

Marriage and Family: Mentor Overview

Home-Based Mentoring For
Premarital And Married Couples

Overview

The following article is written by Carole Ducklow, a counsellor and leader at Capilano Christian Community. She is a marriage and family counsellor in private practice and coordinates the Home-Based Mentoring consortium of Lower Mainland and North Shore churches that participate in this mentoring service. The program includes:

The Home-Based Mentoring program is for premarital, married and re-marrying couples.

There is no cost for the 6-10 sessions of in-home mentoring. The only cost is your time.

The structure of the mentoring sessions is a 30-page "marriage expectations inventory" (MEI) that the couple completes in privacy and shares with a mentoring couple.

The mentoring couples are not professionals; they are people who love marriage and who have been trained to work couple-to-couple with people asking for direction and care.

This is not a counselling program and it is not designed for in-depth counselling. It is a mentoring program to learn and practice new couple skills.

Couples do not have to attend Capilano Christian Community church (or attend any church) to participate.

The pastors of Capilano Christian Community will not marry couples that have not participated in the Home-Based Mentoring program (or its equivalent).

To participate in the Home-Based Mentoring program as a premarried couple planning on an imminent wedding, we ask you to notify us 4-6 months prior to your wedding.

Marriage and Family: Is Marriage Like a Blind Date?

Pastors, counsellors and others like us try to remove the risk and chance of marriage failure for marrying couples. We want them to bypass pain that we have experienced or that we know of. And we want them to capture the joy that we have known or that we believe exists for the next generation of marrying couples. Helpers are as tied into successful marriage as is the couple to be married. And our mutual and covert anxiety and expectations create a charged atmosphere called premarriage mentoring.

Bill and Donna, both previously married, phoned my office requesting premarital guidance. They loved each other but they expressed ambiguity whether they should marry. They seemed less encumbered by the complexities of their marital past than they seemed somehow unseparated from their growing up families. And it was these issues that had made their respective first marriages unsuccessful.

Donna was an only child. Bright, intuitive, explosive angry, and emotionally complex, she came to prize herself and considered others as thinner imitations of herself. She was over loved and, as an adult, she was well aware of this. But she expected her first husband to treat her in the princess-kind-of-way that seemed natural. He wouldn't and probably shouldn't have. When she found that her husband was having "casual sex", she scanned the horizon for a substitute. Bill was married to her best friend.

Bill grew up as the oldest in a large family. He was something of the family hero and became a huge financial success before he was through his twenties. He was accustomed to benevolency and, in his place in his family of origin, found himself taking care of his younger siblings. Bill loved complexity and innuendo. His first wife was charming, beautiful, sociable, and intellectually flat. Donna's narcissism was an allure too compelling.

In the first few mentoring sessions I (Carole Ducklow) drew a three- generation genogram of their families. (You will learn to do a marital and family genogram in the H-B training.) And I observed several things:

1. Bill is the oldest of a family of five children. However, there was an older brother who died at birth. This loss was Bill's gain. Bill's birth was a much-celebrated event. His celebrity status persevered into his adult life.
2. Bill's father was a loving but absentee parent by compulsive work. Highly successful in his business, he transmitted this work ethic to Bill and his siblings. Bill excelled in the ethic.
3. With his father's frequent work absences, Bill took over the paternal role. He became the disciplinarian, "the path-finder", the relational expert. This seemed natural to him. Others accepted it and praised him for it.
4. Bill's mother was considered by everyone as the "weak" member of the family. She had several "nervous breakdowns" (all with hospitalizations) and seemed "jittery and nervous when we (the kids) were around." Bill tried to understand her and help her out. The mother doted on Bill and was quick to over-express her indebtedness to him.
5. By comparison, Donna's home life was stark. Both mother and father were only children from urban, middle-class families. Their marriage was tolerable and reached the level of their small expectations. It was marked neither by great tragedy nor pleasure. It was measured.

6. Donna's father and mother were high school teachers. They considered Donna "a great prize, a marvelous gift." They purchased her every gift and novelty she desired. Never without the coveted bauble, Donna felt cheated of the richness of a "real family."
7. Donna's marriage of two years was marked by distance and conflict. Husband and wife frequently expressed regret at marrying each other and both wondered out loud why they had married at all. They did not have premarital mentoring and did not consider their marital problems solvable. Her husband's affair seemed (to me) as their unconscious plan to start again with someone new.
8. Bill's first marriage was harmonious and warm. His wife idealized him as his mother had practiced. Being industrious and goal-oriented, he was an achiever ("a hero to everyone") at home and at work. He loved his wife and his kids. He was not aware of anything missing in the eleven-year marriage until he met Donna. Bill divorced his wife. It seemed to happen easily, as did everything else.
9. To Bill, Donna seemed vulnerable, delicate, and intricate. He wanted to own her. Marriage seemed inevitable; Bill usually got whatever he wanted.

