

MARRIAGE PREPARATION

I. HOW IT CAN BE DONE



Persuasion

The first task for a church is the persuasion of a couple, however starry-eyed they may be, that they need to do a marriage preparation course. Probably the best line of approach is to point out that marriage is a life-long relationship and so it is a very good idea spending time to prepare for it. We get training for tasks of much shorter duration – surely we should take time out to prepare for a lifelong one! It could also be pointed out that, whereas few couples enter marriage with any thought of failure, in fact two marriages in every five do end in divorce. If couples spent as long preparing for their marriage as they do for their wedding day, the failure rate would be much reduced!

Also, any who reply that they have been preparing for marriage by living together need reminding that cohabitation does **not** make a marriage any more successful. Indeed, if they have cohabited previously with somebody other than their present partner, they are more likely to fail in their forthcoming marriage than those who have not done so.

We warmly commend use of an excellent seven minute video which will help couples to see the value of marriage preparation. 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 Church of England

Whereas other churches do not have to marry a couple who refuse preparation, it is thought that Anglican churches have a legal obligation to do so unless there has been a divorce and the former spouse is still living. That has, however, never been proved at law. Even if it is true, there is no obligation to marry the couple on any particular date, so even Anglican clergy **can** insist on thorough marriage preparation.

Course Contents

Couples need preparation by using a course of several sessions, which both helps them to get to know each other and their expectations better, and includes the practice of skills like listening, communication, budgeting, deciding on roles in the home and resolving conflict, and which above all emphasises the importance of commitment.

If it is difficult at first to persuade couples to give up more than one Saturday for marriage preparation, then a church could ensure that they benefit so much from that Saturday that they are keen to take up the option of a second Saturday to cover other ground.

Sometimes one or both of a couple bring "**enduring vulnerabilities**" to the marriage, like abuse, divorce of their parents, social deprivation, premarital pregnancy, past or present addictions, including to pornography, sexual or financial irresponsibility, gambling, significant homosexual feelings, unhelpful personality characteristics (e.g. stubbornness,

temper, moodiness, neuroticism) or a previous sexual relationship or marriage breakdown. With any of these in their background even a thorough preparation course will often be insufficient to enable their marriage to succeed. Marriage Preparers need to discover any such vulnerabilities and then provide appropriate help or direct the man or woman to it. (There is more on this in our page Marriage Preparation III – ‘Baggage from the Past’.)

Preparation in a Different Church

If the couple live some distance from the church where they are to be married, it may be easier for them to do marriage preparation a church near to where one or both of them are living. The churches listed below are happy to prepare such couples but, if none of them are near enough, a couple could ring up some local churches near them to find what they can offer, and/or they could use PREPARE or FOCCUS (see next section):

- London: Holy Trinity Brompton, Brompton Road, London SW7 1JA Tel: 020 7581 8255 Email: reception@htb.org.uk,
Queens Road Church, Queen's Road, Wimbledon, London SW19 8LR Tel: 020 8947 8995
Woodford Christian Life Church, Tel: 020 8989 3418
- Devon Church of the Nations, 35 Mutley Road, Plymouth PL3 4SB
Tel: 01752 516291
- Dorset Turbary Church, 12 Stonechat Close, Ferndown BH22 9QH
Tel: 01202 877651
- Kent: King's Church Medway, New Road Avenue, Chatham, Kent ME4 6BB Tel: 01634 407657
- Hampshire Southampton Community Church, Tel: 02380 780301
- Hertfordshire St Thomas A Becket, Northaw with St Andrew, Cuffley, Herts,
Tel: 01707 883604
- Manchester Ivy Cottage Church, 97 Barlow Moor, Didsbury, Manchester M20 2GP
Tel: 0161 434 8108
- Oxfordshire Oxfordshire Community Churches, Oxfordshire, Tel: 01865 297400
Email: office@acc.org.uk offering marriage preparation in Oxford, Witney, Carterton, Wantage, Abingdon, Didcot, Bicester
- E Sussex St Helen's Ore, Hastings, E Sussex, Tel: 01424 430703
- W Sussex Burgess Hill Community Church, Tel: 01444 242233
Kingdom Faith Church, Horsham, Tel: 01293 851543
- W Midlands Amblecote Christian Centre, near Stourbridge, W Midlands,
Tel: 01384 377120
- Yorkshire St Thomas Crookes Church, Sheffield, Tel: 0114 267 1090
Email: admin@stthomas.solis.co.uk

