



Experiences of premarital counselling among African Christians in South Africa: A practical theological study

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DECLARATION

I, Gugulethu Engelbetter Ndlovu declare that **Experiences of Premarital Counselling Among African Christians in South Africa: a Practical Theological Study** is my own work and that all sources I have used or quoted have been acknowledged by means of complete references. I further declare that the thesis has been text-edited in accordance with the requirements and has not been submitted previously to any university.

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ABSTRACT

The latest marriage and divorce statistics reveal that South Africa is facing a marital crisis. The divorce rate is two times higher than the marriage rate. This is a matter of concern because marriage performs a critical function for both individuals and society. Divorce, on the other hand, not only threatens the future of social institutions, but also poses physical and psychological health risks to all members of the family system. Its severe negative effects cause disruption on a micro and macro level of society. As a verified method utilised to enhance relationships prior to marriage to prevent the risk of divorce, premarital counselling becomes essential. Premarital counselling is a specialised kind of counselling designed to enhance and enrich the relationship of couples approaching marriage with the intention of increasing marital satisfaction and stability, thus preventing divorce. Unlike other types of counselling, premarital counselling is preventative, equipping couples with information and skills to deal with essential matters before problems develop.

The preservation of marriage in African society is significant. African life centres around the preservation of a clan and its culture, and marriage is a means of preserving and extending a clan. From a Christian perspective, marriage is a sanctified covenant between spouses which reflects the covenant between Christ and the Church. This strong connection between marriage and the gospel makes marriage esteemed. Marriage in African Christian circles is therefore a vital relationship with social, personal, and spiritual dimensions. Thus, it becomes crucial that marriage be safeguarded and strengthened against the threat of divorce by efficiently preparing those who enter it. Preparing people for marriage is an integral part of pastoral care and counselling; hence, marriage preparation was initiated in churches. To date, the majority of premarital counselling continues to be offered within religious institutions; however, little is known about the clergy's counselling approaches and techniques in premarital counselling, particularly in South Africa.

The current study aimed at exploring and understanding the premarital counselling experiences of African Christians in South Africa. To do this, a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was employed. Osmer's four tasks of practical theology were adopted to meet the research objective. Data were drawn from semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews with clergy and married individuals and were analysed using thematic analysis. The Covenant Attachment Theory was utilised as a theoretical framework.

The findings demonstrate that African Christians hold a positive perception of premarital counselling, perceiving it as essential and beneficial to a couple's relationship, especially in creating awareness about marriage, ensuring readiness for marriage, gaining a better

understanding of each other and influencing perceptions and behaviour. It emerged that pastoral premarital counselling is not a widespread practice in black South African churches, as most married individuals in this study were not provided with premarital counselling by their pastors. Black South African churches, however, are seen to uphold the African communal duty of preparing young couples for marriage because even in the absence of pastoral premarital counselling, married individuals did undergo some form of *ukuyalwa* by mothers and fathers in the church. *Ukuyalwa* is an African indigenous premarital counselling in the form of advice-giving by senior family members. Conversely, most clergy in this study indicated direct involvement in premarital counselling and that premarital counselling was mandatory in their churches. Most clergy were found to employ an unstructured approach to premarital counselling, where the counselling process is based on their own discretion, and the primary tool used is the Bible. Only a few clergy adopt a standardised program with clearly identifiable techniques and tools.

As a result, this study developed a model that could be useful to clergy by outlining a framework that could be used in designing a structured premarital counselling program. This model could potentially add value to the practice of pastoral premarital counselling in the African Christian context.

Key terms: premarital counselling, African Christian, practical theology, *ilobolo*, marriage, divorce, *ukuyalwa*, marriage preparation, Covenant Attachment theory

OPSOMMING

Die mees onlangse huwelik- en egskeidingsstatistieke toon dat Suid-Afrika tans 'n huwelikskrisis beleef. Die egskeidingskoers is twee keer hoër as die huwelikskoers. Dit is kommerwekkend omdat die huwelik 'n kritieke funksie vervul, nie net vir individue nie, maar ook vir die samelewing as geheel. Egskeiding bedreig nie net die voortbestaan van sosiale instellings soos die huwelik nie, maar hou ook ernstige fisiese en psigologiese gesondheidsrisikos vir alle lede van die gesinsisteem in. Hierdie negatiewe gevolge lei tot ontwrigting op sowel mikro- as makrovlak van die samelewing.

As 'n beproefde metode wat verhoudings reeds voor die huwelik versterk en die risiko van egskeiding verminder, is voorhuwelikse berading van besondere belang. Voorhuwelikse berading is 'n gespesialiseerde vorm van berading wat paartjies wat op trou staan toerus en hul verhouding verryk, met die doel om huwelikstevredenheid en -stabiliteit te bevorder en egskeiding te voorkom. Anders as ander vorme van berading, is voorhuwelikse berading voorkomend van aard: dit rus paartjies toe met inligting en vaardighede om kritieke kwessies aan te spreek voordat probleme ontstaan.

Die bewaring van die huwelik is van kardinale belang binne die Afrikagemenskap. Afrika-lewenswyses is gesentreer rondom die voortbestaan van die klan en sy kultuur, en die huwelik dien as 'n meganisme om hierdie nalatenskap te bewaar en uit te brei. Vanuit 'n Christelike perspektief is die huwelik 'n heilige verbond tussen twee persone, wat die verbintenis tussen Christus en die Kerk weerspieël. Hierdie noue verband tussen die huwelik en die evangelie maak dat die huwelik in hoë ag gehou word. Binne Afrika-Christelike kringe is die huwelik dus 'n kernverhouding met sosiale, persoonlike en geestelike dimensies. Daarom is dit noodsaaklik om die huwelik te beskerm en te versterk teen die bedreiging van egskeiding deur persone deeglik voor te berei vir hierdie verbintenis.

Huweliksvoorbereiding vorm dus 'n integrale deel van pastorale sorg en berading en daarom het kerke die praktyk van voorhuwelikse berading gevestig. Tot op hede vind die meerderheid voorhuwelikse berading steeds binne godsdienstige instellings plaas. Tog bestaan daar beperkte kennis oor geestelikes se beradingsbenaderings en -tegnieke rakende voorhuwelikse berading, veral in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks.

Die doel van hierdie studie was om die voorhuwelikse beradingservarings van Afrika-Christene in Suid-Afrika te ondersoek en te verstaan. Hiervoor is 'n kwalitatiewe benadering gevolg, met 'n fenomenologiese navorsingsontwerp. Osmer se vier take van praktiese teologie is gebruik om die

navorsingsdoelwit te bereik. Data is ingesamel deur middel van semi-gestruktureerde, in-diepte individuele onderhoude met geestelikes en getroude persone. Die data is ontleed deur tematiese analise, en die Verbondshegtingsteorie (Covenant Attachment Theory) is as teoretiese raamwerk benut.

