

How I Learned to Engage the Engaged in My Premarital Program

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My fingers were crossed during the entire wedding ceremony.

They weren't crossed because I was worried something would go wrong during the detailed order of service. They weren't crossed because I was performing my first wedding.

My pointer finger and middle finger grafted together during the ceremony because my attempt to provide this couple with meaningful premarital counseling had fallen short ... way, way short.

As they walked down the aisle as husband and wife, I prayed a special prayer I created that day. I affectionately call it the God-I-blew-it-with-preparing-this-couple-for-marriage-so-help-them-not-to-become-a-divorce-statistic bailout prayer.

I vowed that I would not let this happen again. Next time, I would do a better job of preparing couples for marriage. I would make sure they read the marriage books I gave them. We would meet several times for premarital counseling. From this point forward, every couple would receive life-altering, divorce-proofing, premarital preparation from this pastor!

Unfortunately, I repeated the crossed-fingers, bailout prayer ritual during the next several weddings I performed.

When I pitched the premarital counseling idea to the couples, they seemed interested in it. But they always had a "good reason" not to complete the reading or do the work: they were really, really busy; they were involved in a couples softball league that had practices or games almost every night; they were taking scuba diving lessons so they wouldn't drown while diving on their honeymoon in Hawaii.

I went back to the drawing board and reassessed premarital preparation in light of the pre-wedding realities of a couple's life. Three truths emerged.

- (1) Couples fear divorce and want to prepare for their marriage.*
- (2) Engaged couples are extremely busy as they start planning the wedding, then they have a waiting period until four weeks before the wedding.*
- (3) Couples want to do more than to read a book or listen to a personalized lecture; they want a dynamic, relationship-enhancing experience.*

Identifying these truths helped with the refining process. As I wrestled with what I wanted, what the couple wants, and what the couple needs, I discovered eight key changes I needed to make to engage engaged couples in my premarital program. Perhaps they can help you too.

Cross the Point of No Return

I was tired of feeling guilty before, during, and after the wedding. I don't remember the time, the place, or the moment; but I made a decision more than a decade ago. Any couple that wants me to perform their wedding is required to complete my premarital program, no excuses. In some communities, clergy have signed marriage agreements, committing themselves to require marriage preparation for couples. Whether it's personal conviction, public pressure, or some combination of the two, couples won't take your premarital standards seriously until you do.

Choose Your Terms Wisely

I was using a phrase that did not relate to what I was actually offering, nor did it translate to the couple as something they were looking for. The phrase was "premarital counseling". Think about it. This newly engaged, head-over-heels couple is about to embark on the lifelong journey of marriage. The last thing they think they need is "counseling." Counseling is for marriages on the brink of divorce or for couples who have serious problems. When I began using terms such as, "premarital education" or "fitness training for your relationship," couples seemed more interested and anticipated our time together. Whatever you call it, bury the term "counseling" when referring to a program for engaged couples.

Set Up a Plan They Can Follow

Part of the problem with my program was that the terms were not clear. Couples didn't know how many sessions we would have, how to be prepared for our meeting, what topics we would cover, or when they needed to complete the premarital sessions. Most pre-married couples are not flakey (like I presumed); they're overwhelmed by the hectic schedule of activities, decisions, and issues surrounding the wedding. By providing them with a premarital education session plan, they have a detailed road map of what they need to do and when it needs to be done. Empower couples to take the steps to complete the program in a timely basis.

Get Their Signature

My program had another fatal flaw; I relied on the couples to retain the fine details of our initial, verbal discussion about the premarital program, and then I was surprised when they didn't follow through. But couples had a lot of detailed decisions to make with many different people associated with their wedding, and somehow the couples did follow through on those. Did they like the caterer, the cake decorator, the deejay, and the photographer better than me? The difference was those professionals had clearly articulated their roles and responsibilities with the couple in a signed contract. Why should things be different for you? Present every couple (even those who are related to you) with a contract or agreement that outlines clear roles, responsibilities and expectations. (View sample contracts and agreements). A signed contract alleviates any confusion or misunderstandings related to the premarital process.

Charge Something

I foolishly believed that marriage preparation was one of the 426 duties of a pastor. Since it was "ministry," it was free. Couples had no idea how much the materials cost, how much energy I devoted to them, and how much time I took away from my family for them. In today's age, if something is free, people don't value it. When couples began paying for the materials, my time, and my expertise, they treated the marriage preparation program with greater respect. Whether it's a little or a lot, couples will value and respect your premarital program if there is a price tag attached to it.

Don't Waste Their Time

My premarital program could have been described as a disorganized book club. Ideally, couples were to study the contents of all three 200-page books, show up for our meeting and convince me they had espoused their newly found wisdom to me. What really happened is that she read half of the first book, and then got discouraged because he did not turn a single page in any of the books. Because the materials provided little value in their relationship, so did my premarital program. I needed to create a program that fostered dynamic interaction between the couple, and empowered them to grow in their relationship. It needed to convey Biblical truths on marriage and Relationships 101 fundamentals. The result is, *Before "I Do" – Preparing for the Full Marriage Experience*, a comprehensive workbook that guides couples

down a path of personal introspection, meaningful discussions, and applicable exercises that immediately impact their relationship. Couples don't want to stand on the sidelines and observe information go by, they want to get on the playing field and handle the relationship principles and concepts offered in premarital programs. Anything less is a waste of time, theirs and yours.

Make Them Sweat a Little Bit

I assumed most of the burden to prepare the couples for marriage. I scheduled the appointments, followed up with a reminder call, and on too many occasions, called to reschedule the appointment they forgot to cancel. Couples (or at least the brides) have to set up, attend, and follow up on all kinds of appointments related to the wedding: dress fittings, cake tastings, ordering and mailing invitations. I decided to make couples work a little harder. Couples are given the responsibility of scheduling our appointments, and showing up with their homework completed. When the burden is placed on them, they rise to the occasion and fulfill their end of the deal.

Put Some Teeth into the Accountability

I felt powerless to enforce my pseudo-premarital requirement when couples didn't follow through. I was stuck performing the wedding, regardless of their participation level. I needed something to motivate the couple. With my new premarital education session plan, the signed contract, and the payment for services, I included some consequences as well. If a couple shows up to a session without completing the homework, the meeting ends immediately, and they are charged for an extra meeting. If a couple misses an appointment, or forgets to cancel the appointment, they are charged. If a couple doesn't complete all of the premarital requirements four weeks prior to the wedding day, I can opt out of performing the wedding, without consequence. Thankfully, I have never had to opt out of a wedding. I have had to remind a couple or two about that part of the contract, but have never had to follow through. Accountability only works if there are consequences. The threat of the consequences is a last resort to help couples stay on track with the premarital program.

Since I made these eight key changes, the engaged couples really engage with my program. Couples complete their homework, they show up on time and ready to discuss the topic, they call ahead of time if they need to

cancel, and they complete the marriage preparation four weeks before the wedding.

It all started with me. The couples needed me to decide how important my premarital standards are, and then tell them how to live up to it.

Since then, I haven't crossed my fingers during a wedding again. I still say a prayer for the couple as they walk down the aisle as husband and wife. But instead of a desperate plea for God's intervention to bail me out, it is a confident prayer of blessing on a couple who is prepared for the marriage journey.

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