Bill and Donna viewed their courtship and eventual marriage as a kind of blind date. Christian marriage values were values that they neither accepted nor acted upon. They were aware of accountability and responsibility only in the most abstract ways. Marriage covenant was for them a religious notion. Their real values included:

- satisfaction of personal wants
- maximization of individual talents and abilities
- education (Donna had recently enrolled in a graduate school of clinical psychology)
- the attainment of personal happiness in work
- friendships
- marriage

And yet they still felt paradoxically trapped by inner dynamics in the family system. And in this way they came to our ministry to help them determine their marital future.

Marriage and Family: On Your Mark, Get Set...

If you are like most try-hard helpers, you want to jump in and solve this premarital nightmare. Especially if you are a pastor with high views of covenant and look for the opportunity of leading this couple to Christ, the lure to do premarriage mentoring may be too enticing to turn away.

However, there are some very good reasons why the pastor should not do premarriage mentoring in this kind of circumstance. (Indeed, I would argue that the pastor should never do premarriage mentoring or counselling.)

First, people stay in churches longer than pastors. And it is probable that a couple like Bill and Donna will need marital counselling in the future. I have found that when couples follow through on premarital mentoring there is a greater probability that they will seek marital counselling at the first sign of problems arising. Hopefully, the couple that did the premarital mentoring is still around.

If the pastor had empowered couples to do the mentoring, Bill and Donna would be able to be mentored in an on-going way by the same couple who did their premarital mentoring. Or the couple could be referred to an appropriate marriage counsellor. (See our referral list of counsellors on this site.)

Second, we find that pastors can be impeded in doing effective premarital mentoring by being over-involved in their own developmental stage of marriage. In matching premarital couples with mentoring couples that are close to their developmental stage, their ages, their personal backgrounds, mentoring proceeds more effectively.

Third, premarriage mentoring provided by the pastor can seem too professional or too religious. Provided by the mentoring couple in their home, the sessions can develop into an easy friendship. It will become more than valuable information. Friendship will develop and a positive marital relationship will be modeled.

Fourth, any pastor that is effective in mentoring and counselling will find himself quickly overburdened with multiple needs and multiple needy people. The same is true in premarital mentoring.

Premarital and marital mentoring provides an opportunity for the Christian church to serve the world and community in a way acceptable to them and required by them. Therefore, the effective counselling pastor, if he does not train others to do the work will find himself unable to respond to the pressing need.

Premarital and marital mentoring is a ministry of the church not simply the ordained leadership of the church. Any mature Christian couple is eminently qualified to care. The Home-Based marital and premarital mentoring program is effective in equipping and empowering couples in the church. It is an effective method of the church to reach out into a hurting world for the good of the gospel and the good of marriage. (I cannot figure out a good reason why the church would not energetically support mature couples to participate in Home-Based Mentoring!)

The Home-Based Model: ..."Go!"

Home-Based marital and premarital mentoring has as its aim to help prevent marriage and family breakdown by enabling persons to be better prepared for marriage and to handle the inevitable difficulties in marriage. There is nothing exceptional in this. The difference between the Home-Based model and other mentoring / counselling programs is that the church leader allows trained and prepared couples to do the ministry, rather than professionals.

Note: We define "premarital" from the time of betrothal to one year after the wedding date. This will seem surprising to some. Yet we have seen that the first year of marriage can often be simply an extension of the courting time or a negotiating period to define what their marriage is to be. Home-Based mentoring includes the first year of marriage as time for mentoring.

Part of the Home-Based model is to provide accurate and helpful information in several areas: (1) communication, (2) conflict resolution, (3) time and money management, (4) marital sexuality, (5) commitment and covenant, (6) emotional differences (7) children (8) remarriage and (9) cross-cultural marriages. However, the marital and premarital mentoring couple is not a "library with lips." It is much more important for the mentoring couple to discern what the marrying couple already knows and accepts as true and to discuss and work with that.

The most important element of caring well for the marrying couple is to create a relationship environment where the married or premarried couple may observe a positive model of a healthy marriage and family. This does not mean that the mentoring couple needs to a perfect relationship (Do I hear a great sigh of relief?). But they need to be the kind of people who are committed to maturity in faith and in family life. And they need to be willing to let others see them resolving their own imperfections.

Mentoring must allow for honest, straightforward man-woman disclosure in the presence of the helping couple. The couple mutually discovering, deciding and doing with the caring support of helping friends is a major element in Home-Based marital and premarital mentoring. It is not unusual for these couple-to-couple friendships to extend long beyond the requirements of the mentoring commitment.

We have found that couples who have had premarriage mentoring are more likely to seek marriage counselling when needed. And this couple-to-couple friendship provides opportunity to request help and to obtain support. The mentoring couple, tied in with the resources of the church, can make referral and engage in meaningful friendship. The professional distance that often occurs in the pastor doing the premarriage or marriage mentoring works as a liability to quickly ask for marital help.