Die bevindinge toon dat Afrika-Christene oor die algemeen 'n positiewe houding jeens voorhuwelikse berading het en dit as noodsaaklik en voordelig vir paartjies se verhoudings beskou. Dit help om bewustheid oor die huwelik te skep, gereedheid vir die huwelik te bevorder, 'n beter begrip van mekaar te verkry, en persepsies en gedrag positief te beïnvloed. Die studie het egter aan die lig gebring dat pastorale voorhuwelikse berading nie algemeen in swart Suid-Afrikaanse kerke beoefen word nie. Die meeste van die getroude deelnemers het nie voorhuwelikse berading by hul pastore ontvang nie. Nietemin vervul hierdie kerke steeds 'n belangrike rol in die voorbereiding van jong paartjies deur die praktyk van ukuyalwa, 'n tradisionele Afrikaanse voorhuwelikse raadgewing deur ouer familieleden of kerkleiers, wat steeds deel is van die huweliksvoorbereiding.

Aan die ander kant het die meeste geestelikes wat aan die studie deelgeneem het aangedui dat hulle wel betrokke is by voorhuwelikse berading en dat dit verpligtend is in hul kerke. Die bevindinge toon egter dat hierdie berading meestal ongestruktureerd is en op die diskresie van die geestelike berus, met die Bybel as primêre hulpmiddel. Slegs 'n klein persentasie van die geestelikes gebruik 'n gestandaardiseerde program met duidelike tegnieke en hulpmiddels.

Gegronde op hierdie bevindinge is daar in die studie 'n model ontwikkel wat as riglyn vir geestelikes kan dien om 'n gestruktureerde voorhuwelikse beradingsprogram te ontwerp. Hierdie model het die potensiaal om waarde toe te voeg tot die praktyk van pastorale voorhuwelikse berading in die Afrika-Christelike konteks.

Sleuteltermes: Afrika-Christen, Egskeiding, Huwelik, Huweliksvoorbereiding, iLobolo, Praktiese teologie, Ukuyalwa (tradisionele voorhuwelikse advies), Verbondshegtingsteorie, Voorhuwelikse berading

ACRONYMS

AIC	African Independent, Indigenous or Initiated Churches
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ANE	Ancient Near East
CHTC	Couples HIV Testing and Counselling
CPD	Continual Professional Development
EFT	Emotionally Focused couple Therapy
FOCCUS	Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GBVF	Gender-Based Violence and Femicide
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IWM	Internal Working Model
NIV	New International Version
NSP - GBVF	The National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide
NT	New Testament
NWU	North-West University
OT	Old Testament
PAQ	Premarital Assessment Questionnaires
PMC	Premarital Counselling
PREP	Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program
PREPARE/ENRICH	PREmarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement and Enrich
RE	Relationship Enhancement Programme
RELATE	RELATionship Education (RELATE)
SWM	Shared Working Model
SYMBIS	Saving Your Marriage Before It Begins
WHO	World Health Organization

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the research problem

South Africa is facing a marital crisis. South Africans are divorcing twice as much as they are marrying. The latest marriage statistics reveal that the civil marriage rate decreased by 11,2% between 2022 and 2023 (Stats SA, 2025a:2), while divorces increased by 10,1% between the same period (Stats SA, 2025a:19). This instability of marriage is a matter of concern because marriage performs a critical function, not only for individuals, but for both individuals and society at large. An epidemiology study conducted by William Farr (1859) was among the first scholarly works to associate marriage with health benefits. Extensive research over the years has found that marriage not only benefits the physical health of individuals (e.g., Hertzog, 2010; Waite & Hughes, 2009; Robles et al., 2014; Waite & Gallagher, 2000), but also benefits psychological health too (e.g., Monin & Clark, 2011; Wade & Pevalin, 2004; Wood et al., 2007). Marriage has a significant effect on health behaviours. Marriage protects people against poor health outcomes by discouraging behaviour which endangers life and health, e.g., alcohol and drug abuse, reckless driving, and violent behaviour (Wood et al., 2007:9). The protective effects of marriage also include how marriage provides one with social and emotional support. Such support and companionship contribute to couples leading healthy lifestyles and recovering easier from disease (Kravdal et al., 2002:2). Data from a national survey conducted in the United States reports: “compared with unmarried people, married men and women tend to have lower mortality, less risky behaviour, more monitoring of health, more compliance with medical regimens, higher sexual frequency, more satisfaction with their sexual lives more savings and higher wages” (Bramlett & William, 2002:3). Since marriage creates an essential sense of self-worth and provides emotional intimacy and support, married individuals are seen to be less depressed than those who are unmarried (Clark et al., 2020:3; Wood et al., 2007:27). Several studies have consistently found that marital entry decreases depressive symptoms (while marital dissolution increases them) (Wood et al., 2007:32). These marital benefits, however, only apply in healthy, stable marriages. Studies show that couples in turbulent marriages are more prone to illness compared to happier couples (Carlson et al., 2020:51; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005:1377). The causal effects of marriage on well-being extend beyond the married couple to the children they parent. Marriage has been found to enhance children’s wellbeing and development (Ribar, 2015:11). The significance of marriage in society is also seen in how marriage is found in almost every culture in the world as foundational to the health of a society.

Divorce not only threatens the future of social institutions, but it also poses physical and psychological health risks on all members of the family system (Baloyi & Buffel, 2021:5; Bramlett & William, 2002:3). When compared with married individuals, divorced individuals report less happiness, more health problems, more social isolation associated with social network changes, a greater risk of mortality and more negative life events such as a decline in the standard of living, change in residential arrangements, conflict over child custody etc. (Amato, 2014:10; Bramlett & William, 2002:4; Damota, 2019:6). In comparison to children from stable marriages, children with divorced parents present more behavioural problems, have more emotional issues, perform lower academically, and have more problems with social relationships (Amato, 2014:12; Bramlett & William, 2002:4; Carlson et al., 2020:51; Damota, 2019:6). The behavioural problems associated with children with divorced parents inevitably affects the society. Drug use and criminal activity pose a serious challenge to the welfare of society (Christians, 2022:27).

The preservation of marriage in African society is significant because, as Mbiti (1969) states, “for African people, marriage is the focus of existence” (Mbiti, 1969:133). The driving motive of African life is the preservation of the clan and its culture (Welch, 1933:22). As a result, marriage is essential for the preservation and extension of the clan through procreation. From a Christian perspective, marriage is a sanctified covenant. In Christian Scriptures, marriage is employed as a means by which the relationship between God and His people is revealed (Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006:224). Marriage is therefore a metaphor for understanding God’s love. The purpose of Christian marriage is primarily mutual help and guidance as well as physical and spiritual fulfilment (Vorster, 2008:466). Marriage in African Christian circles is a vital relationship with social, personal, and spiritual dimensions and is to be preserved through endeavours to prepare those who enter into it efficiently. Considering the significance of marriage for individuals, families and society, it becomes essential that marriage be safeguarded and strengthened against the threat of divorce.