All Saints, Aston, Sheffield, Tel: 0114 287 3087)

Wales Monmouth Baptist Church, 3 Monk Street, Monmouth NP25 3LR
Tel: 01600 716423

Parklands Evangelical Church, PO Box 365, Swansea SA2 0YX
Tel: 01792 589062 Fax: 01792 586849
Email: parklands@parklandschurch.org.uk

Premarital Questionnaires ("Inventories")

Obviously one of the most important parts of marriage preparation is to help a couple discover more about each other, and hence to have assurance that they really are suited to each other. The best way of doing this is to use a PREPARE or FOCCUS Inventory (Questionnaire), which is done with a trained person or couple, of which there are now many spread around the country. See their website: www.prepare-enrich.co.uk for further details of how you or members of your church could become PREPARE Practitioners. The FOCCUS website: www.foccus.org.uk would do the same for them; they use the term Facilitator.

A couple arrange an appointment with such a Practitioner/Facilitator, at which they are each given a questionnaire to complete without reference to each 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 strongly agree, agree, are undecided, disagree or strongly disagree.

The completed questionnaires are sent away for comparison. The couple meet again with the Practitioner(s)/Facilitator(s) two or three weeks later to discuss the outcome with them, and to be commended for their strengths and be helped to address the areas where growth is needed.

Alternatively, both PREPARE and FOCCUS can be done online, after the couple have made arrangements with a Practitioner/Facilitator. For the PREPARE online option, see the website as above and for the FOCCUS online option, visit their website as above. These online options are particularly helpful for couples who live a long way apart. The couple's answers, after comparison, can be emailed to the Practitioner/Facilitator.

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 are not right for each other and cancel their wedding. Research comparison with other similarly conflicted couples who have proceeded to marriage has shown a high rate of breakdown.

If PREPARE is being used the couple are also given a workbook containing exercises in communication, resolving conflict, couple relationship and families of origin, budgeting, setting goals. Some of the exercises can be done with the Practitioner(s) during further sessions and others at home.

Either questionnaire will have revealed whether either person is bringing some "enduring vulnerabilities" to the marriage, e.g. abuse, addictions, parental divorce, etc. (see the first page of this paper). This gives the Practitioner(s)/Facilitator(s) the opportunity to help the person address those vulnerabilities or to refer him or her on to somebody else equipped to do that.

PREPARE is suitable for people of any faith or none. The only questions in it about religion are concerned with exploring the couple's agreement or disagreement on the subject. There are different editions for couples who have been cohabiting (PREPARE - CC), and for couples bringing children into a marriage (PREPARE - MC), and for those aged over 50 (MATE).

There is also a PREPARE Questionnaire which can be done by a couple on their own, without a Practitioner. It is called Couple Check-up, and can be accessed through www.couplecheckup.co.uk. It is designed for those geographically remote, or those who initially find the prospect of meeting with a Practitioner too daunting. There are detailed guidance notes for the couple, and there is an option of contacting a practitioner. One couple has said it took a few minutes to set-up and then about 15 minutes to complete.

FOCCUS comes in four editions: General, Catholic, other Christian denominations, and Alternate. The latter is for those with learning difficulties or with English as a second language. There are optional extra sections for Interfaith Marriages, Second Marriages and Cohabitees preparing for marriage. The General edition can be completed online once (a) Facilitator(s) has/have been arranged.

The inventories are applicable to people of any cultural background and are therefore relevant for those preparing for cross-cultural marriage.

PREPARE and FOCCUS are backed by considerable and ongoing research programmes.

PREPARE stands for PREmarital Personal And Relationship Evaluation and FOCCUS stands for Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study.

There is information later on this page about using PREPARE with a group of couples.

Cross-cultural marriages

Those planning to marry someone from a different national and/or racial background will have extra differences and expectations than those marrying within their own background. We commend the workbook "Love across Latitudes" to all such couples. It is available from Arab World Ministries, 2 Radmoor Road, Loughborough, Leics, LE11 3BS Tel 01509 239525.

