



Leadership Guides No. 8

Counseling Before Marriage

*Modern marriage is precarious. Assembly leaders should encourage brethren to seek counsel before tying the knot. Young people especially may be too starry eyed and should be prepared for the inevitable challenges ahead. **This Guideline assumes both candidates are converted.***

This outline is a guide - points to consider that may or may not be relevant in each individual situation. The Guide leaves opportunity for the personal views of the counselor! Some aspects (e.g. abortion locally, divorce rates) may need your research.

I Principles of Family Living

A Family the foundation of society

- the Biblical revelation unshakeable
- a shared faith is essential (I Corinthians 7:39, II Corinthians 6:14)
- alternative 'non-options': co-habitation, homosexual, serial, pill/abortion etc are destructive
- family is God-appointed and basic to a healthy society (Genesis 2:18-25)
- marriage instituted before "the fall"
- a "covenant" (Proverbs 2:17, Malachi 2:14): obligations, responsibilities
- parallels Christ/church (Ephesians 5:22-33, Revelation 19:7f)
- to be maintained in purity (Hebrews 13:4)
- the ideal relationship normally (Genesis 2:18, 24)
- exception: I Corinthians 7:26ff
- exception: Matthew 19:12 - single life

B Communication: a vital key to our "walk" (Ephesians 4:22ff)

- relationships are based on truth, openness (v.25)
- don't go to bed angry - solve it (v.26, 31f, Psalm 4)
- Proverbs 25:28, 29:11,22, 15:1f, I Corinthians 13:4-8
- first empty your own waste-bin! (Matthew 7:3-5, Romans 2:1)
- also in the church family: reconciliation
- Matthew 5:23f, 18:15ff

C "Love": practical service as well as emotion

- love is giving: of ourselves, time, resources

D Respective roles

1. establishing a new family unit

- leaving parents: physically, emotionally
- "leave & cleave" (Genesis 2:18-24): companions

Leadership Guidelines - *Counseling Before Marriage*

- effective separation from parents
- husband-wife permanent; parent-child not so
- don't build your life around the children
- prepare children for separation: your example
- teach them to fly!
- mutual submission (Ephesians 5:21)

2. *male role: head-ship* (Ephesians 5:22ff)

3. *female role: a help* (cp Genesis 2:18, Proverbs 31)

- complements, completes the man; together a unit
- varied perspective (e.g. child care)
- single parent support by the church
- home-maker: domestic, cleanliness, etc
- career
- personal development
- teaching role (Titus 2:3-5)
- widows (I Timothy 5)

4. *nourish your relationship*

- be creative in finding time for one another

5. *sexuality*

- usually discuss with both, or male to male, female to female, take your wife
- possible need for medical/psychiatric counsel? (But be wary of psychiatry!)
- sex is good in the marriage context (I Corinthians 7:1f)
- children a blessing (Genesis 1:28, Psalm 127)

E Temperaments:

- awareness of differences: separate lives until now
- Hippocratic types:
- Sanguine, Choleric, Melancholic, Phlegmatic
- strengths & weaknesses
- compatibility: 'living together', co-habitation

F Financial Planning

Awareness of potential problems, not directives!

- Home: rent/purchase options
- Budgeting
- Credit
- Savings

G Family planning, abortion, adoption

H Devotional aspects of family life

- importance of a shared faith
- regular joint worship: study, prayer, fellowship

I Relationships

- with family/relations
- with neighbours
- with work colleagues
- with leisure companions: need for change? e.g. pubbing (bars), time spent

J Child rearing

- discuss abuse: own background? Perpetuation. Help available
- principles
- role of correction, methods
- read *University of the Home* (CGOM)

K Hospitality

- be open to other brethren
- don't usually cut off former "unconverted" friends

II Principles of Problem-solving

A General principles

- inadequacy of most secular counsel
- Bible a source book: examples, Proverbs etc
- Careful selection of sources
 - titles by Jay Adams are helpful e.g. *Christian Counsellors' Manual*

B Family 'Conference table'

- regular, to discuss on-going/potential challenges

C Reconciliation dynamics

- seek counsel early: don't let problems drag; purpose is reconciliation
- strive to reconcile:
- arbitration: independent counsel
- Church involvement
- pastoral involvement

D Coping with specific challenges

- grief: parents, children, spontaneous abortion (10%+)
 - helpful to mentally prepare for such events
- illness: medical, home care, healthy living
- financial reverse: see also IF
- work, unemployment
- ageing process: retirement, disability
- religious conflict at home

III The Wedding

A Preparation: Registrar, location etc

- some couples may need guidance, especially if no family support
- church involvement: historical review
- see *Leadership Guide No 4* (CGOM)

B Ceremony: vows, contract

- agree details together
 - explore views on this
- family involvement if possible

C Reception

- A day to remember for ever
 - an informal celebration is more Biblical than a formal reception
 - discuss with all involved
- Alcohol: keep well-controlled; none if some guests could be a problem
- Within budget: cost factor

D Honeymoon and beyond

E Sexuality - see also I C

IV Post-marital counsel

A Encourage counsel-seeking & use of above principles

B Pastoral awareness of potential problems

- check out 'stories' before acting (tittle-tattle)
- keep in regular touch

C Use stable couples to mentor new families

- perhaps arrange to see monthly for a time: informal, keep on social level
- purpose is not to pry but to help establish good relationships
- whole assembly should encourage, help the newly-weds