As a method utilised to enhance relationships prior to marriage to prevent the risk of divorce, premarital counselling (PMC) becomes essential. Multiple studies have verified PMC to assist in strengthening marriages and therefore preventing their failure (Adzovie & Debone, 2021; Carrol & Doherty, 2003; Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019; Duncan et al., 2010; Stanley et al., 2006; Udofia et al., 2021). PMC could therefore play a role in improving marital stability in South Africa and ameliorating the effects of divorce. Marital stability refers to “a firm, steady, well-balanced and healthy marital relationship between couples” (Egbo, 2012:3). Marital stability is beyond the continuation of the marriage and entails the functioning of the marriage as well. A stable marriage is one where both spouses perceive the marriage to be personally fulfilling and worth maintaining (Odero, 2018:20). Stahmann (2000) defines PMC as “a process designed to enhance and enrich

premarital relationships leading to more satisfactory and stable marriages with the intended consequence being to prevent divorce” (Stahmann, 2000:105). PMC is a specialised kind of counselling with the primary objective of providing couples approaching marriage the opportunity to learn and gain greater insight concerning how they function as a couple (Sauerheber & Bitter, 2013:307). Couples are provided the opportunity to self-explore and self-examine any problems that are pertinent to their relationship (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020:1). There is also a focus on nurturing positive aspects of the relationship (Williams, 2007:208). It is a form of pre-service training skills for marriage as it equips couples with the needed skills that can assist them with resolving future conflicts (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019:55). PMC guides couples to answer important questions and helps them explore what behaviours they need to change (Adzovie & Dabone, 2021:11). Unlike other types of counselling, PMC is preventative as it comes before problems arise (Collins, 2007:524), providing couples with information and ways to deal with important matters before problems develop (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019:55).

Christian PMC is particularly aimed at helping couples “prepare for and build happy, fulfilling, Christ-honouring, and successful marriages (Collins, 2007:533). It focuses on teaching about marriage from a biblical perspective, assessing marital readiness and exploring possible problem areas. There are no clear biblical examples of premarital guidance, nor does the Bible give any direction concerning how people should prepare for marriage. Collins (2007) explains that “in all Scripture, the closest we come to PMC is Paul’s advice in 1 Cor. 7. He encourages people to remain single but acknowledges that it is better to marry than to burn with lust. He warns that marriage will bring challenges and pressures, and he notes that it is difficult for married people to serve the Lord wholeheartedly because part of their focus is on pleasing each other” (Collins, 2007:255). Although the Bible makes no direct reference to PMC, the few biblical guidelines available on marriage and family life can be useful when preparing Christian couples for marriage. Viewed in its broader context, Christian PMC is part of Christian discipleship (Collins, 2007:532). PMC presents pastors the opportunity to teach about the biblical values of love, marriage and family, which inevitably helps couples grow in their relationship with Christ. There is a mandated biblical responsibility among Christians to teach and train the younger generation of Christians. In his letter to Titus, Paul directly places this responsibility of discipleship within the context of marriage. “Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God” Titus 2:3-5 (NIV). It is evident through this text that when marriages and families thrive, the Christian message and church are reflected in a positive light (Hollifield, 2021:10). Where PMC is done, it

leads to the stability of marriages and consequently, the stability of the Church. PMC is therefore linked to the strengthening of the church.

There are mainly two types of premarital education: (1) information-based education focused on conveying information and (2) skills-based training focused on teaching skills (Marks, 2007:32). Most of the premarital education that takes place in religious settings is largely information-based. The content of PMC varies according to the different counselling providers and the theories that influence their practice. For example, counselling by clergy tends to emphasize spiritual and religious content, counsellors, and therapists place importance on couples' families of origin and issues within the relationship, and physicians focus on health and sexuality (Mac, 2008:21; Stahmann, 2000:106). Generally, PMC focuses on educating and guiding couples around the following areas: communication, conflict resolution, marital roles, in-laws, religion, sex and romance, financial management, and parenting (Adzovie & Dabone 2021:11; Ansah-Hughes et al., 2015:72; Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019:55). There are currently many marriage preparation programs, predominately from the United States of America. Christians (2022) has noted the use of some of these programs by South African counselling organisations, assuming that the importation is due to a lack of locally developed and readily available programs (Christians, 2022:10). However, the extent to which any of these programs are used in African churches is unknown.

In most parts of Africa, as in the United States and Canada, the majority of PMC is offered within religious institutions (Carlson et al., 2020:54; Mac, 2008:30; Murray, 2006:70; Osei-Tutu et al., 2020:204; Wilmoth & Blaney, 2016:856). Historically, marriage preparation began in churches. Recent studies attest that clergy remain the predominant service providers of PMC (Bruhn & Hill, 2004:389; Carlson et al., 2020:54; Christians, 2022:57; Klausli & Gross, 2021:178; Minzenmayer, 2018:10; Summers & Cunningham, 1989:328). Although the majority of marriage preparation efforts take place in faith communities, there is a lack of documentation of marriage preparation programs conducted by clergy (Christians, 2022:146; Klausli & Gross, 2021:178; Silliman & Schumm, 2000:136; Wilmoth & Blaney, 2016:860). Little is known about the clergy's counselling approaches and techniques in PMC. It is known that most PMC in churches revolves around exposition of Bible passages on marriage (Marks 2007:47; Mbunga, 2010:67). It is not unusual for the counselling content to be solely based on the views and understanding of the clergy providing the counselling (Marks, 2007:46; Mbunga, 2010:67). In such instances, the clergy use no standardised curriculum or approach. There are also no rules concerning the number of sessions, duration of each session and approach of counselling (Bawa, 2018:235). Osei-Tutu et. al (2020) and Moeti et al. (2024) attest that most PMC services offered by religious lay counsellors and clergy in Ghana and Botswana are unstructured (Moeti et al., 2024:4; Osei-Tutu et al.,

2020:205). Research participants in South Africa concurred with this, indicating that the PMC offered by clergy needed more structure as well as practical and professional approaches (Christians, 2022:64).