An additional purpose of our Home-Based model is to provide time for the couple to understand each other's family background, perceptions, and values. This is done with the use of a "family genogram." We have found that trained couples provide excellent help through this simple teaching. (See the outline on the "family genogram" in this area of our web site.)

When a couple discloses their hopes and dreams to a welcoming mentoring couple who listen, a simple sharing of Christian faith is natural and easily acceptable. One of the surprise outcomes of doing this kind of caring in the context of one's home is that couples come to know Christ and find immediate faith support from the mentoring couple.

Home-Based: The Process

When the premarital couple requests wedding services of the pastor, the pastor will recommend premarital mentoring for the marrying couple. The mentoring requires three to four months prior to the wedding to cover the eight to ten sessions. The pastor then refers the couple to the mentoring couple by completing the premarital referral (all forms are included in the H-B training). The mentoring couple contacts the premarital couple and invites them to their home for an evening. The mentoring couple's home is the ideal location for premarital mentoring.

The home atmosphere tends to be "soft" as opposed to the "hard" environment of office or work. The mentoring couple has the responsibility to provide time structure as well as content structure. The H-B mentoring is systematic and developmental, progressing logically from theme to theme. The couples follow the Marital Expectations Inventory (included in the H-B training) and use the theme of each section to provide the content structure for each session.

Homework tasks and assignments are given so that the couple can benefit between sessions. We caution our couple counsellors to not allow the sessions to deteriorate into a teacher-student relationship. Nothing ruins mentoring more than the presumed teacher evaluating and judging the content and quality of the students' assignments. At the same time when the premarital couple have completed one of the tasks outlined in the Marital Expectation Inventory they are excited to share their learning and have the mentoring couple's feedback in what they have worked through.

At the end of the series of sessions, the mentoring couple writes a formatted summary (included in the manual) and forwards to the pastor prior to the wedding. The pastor who is to officiate may decide to marry the couple or recommend additional mentoring or professional counselling prior to the wedding.

Home-Based Means "At Home"

The coming-for-mentoring couple should be allowed the opportunity to participate in the healthy and normal functioning of the mentoring couple's home. "Church manners" are not appropriate. The happy meeting around a family meal makes for an excellent beginning for thoughtful discussion of marriage, marriage roles and expectations.

Transitions from family to a more formalized mentoring environment is necessary by moving to a space where interruption by children, TV, telephone, pets, etc. is not permitted. Like any honest disclosure of feelings and ideas, premarital mentoring requires intensity and confidentiality, attributes that need to be structured into a home atmosphere.

Providing mentoring ministry from the home requires clear limit setting. Marathon-long mentoring sessions (e.g. "We talked until 2:00 am because it was so good!") can detract from the end goal, as well as disrupting the mentoring couples family harmony. We have found that one and a half to two hours is sufficient time. So don't plan on marathons.

Well, if you have read this far, it might be a good idea to give you an idea of some of the content that the couple friends talk about. Don't forget; the mentoring couple is led through this process by the Marriage Expectation Inventory.

Home-Based Mentoring Content (via the MEI)

1. Courtship and engagement: length of engagement, length of friendship; is there an urgency to marry quickly?
2. What is the "glue" to the relationship? The counsellor should discern genuine caring from romance (no matter how effective the religious mask!).
3. Every couple begins with dependency issues and it is these issues that can quickly de-rail the marital train. What are they? Distancer - pursuer problems in marriage.
4. Who controls the shots? Who owns the power? Use, abuse and abdication. Activity vs. passivity: who initiates action?
5. Ambivalence in marrying - it always exists: who has it and to what extent?
6. Understand the "families of origin." A genogram can provide vast information and powerful understanding for the premarital couple.
7. Cultural factors: what are the differences and similarities?
8. Educational similarities or discrepancies are important. What are the probable intellectual commonalities 5 years from the wedding date?
9. What are the shared interests or other "glues" of the relationship?
10. Have both partners had the experience of debt management? How are fiscal decisions to be made? What do they do now when cash gets tight?
11. Is faith shared? Are their religious roots convergent or divergent? Do they need to discover a third option for their spiritual lives?
12. By the time premarital mentoring has been initiated, the couples communication patterns have been firmly established. Do they speak directly? With a nasty edge? Who is the butt of sarcasm? Do they talk ideas or feelings mostly?
13. In sexuality, premarital couples typically know less than they let on and do more than they tell. Marriage is intercourse and sex is one variety.
14. What are the lifestyle expectations? Middle class to missions.
15. Career and career training - who works and who studies?
16. Children, childishness and career. What are the expectations for parenting a child and being treated as a child by the marital "parent"?
17. What is the believed and expected leadership model? What views are there on headship - submission vs. dominance - compliance?

18. Emotional "rubber-banding": abandonment, loneliness, jealousy, sexual identity, etc.

19. Ability to love self and others.

20. How problems are viewed. Solvable? With dreary accommodation?

To enroll in the Home-Based Mentoring program, please e-mail Life@CapChurch.ca for registration info.

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