

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 DVD 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 say they enjoyed it.

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 3 – 'Baggage from the Past'.)

Preparation at another church

If a 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 couple could ring up some local churches near them to find what they can offer. Quite number of churches now use the excellent Marriage Preparation Course compiled by Nicky and Sila Lee, of Holy Trinity, Brompton, London (not to be confused with their Marriage Course for those already married). See details below. Or the couple could use PREPARE (see next section).

PREPARE Questionnaire ("Inventory")

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. One way of doing this is for them each to use a PREPARE Questionnaire, which is done with a trained person - "Facilitator", or Facilitator couple, of which there are now many spread around the country. See their website: www.prepare-enrich.co.uk for further details of how to become a PREPARE Facilitator.

PREPARE can provide leaflets which encourage couples to use a questionnaire.

A couple arrange an appointment with such a Facilitator(s), 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 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 they differ. Facilitators are provided with questions that they could ask couples, depending on the answers the couple have given.

Alternatively, and now more usually, PREPARE can be done online, after the couple have made arrangements with a Facilitator. For this, see the website above. This option is particularly helpful for couples who live a long way apart. The couple's answers, after comparison, can be emailed to the Facilitator, who then arranges to meet them.

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 marriage breakdown.

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 Facilitator(s) during further sessions and others at home.

PREPARE should have revealed whether either person is bringing some "enduring vulnerabilities" to the marriage, e.g. abuse, addictions, parental divorce, etc. (see earlier on this page). This gives the 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. This is most important.

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 shorter PREPARE Questionnaire which can be done by a couple on their own, without a Facilitator. It is called Couple Check-up, and can be accessed through www.couplecheckup.co.uk There are three versions - dating, engaged, married. It is designed for those geographically remote, or those who initially find the prospect of meeting with a Facilitator too daunting. There are detailed guidance notes for the couple, and there is an option of contacting a Facilitator. It can take a few minutes to set-up and then about 15 minutes to complete.

PREPARE is applicable to people of any cultural background and is therefore relevant for those preparing for cross-cultural marriage. It is backed by a considerable and ongoing research programme. PREPARE stands for PREmarital Personal And Relationship Evaluation.

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

“The Marriage Preparation Course” of Holy Trinity, Brompton

This may be the most widely-used course in the world, and deservedly so. It is a series of five sessions on DVD, 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 a Couple Survey questionnaire, similar to PREPARE. They meet to discuss the results with a Support Couple.

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 with Guest Manuals. The latter are essential for all participants – outlines of the talks, and the exercises the couples do during the course.

Other materials are:

Leaders' Toolkit.

The Marriage Book – best-seller by Nicky and Sila lee – very helpful reading for any married or engaged couple.

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.

The Marriage Preparation Course and 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.

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

For running the course yourself with live speakers –

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

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

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. They are A4 folded down to DL envelope size - pack of 50.

Advertising posters: A3 size and A4.

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.

Resources are available from www.relationshipcentral.org/marriage-preparation-course
0845 758 1278

Planning Your Own Course

If you just use PREPARE you will do well to add further preparation. Christian couples in particular should value the opportunity for some specifically Christian preparatory work.

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.

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 2: Skills Training, on this website.

Other Ready Made Courses

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 Centre for Relational Care, Cressida Close, Heathcote, Warwick CV34 6DZ Tel: 01926 430901 or www.relationaltraining.co.uk.

"**Preparing Together**" is the **Marriage Care** course. This is a one day course usually held on a Saturday at various venues. It is available from Marriage Care Tel 0800 389 3801 for your nearest venue or www.marriagecare.org.uk Marriage Care has roots in the Roman Catholic church, but has broadened its base.

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 Facilitator and which might be distracting for the couple. These statistics can be made available to the Facilitator through a copy of the Facilitator 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 www.chpublishing.co.uk

Preparation by other organisations

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

Greater London South East Barry & Chrissy Turner, 135 Gates Green Road, Coney Hall, West Wickham, Kent BR4 9EG Tel: 020 8249 8685
Website: www.MarriageResourceSELondon.org.uk

London South West Tricia Colby, 4 Parkgate Close, Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey KT2 7LU Tel: 020 8546 0683 Website: www.marriageresourceswLondon.co.uk

Area Representatives:-

Dorset Edward Pratt, 7 Bay Close, Swanage, Dorset BH19 1RE 01929 427229

East Yorkshire (excluding Hull) Jim and Rosemary Gillespie, 18 St James Road, Bridlington, E Yorks YO15 3PF Tel: 01262 401560 Email: DrJimGillespie@btopenworld.com

Hampshire John Deagle, Tel: 02380 216003 Email: info@scft.org.uk Website: www.scft.org.uk

West Midlands www.foundations-westmidlands.org.uk

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

Christian Guidelines (Northern Ireland) admin@cguidelines.org.uk Tel: 028 9146 8846
Weeknight, Friday evening-Saturday morning, or Saturday courses

CWR Waverley Abbey, Farnham, Surrey www.cwr.org.uk/training - click Life and Discipleship - once a year in the spring

Engaged Encounter (in England) (for Christians and non-Christians) (various venues)
<http://www.marriageencounter.org.uk> Anglican or Catholic Weekends

Some Community Family Trusts offer marriage preparation for both Christian and non-Christian couples. Some include a questionnaire. Although courses offered do not include explicit religious content, the underlying values of the CFTs are Christian, as are most of the people involved:-

Bedford South Bedfordshire Community Family Trust www.twointune.org

East Devon Exeter Community Family Trust, 13 Okehampton Street, Exeter, EX4 1DU
admin@ecft.org.uk 01392 671990 www.ecft.org.uk

Mid-Devon Mid-Devon Community Family Trust www.mdcft.org.uk

York Family Matters York, Tel: 01904 639767 Email: info@fmy.org.uk
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. One that does address it is the premarital questionnaire PREPARE - CC. (Note the "CC" addition.)

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 (Inter-Church House, 35 Lower Marsh, London SE1 7RL) 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 a couple did not do the PREPARE questionnaire with a Facilitator before marriage, then they could do a similar ENRICH questionnaire with a Facilitator at this point www.prepare-enrich.co.uk

See also the page on this website: "Insecurity and Children of Divorce"

Edward Pratt