In addition to PMC services offered by clergy, professional counsellors/therapists and physicians, there also exists African indigenous marriage preparation in the form of advice-giving by senior family members (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019:56; Osei-Tutu et al., 2020:204). In African communities, marriage is not perceived as a private affair, but as a community affair (Twene, 2019:17). African families have a responsibility to participate in the establishment and success of all the marriages within their clan because marriage serves the purpose of preserving and extending the clan (Mbiti, 1969:133; Twene, 2019:19). Traditional marriage preparation known as *ukuyalwa* (to be given instruction or advice) in isiZulu (*go laya* in Sestwana) is an integral part of the marriage process and is considered key to the preservation of marriage in African society. Although scholars like Chisale (2016), as well as Makwanise and Masuku (2016), point out that *ukuyalwa* is now strictly directed towards the bride, John Kambalame in Kapolo (2001) points out that this was not always the case, as words of counsel were directed to both the groom and the bride (Kapolo, 2001:131).

Indigenous African PMC addresses the couple on the responsibilities of husband and wife as well as the expected behaviour of each spouse (Kapolo, 2001:131). It also seeks to create boundaries by warning the family members not to interfere in the couple's relationship (Kapolo, 2001:133). Premarital education also forms part of traditional initiation or puberty rites in most African societies. Young men and women are ushered into adulthood by being educated on topics such as sexual behaviour, marriage and family life (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019:56). The integration of indigenous African marriage preparation with pastoral PMC could prove helpful in the efforts to improve marriage stability in South Africa. In advocating for an African premarital pastoral care and counselling model, Kapolo (2001) says, "The church in its ministry of healing and counselling is in a good position to create a family counselling model based on an understanding of the African culture. Such a model will integrate the African concept of family care with western-oriented family care" (Kapolo, 2001:130). Therefore, a need exists to explore which aspects of indigenous PMC can be enculturated by the church.

This study investigates PMC in South Africa as experienced by African Christians. A thick description of the lived experiences of African Christians with regards to PMC helps enhance pastoral PMC in South Africa and preventing the failure of marriages among African Christians.

1.2. Research Problem

Despite the established importance of PMC for marital stability and well-being, a significant void exists within practical theology regarding its specific practice among African Christians in South Africa. While research on PMC among African Christians has been conducted in various other contexts, including Ghana (Adzovie & Dabone, 2021; Ansah-Hughes et al., 2015; Bedu-Addo & Asare, 2022; Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019), Kenya (Keverenge et al., 2020; Mbunga, 2010; Mutunga, 2020; Odero, 2018; Rotich & Starcher, 2016), Nigeria (Bawa, 2018; Egbo, 2012; Pepple, 2017), and Botswana (Madigele et al., 2020; Moeti et al., 2024), there remains no known study exclusively investigating the South African context. Consequently, the effectiveness, experiences, and perceptions of PMC among African Christians in South Africa are currently unknown and understudied. This represents a critical gap, particularly given that clergy are the predominant providers of PMC in South Africa (Christians, 2022:57).

PMC is an integral component of pastoral care, which, to be effective in any context, must seriously consider people's specific contexts (Magezi, 2007:658). In an African context, effective pastoral care must specifically reflect the African understanding of life, moving away from individualistic Western approaches towards a more systematic model that addresses patterns, structures, and social relationships (Louw, 1997:392). This study directly addresses this gap by exploring PMC viewed particularly within the context of its interrelation with Christian living and the African understanding of life in South Africa. This research will provide valuable insight into the lived experiences of PMC by African Christians in South Africa, thereby contributing significantly to the contextualization of pastoral care and counselling in the region, making it more relevant to the unique needs of African Christians.

1.3. Research questions

The primary research question that this study seeks to address is: What are the experiences of married African Christians with regard to premarital counselling in preparation for stable marriages? To clarify the primary research question above, the following sub-research questions are posed:

- a) What is the nature and content of the premarital counselling of African Christians in South Africa
- b) Why are African Christians in South Africa being prepared for marriage from this approach?

- c) How does the currently utilised premarital counselling approach address African Christian's marriage needs and realities?
- d) What is the theological understanding of marriage within the pluralistic South African context that can be discerned to inform effective pastoral premarital counselling of African Christians in South Africa?
- e) What are the strategies that can be developed to enhance the theory and practice of pastoral premarital counselling for African Christians in South Africa?

1.4. Research objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore and understand the premarital counselling experiences of African Christians in South Africa. To clarify the primary objective above, the following research objectives are posed:

- (a) Assess the nature and content of premarital counselling among African Christians in South Africa.
- (b) Understand the approach currently utilised in preparing African Christians in South Africa for marriage.
- (c) Evaluate how the current premarital counselling approach addresses African Christian's marriage needs and realities.
- (d) Explore the theological understanding of marriage within the pluralistic South African context that can be discerned to inform effective pastoral premarital counselling for African Christians.
- (e) Identify strategies that can be developed to enhance the theory and practice of pastoral premarital counselling for African Christians.

1.5 Central Theoretical Argument

The central theoretical argument is that a thick description of the lived experiences of African Christians with regards to PMC will help enhance pastoral PMC in South Africa and help prevent the failure of marriages among African Christians.

1.6. Contribution to Practical Theology

Practical theology is focused on reflecting theologically on human experience. According to Swinton and Mowat (2016), “practical theology seeks to explore the complex theological and practical dynamics of particular situations in order to enable the development of a transformative and illuminating understanding of what is going on within these situations” (Swinton & Mowat, 2016: xi). The object of study in practical theology is praxis. Praxis refers to the way in which religion is lived. Praxis designates action which is inspired by critical reflection, giving rise to both change and insight (Maddox, 1991:166). As Macallan & Hendricks (2014) define it, praxis is “reflected-upon action and acted-upon reflection” (Macallan & Hendricks, 2014:107). Practical Theology seeks to understand present praxis and its context.

This study bears significance on the pastoral care and counselling practice of practical theology. The terms ‘pastoral care’ and ‘pastoral counselling’ are used interchangeably, but they are distinguishable (Magezi, 2007:655). Pastoral care refers to helping acts by persons in ministry, while pastoral counselling specifically refers to pastoral caring in the form of dialogue and communication. Pastoral counselling is an aspect of pastoral care which uses various healing methods to assist people with handling their problems (Magezi, 2016:1). Pastoral care is often associated with caring activities directed towards troubled persons facing crisis or trauma. However, besides relieving and healing distress, pastoral care also aims to prevent distress through creative anticipation and awareness-building (Lartey, 2003:30). This is the scope of pastoral care which PMC falls under since it is aimed at avoiding marital problems and personal conflict that could make life difficult after marriage (Collins, 2007:543).

Considering this aim, this study focused on exploring the content and usefulness of PMC in South Africa by analysing the experiences of African Christian couples. There are few practical theological studies which investigate PMC among African Christians in South Africa. This is a critical gap considering the increase in divorce rate in the country and the fact that black Africans have, for the past ten years, occupied the position of the highest number of divorces when compared to other population groups (Stats SA, 2025a:19). These statistics imply that black South Africans (who are the majority population) are not being adequately prepared for marriage. This study seeks to fill the gap by obtaining new insights on the subject.