Planning Your Own Course

Whether or not you use PREPARE or FOCCUS - and we hope you will - you will probably wish to add further preparation. Christian couples in particular should value the opportunity for some specifically Christian preparatory work.

A Care for the Family questionnaire in 1998 showed that most churches devise their own preparation course. No doubt many of them draw on materials from diverse sources.

Churches Together for Families have a booklet, "**Carefully Prepared**", to help those drawing up their own courses. It is available from Inter-Church House, 35 Lower Marsh, London SE1 7RL.

If for any reason you are not using PREPARE or FOCCUS, you will be well advised to give a couple a short questionnaire at the outset, so as to seek to discover whether they have any of the "enduring vulnerabilities" listed under the heading Course Contents above, so as to be able to help them yourself or refer them to others for that help.

Likewise, couples need not only to have teaching in listening, communication, resolving conflict, budgeting, agreeing roles and setting goals; they also need to be given the opportunity to learn such skills through practical exercises.

If you are devising your own course **we strongly recommend** that you refer to our page Marriage Preparation II: Skills Training on this website.

Ready Made Courses

"The Marriage Preparation Course" from **Holy Trinity Brompton** is probably the most widely used course. It is a series of five sessions, ideally each beginning with a meal, designed to help engaged couples develop strong foundations for a lasting marriage covering:

- The importance of commitment
- Expressing feelings and learning to listen
- Keeping love alive and developing a fulfilling sexual relationship
- Resolving conflict
- Talking about goals and values

Before starting the course couples do the FOCCUS questionnaire.

While the course is based on Christian principles it is designed for couples with or without a church background. The DVD sets should be used with the Leaders' and Support Couples Guide and Guest Manuals.

Running the course for the first time? -

Starter Pack – Course DVD, 2 Leaders' and Support Couples' Guides, 10 Guest Manuals, 1 Leaders' Toolkit. Ordering Code MPSKIT

For your guests –

Guest Manual – essential for all participants – outlines of the talks, and the exercises the couples do during the course. Code 978 1 904074 39 7

The Marriage Book – best-seller by Nicky and Sila lee – essential reading for any married or engaged couple. Code 978 1 904074 55 7

Ready for Marriage? – How do we know we are right for each other? What happens if we are not compatible? Is it normal to have doubts? In a short booklet Nicky and Sila address these and other questions asked by those considering marriage. Code 978 1 905887 02 6

Introducing you to the course –

The Marriage Preparation Course & The Marriage Course Introduction for Leaders - This short booklet introduces the courses to people who may be interested in running either or both. It outlines the topics covered, includes testimonials from those who have run the courses, and provides tips for getting started. Code 978 1 905887 21 7

For running the course –

Course DVD – the 5 talks presented by Nicky and Sila. Code MPDVD05

Leaders' and Support couples' Guide. Code 978 1 904074 75 5

Leaders' Toolkit – Two DVDs and a CD-Rom, containing material to help you set up, run and publicise the course in your home, church or community. It also contains training on using the FOCCUS questionnaire. Code MPCTKDVD

For running the course with live speakers –

Inserts DVD – contains the media clips(inserts) from the Course DVD. If you are Giving the talks you will find this a useful tool for enhancing your presentation. Code MPSTRDVD05

Speaker Notes CD-ROM - Provides all the necessary support material for those wishing to present the sessions as live talks. Ordering Code: MPREPCDROM

For promoting your course -

Course Invitations

To be given to potential guests, including a description of the course and a reply slip. There is also a blank space for your course details. A4 folded down to DL envelope size. *Pack of 50*: Ordering Code: MPREPINV

Advertising posters

A3: Ordering Code: MPREPA3

A4: Ordering Code: MPREPA4

Resources are available from the Alpha Publications Hotline on 0845 7581 278

Holy Trinity also run day conferences to equip people to run their courses.

The course is suitable for any couple. It includes some Christian teaching, gently introduced. But there is also The Marriage Preparation Course Civil Wedding Edition for use by those interested in offering marriage preparation to couples being married in secular locations.

A Scripture-based course specifically for Christians is available from **Oxfordshire Community Churches**. Order on-line from www.occ.org.uk Called "**Preparing for Marriage**", there are workbooks and a leader's manual. It is designed to be led by a couple who will give some teaching at each session before the participants complete and discuss the workbook exercises as a couple. There are six units, which can be completed in one session each, or with an extra session for units 3 and 6, i.e. eight sessions in all. It can be used with several couples or just one.

