our relationship and to have had such support. We went into our marriage understanding what we were entering into. The course was great fun.”

“Doing the pre-marriage questionnaire made us think about and discuss certain key issues that we probably wouldn't have talked over otherwise. It also made us look realistically at problem areas. It felt good to find we felt the same about important issues. We both enjoyed the course and would highly recommend it to anyone getting married.”

“What I learned was that it was safe to disagree in front of our mentor couple. I could watch how A..... responded and I learned to do things differently. Because the mentors made me feedback to A..... what I had heard, they helped me realise how often I miss what he actually says. It has taken the sting out of our difficult issues, like discussing when to have kids. I definitely think our marriage would have been different if we had not done it. I love being married.”

Other Methods of Preparation

There are various marriage preparation courses, several of which are described on the page on this website [Marriage Preparation 1 - How It Can Be Done](#).

Already Married

For young couples already married, a similar way of starting Mentoring could be use of the ENRICH or REFOCCUS questionnaires for married couples

Getting Together

Mentoring is not a professional relationship but a building of friendship. Mentors need to encourage their couples to ask **any** questions they wish about the Mentors' own marriage. Usually that would happen when the four are together, but the Mentors should also offer opportunities for occasional same-sex twosome conversations, if desired.

Similar opposite sex twosome conversations should **not** take place. Mentors need to be aware of the risk of any cross-couple relationship developing. Mentors will share their experiences, their successes and their mistakes, but will not expect the younger couple to tackle everything in the same way as they do. Part of the understanding is that if either of the young couple wish to contact the Mentor of the same sex at any other time, they can do so, especially if some problem arises before their next get-together.

Mentors should of course refer a couple on for other help if a couple have particular problems beyond the Mentors' expertise. Mentoring is not counselling.

Training

It should be possible for mentor training to be planned and offered within a local church. However, if a prospective Mentor couple wish to enhance their own marriage, they could go contact a PREPARE Practitioner or a FOCCUS Facilitator or some other method of marriage enhancement described in the [Marriage Enhancement](#) page on this website.

At the very least, it would be good if all such couples read one or more books on marriage. For example, Rob Parsons' book "**Sixty Minute Marriage**" is not too demanding for those

who read little, Nicky and Sila Lee's **The Marriage Book** is a bestseller, and J. John has written **Marriage Works**. James Dobson's **"Man to Man About Woman"** has helped men and women to much greater understanding, as has **"I Married You"** by Walter Trobisch. **"The Act of Marriage"** by Tim and Beverly La Haye is good on sex, and **"Praying Together"** by Mike and Katy Morris is helpful on the important subject of a couple praying together. **"How to save your marriage alone"** by Ed Wheat, and **"Love Must Be Tough"**, another book by James Dobson, are for marriages in difficulties.

On the secular front, John Gray's **"Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus"** is an excellent read (ignore the unhelpful publisher's sub-title on the cover, if it is still there).

"Fighting for Your Marriage" by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley and Susan Blumberg is a good book on the skills of communication, conflict solving, commitment and other practical matters. It is published in America but can be obtained from Marriage Care, Clitheroe House, 1 Blythe Mews, Blythe Road, London W14 0MW Tel: 020 7371 1341. These and other books could be reviewed by church leaders, as could books on singleness.

If the couple are going to use PREPARE or FOCCUS they will benefit from some outside training. (see their respective websites given above.) Alternatively, for those in reach of the South West, contact Bristol Community Family Trust, www.bcft.co.uk.

Occasionally mentoring may highlight a problem within the Mentors' own marriage, so during training Mentors need to be told where to find help for themselves if they need it.

It would then be helpful if the couple pair up with another couple who are training to be mentors and use the post marriage questionnaires ENRICH or REFOCCUS. First, one of the couples act as practitioners/facilitators for the other training couple as they do one of those questionnaires, then the couples reverse roles. In this way each couple gains experience in being practitioners/facilitators and also benefits from enhancement for their own marriage by use of the questionnaire.

Other applications of mentoring

Harry Benson has written: "Mentoring has a wider application for couples in trouble and in stepfamilies.

"Couples who have been to the brink of divorce and come back have a great deal to offer couples who are on the brink of divorce now. They have a special understanding of what it is like to be in serious trouble and the struggle to find a way ahead, without having to involve special counselling skills or training. Most importantly, these couples can provide real hope for those in trouble, whose negative feelings may blind them to the positive prospect of a new and better future together. The experience of finding a way ahead can act like a road map, if used flexibly. Such mentors also provide an effective antidote to the worldly 'wisdom' (discredited by recent research) that divorce is usually best if couples are unhappy. There is now good evidence that mentoring programmes in the USA have had vastly better results than counselling programmes in bringing couples back from the brink.

"Couples who are in stepfamilies also have a special understanding of the needs and tensions involved in stepfamilies. The best people to support 'stepcouples' are other stepcouples who have been there and survived. Stepfamily mutual support groups can also be very helpful."

Mentoring for both couples in trouble and stepcouples can be done using REFOCCUS or ENRICH mentioned above.

Accountability

Within each church mentor couples must operate under the leadership of a senior couple from whom they can also seek confidential guidance when necessary. The role of the senior couple would also be to inquire from time to time to see that the mentoring is actually happening.

Prayer

Any mentoring scheme should be undergirded with prayer; prayer about the introduction of mentoring, prayer about choice of Mentor couples and prayer for mentoring itself. Each Mentor couple would benefit from having one or two prayer supporters - though they must not divulge confidential details to them.

Book

We very warmly commend Harry Benson's book "Mentoring Marriages", which is published by Monarch at £8.00. It is a 'must read' for anyone considering mentoring and it will train you as you read it.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful for help with this page from Harry Benson, Chris Grimshaw and Nick Gulliford.

Edward Pratt