The need for such a study is a practical theological matter seeing that the majority of PMC is generally offered by clergy (Bruhn & Hill, 2004:389; Christians 2022:57; Klausli & Gross, 2021:178). The study’s practical value is that its results provide a description and analysis of PMC among African Christians as well as identify strategies that can be developed to enhance the theory and practices of pastoral care and counselling in a South African context. This is significant

considering that pastoral care and counselling were imported without adapting it to the African context and culture. Pastoral theory and practice in South Africa is therefore primarily Western, dominated by individualistic theories of Western Europe and North America (de Jongh van Arkel, 1995:189). Thus, there remains a need to contextualise the theory and practice of pastoral care and counselling in South Africa, making it relevant to meet the unique needs of African Christians (Msomi, 1992:12).

1.7. Definition of terms

The following are working definitions to give a common understanding of terms used throughout this study:

1.7.1. African

The primary meaning the Oxford English Dictionary ascribes to 'African' is "a native or inhabitant of Africa; a person of African origin (contextually = black African; spec. (in local usage) such a person as distinguished from a person of European origin, as (South African) a member of any of the Bantu-speaking peoples of South Africa" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). By 'African', this study is therefore referring to people who are black and of African descent, to the exclusion of Indian (Asian) and Coloured (mixed-race) people.

1.7.2. Marriage

Marriage is a human institution rooted in the social context in which it is lived; it is therefore subject to the norms and expectations of that context (Methuen, 2014:160). In this study, marriage is subjected to the norms and expectations of a Reformed perspective of the Bible. A Reformed perspective holds a revelation-historical hermeneutical approach, which distinguishes between descriptive and prescriptive parts of Scripture. Descriptive parts narrate a particular historical event or custom while the prescriptive parts establish ethical principles and norms for modern-day behaviour (Vorster, 2008:465). According to this approach, the first three chapters of Genesis are the origin and prototype of marriage (Vorster, 2008:466). Marriage is, therefore, exclusively heterosexual and monogamous. By 'Marriage', this study is referring to a heterosexual monogamous marriage, to the exclusion of same-sex unions and polygamous marriages, which are constitutionally recognised in South Africa.

1.7.3. Premarital counselling

Stahmann (2000) defines PMC as a preventative effort attempting to intervene at the transition point of the beginning of a marriage to give couples a stronger foundation for a stable and

satisfactory marriage (Stahmann, 2000:104). In this study, PMC is used as a generic term to denote any type of premarital preventive intervention used to prepare premarital couples for marriage. This is based on the etymology of 'counselling'. 'Counselling' is a verbal noun from the verb 'counsel'. To 'counsel' primarily means "to give or offer counsel or advice to (a person); to advise (a person), esp. as to the best course of action" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). There are different terms used to identify premarital preventive interventions in literature, including: 'marriage preparation', 'marriage education', 'premarital education', 'premarital counselling' and 'premarital preparation'. For the most part, these terms are used interchangeably in literature and in this study.

1.8. Research Methodology

The empirical study utilised a qualitative research approach and made use of a phenomenological design. This approach is selected because the primary task of qualitative research is identifying and developing understandings of meaning participants ascribe to phenomena or experiences (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:29). Since the research aim is to understand the participants' experience of PMC, phenomenology was selected since it allows the researcher to describe what research participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon instead of theorizing and generating a theoretical model as in grounded theory (Creswell et al., 2007:252). Phenomenology not only allows the researcher to describe the participants' lived experiences but also allows the researcher to interpret their meaning (Creswell et al., 2007:253).

The practical theological methodology employed is informed by Osmer (2008), who states that practical theology has four tasks as described in Figure 1 below. Guided by Osmer's first and second tasks, the study will describe and analyse the experiences of African Christians with regard to PMC. In fulfilling the normative task, different approaches to PMC and biblical concepts related to marriage preparation will be analysed and discussed to develop a model to enhance pastoral PMC in an African Christian context, which is a response to the fourth question posed by Osmer.

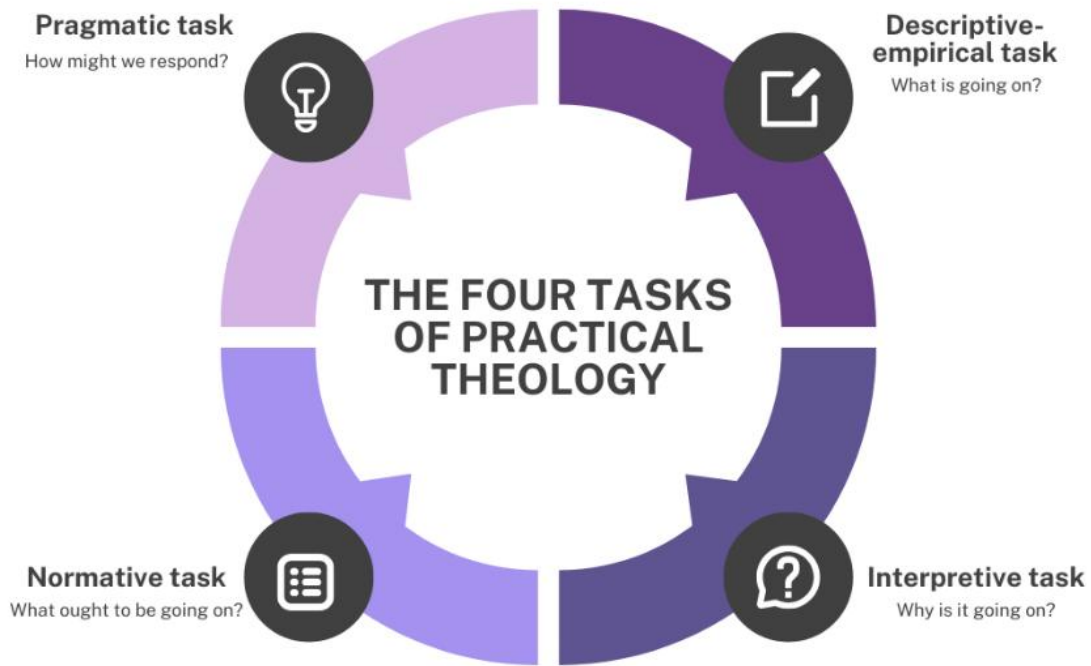


Figure 1: The Four Task of Practical Theology (Osmer 2008)

1.8.1. Research design

The study followed a qualitative research design and utilised a phenomenological approach. A qualitative research approach was the appropriate approach for the study because this research approach allows the researcher to study things in their natural settings, attempting to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people give them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998:3). The study explored the experiences of married African Christians with regard to PMC. Hence, the qualitative approach was the most appropriate design.