Intimate Life Ministries also have a six session course for Christians entitled "**So You Want To Get Married**". It is designed to help a couple have a God-centred marriage. It can either be used by a couple to prepare themselves with a workbook each, or it can be used in a church group. Workbooks are obtainable from PO Box 3065, Warwick CV34 6WD Tel: 01926 430889 Fax: 01926 435704.

Also called "**Preparing for Marriage**" is the **Catholic Marriage Care** course. This is divided into three parts: Communication, Conflict-solving and Commitment. In each of the three parts there is a choice of three presentations and twelve activities; the Leader(s)

choose from these. Thus the course can be anything from three to nine sessions. It is available from Marriage Care, 1 Blythe Mews, Blythe Road, London W14 0MW.

The **Growing Together Programme** allows practitioners to use PREPARE (ENRICH) Inventories for groups of couples, in pre-marriage or marriage enhancement. The programme is supported by a special report called the Couples Report which consolidates a couple's answers to the questions in the inventories into key areas such as Communication and Finances. This information is then presented in a form which the couple can use as the basis for discussion when particular topics, and related exercises, are introduced by the practitioner. The report does not include many of the statistics that guide the practitioner and which might be distracting for the couple. These statistics can be made available to the practitioner through a copy of the Practitioner report.

The programme has also been used for mixed groups of pre-marriage, recently married and enhancement couples, which adds wider opportunity for experience sharing. The ground rules for this sharing include confidentiality, voluntary participation and agreement by the couple on what they are happy to share. The programme is suitable for a day, a weekend or a number of evening sessions.

There is a Guide available by email free or by post for a small charge, and a powerpoint available by email or CD. For more details see the PREPARE/ENRICH website above.

There is also another marriage preparation course called **Growing Together**. This one is by The Rev. Andrew Body, an Anglican Vicar of many years experience and former Relate counsellor. It builds on his book of the same title. It can be run on a day or over a series of seven sessions. There are Introductory Notes for planning and leading sessions, readymade session plans, and a CD-Rom which includes scripts, handouts and materials to promote the course. It is available from Church House Publishing, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3AZ Tel 0207 898 1451

Preparation Days and Weekends

Several Christian organisations will lead a day or weekend for you at a venue of your choice. They may ask you to share in giving some of the teaching.

Christian Marriage Ministries (Mission to Marriage) (UK).
www.Christianmarriageministries.co.uk

Christian Guidelines (Northern Ireland only)
7Queen Street, Belfast BT1 6EA Tel: 02890 312098

The following Marriage Resource Branches and Area Representatives can also help in or near their areas:

London South West, 4 Parkgate Close, Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey KT2 7LU
Tel: 020 8546 0683

Southampton, www.twobecomeone.org.

Sussex,"Lynton", Brookers Road, Billingshurst, W Sussex RH14 9QS
Tel: 01403 784718

West Midlands, 33 Blakebrook, Kidderminster, Worcs DY11 6RG
Tel: 01562 862281

There are three organisations which run marriage preparation courses at their own venues:

CWR (primarily for Christians) (at Farnham) Website: www.waverley.org.uk

Engaged Encounter (in England) (for Christians and non-Christians) (various venues) Ray and Val Humby, 39 Mayfield Avenue, Orpington, Kent BR6 0AJ Tel: 01689 820466 <http://www.marriageencounter.org.uk>

Christian Marriage Ministries (Mission to Marriage) (for Christians) (various venues)
- address above

A growing number of Community Family Trusts around the UK now offer marriage preparation for both Christian and non-Christian couples. Most of these use one of the two "inventories" FOCCUS or PREPARE (see below) as all or part of their course. Although courses offered do not include explicit religious content, the underlying values of the CFTs are Christian, as are most of the people involved. Please contact:

Bedford	Bedford Community Family Trust Tel: 01234 824112 helen@musgrave123.fslife.co.uk
Bristol	Bristol Community Family Trust, 25 Somerset Street, Kingsdown, Bristol BS2 8LZ Tel: 0117 924 1480 Email: info@bcft.co.uk Website: www.bcft.co.uk
Cheshire (Stockport)	Romiley Life Centre, Tel: 0161 046 0721 Email: davidjones@romileylifecentre.co.uk
Devon	Exeter Community Family Trust, Email: tonyandpamshead@thesheads.co.uk
Devon	Mid-Devon Community Family Trust, Tel: 01404 823392 campliz@tiscali.co.uk
Leics	Loughborough Community Family Trust, Tel: 01509 212323 Email: jacqui.plummer@ntlworld.com
Southampton	John Deagle, Southampton Community Family Trust Tel: 02380 216003 Email: info@scft.org.uk Website: www.scft.org.uk
York	Family Matters York, Tel: 01904 639767 Email: robin@fmy.org.uk Website: www.fmy.org.uk

Cohabitation

This is of course the wrong way to prepare for marriage, not only on Christian grounds but also from a secular standpoint. Research first published in Britain in 1992 mirrored that already done in some other Western countries, showing that cohabitation-based marriages are much more likely to fail than others. However, recent research has shown that when it is a first cohabitation for both parties, their marriage is no more likely to break down. But conversely, if one has already cohabited with somebody else, their chances are not at all good. These results in no way justify cohabitation, because of course the first cohabitation may fail, quite apart from other reasons against it.

There is a page on this website - "**Living Together Successfully**", aimed at discouraging cohabitation and written for the 18 to 30 age group.

Not all the courses or organisations mentioned above address the issue, although we do not know the detail of the contents of some of them. **Those known to us which do address it** are the premarital questionnaires PREPARE - CC and FOCCUS (which also has a video on Preparing Cohabiting Couples for Marriage).

The issue is tackled helpfully in the Church of Scotland Board of Social Responsibility study pack for couples "**Marriage Plus**", available from them at Charis House, 47 Milton Road East, Edinburgh EH15 2SR Tel: 0131 657 2000. The pack is designed to be used in marriage preparation, marriage enhancement or study groups; much of it is explicitly based on Scripture. Cards 24-27 are on cohabitation.

The issue of how a minister marries a couple known to have been cohabiting, without giving the impression to their relations and friends that cohabitation is acceptable, is problematical. Some ministers suggest that such a couple should, if possible, live apart for a time before their wedding, unless they have children. Otherwise, and in any case, opportunities occur in the introduction, the address and the prayers of a marriage service to make clear gently but firmly in general terms that God's gift of sex is for marriage itself.

Cohabitees are in as much need of marriage preparation as any couple. It is likely that they will not have got to know each other at the same depth as a couple who have had a traditional courtship. (There is more on that in the "Living Together Successfully" page to which we referred above.)

Step Families

Churches Together for Families (address above) have also produced a free booklet "**Step Carefully**" to help with marriage preparation where children from a previous relationship are involved. It outlines the considerable difficulties the couple face very helpfully and recommends other resources, but it is not sufficient for marriage preparation on its own.

Care for the Family have found that only 7% of those marrying again had received any specific guidance about marrying someone with children. So they have produced **From this Step Forward**, a course on a CD-ROM. It looks at practical, emotional and financial issues, explores outstanding issues relating to former partners and with the wider family, and offers help in the couple's relationship and in parenting. It can be done as a couple at their own pace, or in a group. Visit www.careforthefamily.org.uk to find a course in your region.

Inexpensive weddings

It is astonishing what can be spent on a wedding. It would be good to draw couples attention to the page **Why pay the earth for your wedding?** on this website, and also to www.cheap-wedding-success.co.uk

Follow Up

Continued support for marriages is most important. We warmly commend the practice of Mentoring, described in our page Marriage Mentoring on this website. Failing that, it is most important to offer couples some form of marriage enhancement about six months after their wedding, because many marriages fail, or begin to fail, in their first year.

It is a good time to go on a marriage enhancement day or weekend. There are plenty of ideas in the page on this website on Marriage Enhancement. If they did not do the PREPARE or FOCCUS questionnaire with a Practitioner/Facilitator before marriage, then they could do a similar ENRICH questionnaire with a Practitioner or a REFOCCUS questionnaire with a Facilitator at this point.

See also the page: "Insecurity and Children of Divorce"

Edward Pratt