Useful Questions

The questions are derived from a questionnaire compiled by David Olson, University of Minnesota. A 15-page computer generated report is produced. It claims to identify with 90% accuracy marriages that will last, and those that will end in divorce within three years. Each question should open a line of enquiry for the couple to explore

1. Are you realistic about the demands of marriage?
2. Can you accept each other's personality and habits?
3. Are you being understood, and can you share your feelings and ideas?
4. Do you feel you can discuss differences?
5. How much do you agree on financial matters?
6. Do you have shared interests, and enjoy time together and apart?
7. Are you comfortable discussing sexual issues?
8. Do you agree on the number of children, and on sharing responsibilities?
9. Do you have a good relationship with each other's family and friends
10. Do you agree on how to share decision-making?
11. Do you accept each other's spiritual values?
12. Are you emotionally close to each other?

Pastoral Care

The following guidance is adapted from the *Code of Ministerial Practice* promoted within the Church of England.

[The word *minister* in this text applies to any servant of the assemblies.]

“Every minister is first and foremost a disciple of Jesus Christ, and at the heart of every ministry is the maintenance of that discipleship in prayer, Bible study, worship and a readiness to hear the promptings of the Holy Spirit. To this end ministers need to make sure that time and resources are available to ‘feed’ their own spiritual life. They must also thoroughly understand the proper use of the authority and responsibility which is a part of their role”.

Ministers must:

- behave so as to enhance and embody the communication of the Gospel
- uphold and enhance the good standing of the assembly and related associations
- maintain public trust and confidence
- be responsible for their own on-going training and development
- stay within their own competence
- be willing to refer to appropriate external professional advice
- work co-operatively, not in competition, with ministerial colleagues
- seek the good of the brethren and others in their pastoral care
- encourage the brethren to discern and develop their spiritual gifts
- involve the brethren in all assembly activities
- maintain confidentiality concerning brethren and regarding information from colleagues (See below)
- attend to careful record-keeping, and reply to enquiries promptly
- ensure the highest standard of probity in all financial matters
- constantly review personal work methods, and seek external appraisal
- be fully accountable for your advice and counsel (you may be sued!)
- be even-handed with all brethren including ministerial colleagues (I Timothy 5:19-20)

Ministers must NOT:

- undertake professional duties while influenced by alcohol or other recreational drugs
- abuse their privileged relationships with the brethren or colleagues
- blur the distinction between personal and assembly finances
- enter or continue in a relationship for personal advantage or gain - monetary, emotional, sexual or material
- present a personal opinion or viewpoint as official church teaching

Guidelines for Pastoral Care

The overall aims of pastoral care are to increase the bonds of love between the brethren, to nurture their faith, to help them cope with life and live successfully in Christ.

- recognize the importance of your own spiritual life as the foundation for successful pastoral care
- behave in a professional, competent and ethical manner
- be ready to seek appropriate outside support and further training
- be aware of your own emotional needs and the vulnerability of the other person
- act with compassion, while keeping a proper emotional and psychological distance
- clarify what help is being sought, working towards a clear understanding by all parties of the help being sought and offered. Offer only what is in your competence
- encourage maturity and growth in the counseled - not dependency
- be aware that you are perceived to exercise authority as pastor, spiritual guide and representative of the faith. *Don't abuse it!*
- Avoid competitiveness with colleagues, and be clear about areas of responsibility

Situations to avoid:

- Unless you are accompanied don't visit someone alone at home, or invite a visit when you are alone. Ensure that a pastoral visit is known to others within the bounds of confidentiality
- don't spend time with a child or children except when other adults are in the vicinity
- avoid a pastoral relationship with one half of a marriage partnership. Work with *the couple* wherever possible
- be careful that a pastoral relationship doesn't damage the life and well-being of the assembly - or affect the wider community

Guidelines on Confidentiality

Sensitivity to the issue of confidentiality is vital. What must be confidential is often a matter of personal judgement. To nourish trust there must be absolute confidence that what is discussed will be in confidence, and when it is essential to share the confidence (in restricted appropriate places) it should be with informed consent.

- Data, names *etc* that could identify should usually be removed or disguised when pastoral work is discussed with an external consultant, professional, expert. In discussion with involved colleagues it may be necessary to identify individuals - but always with consent.
- Be aware you may be manipulated by the sharing of one-sided information by the counseled.
- Except by agreement, information should not be shared with the minister's family or friends.
- Disclosure of information may be a legal necessity - e.g. with regard to the safety of children, serious criminality. But consult with your experienced spiritual peers before taking such action. Be aware of legal requirements where you live. (A dilemma may arise when the one offended doesn't want disclosure.)

Ministers should:

- assume personal information is to be treated as confidential
- only divulge information, usually, with the other party's consent. If you judge the information must be disclosed, then tell the individual you are doing so
- be sure consent is properly informed by all parties
- written records - and computer records - are also confidential and you are responsible for their fairness and accuracy. They should be open to examination by the subject. In the UK they are subject to the provisions of the *Data Protection Act*. You may need to register under the Act. Other countries have their own regulations, and you should be familiar with your own.

Further Reading

The various books by **Jay E Adams** are very helpful for counseling from a Biblical viewpoint: e.g. *Shepherding God's Flock*, *Christian Counseling Manual*

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