A qualitative research approach seeks to construct detailed descriptions of reality. The primary task of qualitative research is identifying and developing understandings of meanings participants ascribe to phenomena or experiences (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:29). Qualitative research takes human experience seriously, seeking to understand and interpret said experience (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:30). Qualitative research therefore has a narrative emphasis. Thus, as a qualitative researcher, I aimed to explore the experiences of married African Christians with regard to PMC. This entailed “understanding rather than explanation” (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:308). The researcher is therefore the primary tool of qualitative research (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:56). In this situation, as Swinton and Mowat (2016) explain, a researcher is a participant and an actor in

the research process. Thus, qualitative research requires critical self-reflection by the researcher throughout the research process (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:57).

The search for experiences participants had with PMC in the study was critical for the researcher to get an understanding of how they make meaning of the importance and usefulness of PMC. To that end, the researcher adopted a phenomenological approach. At the root of phenomenology is the aim to understand phenomena and provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the participants (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:316). Phenomenology allows the researcher to describe what research participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon instead of theorising and generating a theoretical model as in grounded theory (Creswell et al., 2007:252). Phenomenology not only allows the researcher to describe the participants' lived experiences but also allows the researcher to interpret their meaning (Creswell et al., 2007:253). Unlike narrative-biographical designs that report on the experiences of an individual, a phenomenological design describes the meaning of the lived experiences of a phenomenon for several individuals (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:316).

1.8.2. Sampling

Qualitative sampling requires the identification of appropriate participants, such as those who can best address the research question. The sample for this study consisted of two groups of participants: married individuals and clergy. The purpose of selecting the most relevant sampling technique in qualitative research is to collect the richest data (Strydom & Delport, 2011:391).

Purposive sampling was used for the study. Purposive sampling is a sampling technique "typically used in qualitative research to identify and select the information-rich cases for the most proper utilisation of available resources" (Etikan et al., 2016:2). In purposive sampling, a specific case is selected because it illustrates features that can purposefully inform an understanding of the study's research problem. Participants are chosen based on the study's aim with the prospect that each participant will provide unique and rich information (Etikan et al., 2016:4). Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where the sample rests entirely on my judgement as the researcher to choose a sample that best serves the purpose of the study.

The purposive sampling strategy used was homogeneous purposive sampling. This form of sampling focuses on candidates who share specific characteristics (Etikan et al., 2016:4). The idea is to focus on this precise similarity and how it relates to the topic being researched. The main aim in choosing this sampling technique was to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of PMC by African Christians, as well as the provision of PMC by clergy.

Following approval from the NWU Ethics Committee, participants were recruited for interviews through social media posts on various platforms and word-of-mouth referrals. Candidates were directed to a website page explaining all the details of the research study for them to fully understand the details of the study and their possible participation. Those who were interested in participating were then invited to complete an online form. They were then supplied with a consent form (Annexures A and B). The consent form explained the aim of the study, the expected duration of their participation, the procedures which will be followed during the investigation and my credibility as a researcher. The form also emphasised the participants' voluntary participation as well as assured participants about the security of their personal information. Once the consent form was returned signed, an interview was arranged.

1.8.2.1 Sampling Criteria

The sample consisted of two groups of participants: married individuals and clergy. The married individuals had to be married for between one and fifteen years. They had to be black South Africans and practising Christians. The clergy participants had to have five or more years of pastoring experience in a predominantly black church in South Africa. There were no geographical limitations for both groups of participants.

The sample consisted of thirteen married individuals and eleven clergy members. The total number of participants for the study was twenty-four ($n=24$). Hereunder is the detailed description of the married individuals ($n=13$):

Both gender groups were presented in the sample, males ($n=6$, 46%) and females ($n=7$, 54%). The participants were classified within two Christian denominations, namely Pentecostal/Charismatic ($n=11$, 85%) and Evangelicals ($n=2$, 15%). The duration of their marriages was between two groups: one to nine years ($n=10$) and ten to fifteen years ($n=3$). Participants represented three different age groups: thirty to thirty-nine years ($n=7$), forty to forty-nine years ($n=5$), and fifty to fifty-nine years ($n=1$). Participants represented four of the nine provinces of South Africa, namely Gauteng ($n=3$), KwaZulu-Natal ($n=2$), Mpumalanga ($n=7$) and Western Cape ($n=1$).

Following is the detailed description of the clergy participants ($n=11$):

Both gender groups were presented in the sample, males ($n=7$, 67%) and females ($n=4$, 33%). The participants were classified within two Christian denominations, namely Pentecostal/Charismatic ($n=10$, 99%) and Evangelicals ($n=1$, 1%). The duration of their involvement in ministry fell into four groups: five to nine years ($n=2$), ten to nineteen years ($n=4$), twenty to twenty-nine years ($n=4$) and thirty to thirty-nine years ($n=1$). Participants represented

four different age groups: thirty to thirty-nine years (n=3), forty to forty-nine years (n=3), fifty to fifty-nine years (n=3) and sixty to sixty-nine years (n=2). Participants represented two of the nine provinces of South Africa, namely Gauteng (n=3) and Mpumalanga (n=8).

1.8.2.2 Inclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria are key features of the target population that the researcher uses to answer the research question (Patino & Ferreira, 2018:84). These include demographic and geographical characteristics. As indicated, married individuals and clergy were the chosen sample for this study. Their criteria for inclusion and exclusion differ from one another and are depicted separately. For my inclusion criteria for married individuals, I was looking for black South Africans who are practising Christians, i.e. self-identified Christians who consider faith an essential aspect of their lives and regularly attend church services (Barna, 2019). They had to be married for between a year and fifteen years, as it is more likely that people married for this long would still have a clear recollection of their premarital experience. The inclusion criteria for the clergy are clergy members with at least five years' experience of pastoring a predominantly black Christian church. It is more likely that they would have had to conduct a marriage or marriages in this time frame.

1.8.2.3 Exclusion criteria

Exclusion criteria are features of the potential study participants who meet the inclusion criteria but present with additional characteristics that could interfere with the success of the study (Patino & Ferreira, 2018:84). The exclusion criteria for both groups of participants relate to individuals who cannot communicate proficiently in English or isiZulu. Participants outside of Mpumalanga who were not proficient in virtual meeting tools were also excluded.

1.8.3. Data collection

Data was collected through interviews. Interviews were ideal for this study because they enable the researcher to collect detailed information, understanding and perspectives on African Christians' experience of PMC. Individual semi-structured interviews were used as my data collection method. Semi-structured interviews were organised around areas of particular interest while still allowing considerable flexibility in scope and depth (Greef, 2011:348). This kind of interview method allowed me to gain a clear idea of the participants' accounts of their experience with PMC. I conducted the interviews using an interview schedule (Annexure C and D), the schedule, however only guided the interview and did not dictate to it (Greef, 2011:352). The participants shared their stories guided by the questions, with the flexibility of introducing an issue I may not have thought of. Interviews were either conducted in person or virtually, depending on the proximity of the participant to the researcher's location. Although I had an estimation of ninety

minutes per interview, the length of the shortest interview was thirty-five minutes, while the longest interview lasted seventy-five minutes due to thorough and straightforward responses. I conducted a total of twenty-four in-depth interviews, eleven in-person and thirteen virtually through Microsoft Teams. All interviews were recorded through the 'record' function on Microsoft Teams so that all the data obtained could be transcribed verbatim. Field notes supplemented the recordings. I manually transcribed and simultaneously translated each interview as most participants would interchange between English and isiZulu, and some were exclusively in isiZulu/isiXhosa.

1.8.4. Data Analysis

Data was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis identifies commonalities in the way a topic is talked about and makes sense of them (Braun & Clarke, 2006:57). This method therefore allowed me to see and make sense of the participants' shared meanings and experiences of PMC. Themes were generated within a Heideggerian phenomenological frame which focuses on the researcher's reflexivity. Because Heidegger argues against a presuppositionless approach to phenomenology, his approach acknowledges that a researcher brings their experience, preconceptions and assumptions into the research process (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016: 4). In the researcher's attempt to keep check of their preconceptions, reflexivity becomes important. Reflexivity is critical self-reflection during the research process where the researcher interrogates their own understandings in order to remain focused on the phenomenon being studied (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016:4; Swinton, 2016:57). Reflexivity during data analysis in particular means avoiding reaching an interpretation prematurely (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016:5), hence the critical step of reviewing themes before naming and defining them.

Analysis is the process of transforming data into findings. Qualitative data analysis cannot be associated with structured, mechanical, and technical procedures but is a process of inductive reasoning, thinking, and theorising (Schurink et al., 2011:399). The process of analysing qualitative data is not a linear one, but it is rather circular and reflective (Swinton and Mowat 2016:267). In my analysis of the data I collected, I followed the six steps of thematic analysis as outlined by Kiger and Varpio (2020), together with the principles outlined by Schurink et al. (2011). Data analysis involved familiarising myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Kiger & Varpio, 2020:1). After conducting the interviews, I transcribed each interview. Transcribing the interviews myself allowed me the opportunity to familiarise myself with the data, and by so doing, I generated emergent insights. After reading the transcripts in order to get a feel of the database, I systematically worked through each transcript, identifying meaningful units and applying open coding. Open coding involves the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising, and categorising data (*cf.* Schurink et al., 2011:412). Coding was conducted

electronically through ATLAS.ti.24, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. I then discovered categories by grouping codes that seemed to pertain to the same phenomenon. I then grouped the categories into emerging themes through selective coding - the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, and validating those relationships (Schurink et al., 2011:413).

Osmer's first two tasks of practical theological interpretation shaped the data interpretation process. The descriptive-empirical task involves identifying data that is useful in discerning patterns and dynamics in particular contexts (Osmer, 2008:4). Coding was therefore shaped by discerning patterns and dynamics pertinent to premarital counselling in the church. The interpretive task involves drawing on various theories to better understand and explain said patterns and dynamics (Osmer, 2008:4). Literature on marriage and premarital counselling was therefore analysed. The gathered data was then interpreted in light of the literature reviewed.

1.8.5. Research Credibility

Research credibility relates to the rigour applied in the study. Morse et al. in de Wet and Erasmus (2005) define rigour as "researchers' adoption of verification strategies and self-correcting mechanisms (at each stage during the research process) to actively work towards reliability and validity in the analysis of qualitative data" (de Wet & Erasmus, 2005:28). Qualitative data analysis procedures are too often perceived as ad hoc, intuitive and unsystematic, thus without academic rigour (de Wet & Erasmus 2005:27). In response to the scrutiny Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed a criterion for assessing rigour: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The following strategies suggested by Shenton (2004) were employed to ensure credibility and rigour:

To ensure credibility (how congruent the results are with reality), I adopted well-established research methods reflected above. In order to ensure that participants gave honest responses during data collection, I ensured to indicate to participants that there were no correct answers to the questions asked. The researcher also used probes to elicit detailed data during interviews. Lastly, the researcher related her findings to an existing body of knowledge as reflected in the chapters to follow.

To ensure transferability (the extent to which the findings can be applied to other situations), I provided a background of the data to establish the context of the study (see Chapters 4 and 5). I also provided a detailed description of the phenomenon in question to allow comparisons to be made. To ensure dependability, I reported the research process in detail in this chapter to enable a future researcher to repeat the work. And to ensure confirmability (how the findings are a result

of the participants' experiences and views), I recognise the limitations of the study (see Chapter 9) and admit my own beliefs and assumptions in this chapter.

1.8.6. Ethical Considerations

Human beings, being participants in studies in the social sciences and humanities, present unique ethical considerations. The ethical issues for researchers in the social science and humanities field are pervasive and complex since data should not be obtained at the expense of human beings (Strydom, 2011:113). To ensure that I upheld my ethical responsibility, I underwent ethical training and received ethical clearance from the University's Research Ethics Committee before proceeding with the data collection.

1.8.6.1. Risk and Beneficence

The estimated risk level for human participants in this study is rated at a minimal level. The possible risk involves the potential of discomfort or inconvenience, which is not greater in and of itself than that ordinarily encountered in daily life. I ensured that the interviews did not take any longer than they needed to. I made the participants aware of these possible risks before consent was granted.

It was important that the benefits of the research be weighed against the risks. I therefore explained all aspects and processes of the study to participants and the reasons why it was essential to conduct this study. The intention of the data collected is that the findings of the study would benefit churches, as the model developed in this study will be helpful for PMC in the church. Participants were aware that they would not benefit directly, but their participation and views would enable a model to be developed to assist in benefiting the practice of PMC.

1.8.6.2. Anonymity and Confidentiality

Babbie in Strydom (2011) explains anonymity to mean that no one, including the researcher, should be able to identify any subject after the research has been conducted (Strydom, 2011:120). Confidentiality is the confidential handling of information, i.e., limiting access to private information (Strydom, 2011:119). Participants were assured that all their private information would be handled with the utmost confidentiality. The information provided by participants is kept private, and nobody will have access to the data besides me and my supervisor. I also ensured that I report on participants' information in a way that does not make the participants identifiable. The participants' identities were not used as identifiers; instead, participant numbers were used to anonymise the results.

1.9. Role of the Researcher

Unlike quantitative research, which uses external tools, the primary tool in qualitative research is the researcher (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:56). As a result, it is impossible for the qualitative researcher to be detached and objective during the research process. The qualitative researcher is instead a participant in the research process (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:57). Qualitative research therefore, requires a high level of self-awareness. For this reason, it is significant for me to describe any biases and assumptions that I had.

As a clergy member pastoring a church, my role in this study was emic. As a pastoral counsellor heavily involved in PMC, I had my assumptions about the practice of PMC in black South African churches. My assumption was that black South African churches do not prioritise PMC, and therefore, PMC is not a prerequisite for getting married in the church. I also assumed that where PMC does take place, clergy are poorly prepared to conduct it effectively. I premised that pastors relied on their own understanding of Scripture and their marital experiences instead of empirically proven methods in preparing couples for marriage. I was aware of my biases throughout the research process and monitored and reduced my biases to the best of my ability. I was careful to be sensitive during the research process, especially during the data collection process. I was careful to maintain a neutral position in my responses to participants, having the understanding that my behaviour would impact how participants narrated their views and experiences.

1.10. Structure of the Thesis

This chapter, **Chapter 1**, outlines the background of the study, the research problem, questions and objectives. The study's contribution is defined, and the research methodology is explained in detail. **Chapter 2** explores literature on the subject of PMC, giving attention to the meaning of marriage and the practice of PMC in the Church and in African society. The process of preparing for Christian marriage in an African context is analysed in **Chapter 3**. In **Chapters 4 and 5**, a report is provided on the data collected from interviewing clergy and married individuals. The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data are discussed in detail. The findings of the study are then discussed in **Chapter 6**. **Chapter 7** addresses the normative task of the study by analysing PMC from a biblical perspective. The pragmatic task of the study is addressed in **Chapter 8**, which deals with how a practical theological approach can be instrumental in informing and guiding pastoral PMC. **Chapter 9** presents the study's conclusions, recommendations, and limitations.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The instability of marriage and the rise of divorce, with their adverse effects on individuals and society, is a pastoral challenge. This is because the church as a social institution is expected to contribute towards addressing challenges that plague the community. PMC is a method utilised by the church to improve marriage stability and prevent the risk of divorce. This chapter is a review of the literature aimed at providing perspective into the major themes that form the basis of this study. In this chapter, I first define marriage from a religious, cultural and legal perspective. I then outline the theoretical framework of this study. The determinants of effective PMC are then defined, followed by an exploration of marriage preparation programs and inventories. Following the discussion of premarital health screening, the chapter concludes with an exploration of marriage preparation in the context of the church and African communities.

2.2. Defining Marriage

Since PMC is understood within the context of preparing people for marriage, we cannot understand PMC without first establishing an understanding of what marriage is. Marriage is multidimensional, being a social institution as well as a close personal relationship (Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006:216). Marriage is a legally and socially sanctioned union, usually between a man and a woman, that is regulated by laws, rules, customs and beliefs (Britannica, 2025). Marriage exists universally within different societies and cultures because it provides structure for many basic social and personal functions. As a result, “there is no one definition of marriage that fits all cultures” (Monsma, 2014:23). Marriage is a human institution rooted in the social context in which it is lived; it is therefore subject to the norms and expectations of that context (Methuen, 2014:160). There are various contexts, such as religious, cultural and legal contexts, from which the concept of marriage can be defined. In line with the research problem of this study, in terms of religious context, marriage will be defined within the Christian context. In terms of cultural context, marriage will be defined within the African context. And in terms of legal context, marriage will be defined within the context of South African law.

2.2.1. Christian marriage

Christian views of marriage are informed by scripture. Since scripture is read in a cultural context, Christian views on marriage have shifted and changed throughout church history (Methuen, 2014:150). In the times of the early church, marriage was not a Christian institution but a pagan institution. Marriage ceremonies were considered private family festivals and so the marriages

took place at home (Ngundu, 2011:38). In the early church, Christians followed the traditional nuptial rites of the province they lived in but were encouraged to avoid things such as drinking, dancing, overeating, and customs involving sacrifices to pagan gods during their marriage ceremonies (Ngundu, 2011:39).

The Christian understanding of marriage developed from influences from Greek, Roman and Jewish practices (Methuen, 2014:153). A priestly blessing was part of the marriage celebrations by the fourth century. At first, the Christian couple was prayed over by the bishop when he came to congratulate the couple at their home, but by the 5th century, this priestly blessing was administered in front of the church (Ngundu, 2011:39). During the medieval times the Roman Catholic Church began to regulate marriages in Western Europe, resulting in marriages being regarded in ecclesiastical terms rather than just social terms (Ngundu, 2011:40). In 1215, marriage was included in the definitive list of seven sacraments (Methuen, 2014:15). The understanding of marriage as a sacrament led to the Church claiming rights to preside over marriage. The renewed interest in the Bible that came with the Protestant Reformation gave marriage a new importance, allowing the doctrine of marriage to be grounded on Scripture more than Greek philosophy.

Different Christian traditions hold different perceptions about marriage. Still, the idea of marriage as a covenant remains an essential definition of marriage in many traditions (Vorster, 2016:4). Marriage is rooted in the conjugal covenant, which reflects the covenant between Christ and the Church (Palmer, 1972:618; Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006:224; Mwiti & Dueck, 2006:176). Scripture portions such as Hosea and Ephesians present marriage as a model for the loving relationship between the Church and God (Methuen, 2014:154).

Köstenberger in Vorster (2016) explains the concept of marriage as a covenant as involving the permanency of marriage, the sacredness of marriage, the intimacy of marriage, the mutuality of marriage and the exclusiveness of marriage (Vorster, 2016:4). Based on Matt. 19:6 and Mark 10:9, marriage should be viewed as an institution of God designating a permanent relationship between husband and wife (Vorster, 2016:4). Marriage is sacred because it is not merely an agreement between two individuals, but “a relationship before and under God” as reflected in Gen. 2:22 (Vorster, 2016:4). The intimacy of marriage is reflected in Gen. 2:23-25. Marriage is a sexual union where the two become ‘one flesh’. ‘One flesh’ is beyond sexual intercourse, also meaning that two married people share each other’s lives in a complete and dedicated manner – a ‘communion of life’ (Mwiti & Dueck, 2006:176; Vorster, 2008:467; Vorster, 2016:4). The Christian understanding of marriage as a covenant demands a detachment from one’s family to form an attachment to one’s covenant partner (Khathide, 2011:115). Marriage as a covenant indicates the mutuality of marriage, seeing that it is a relationship of the self-giving of one individual to another

as explained in Eph. 5:25–30 (Vorster, 2016:4). Marriage is exclusive according to Gen. 2:22-25 and 1 Cor. 7:2-5 (Vorster 2016:4).

Christian marriage serves two purposes: companionship and procreation. The doctrine of the Trinity asserts that God is 'community' since the triune God is comprised of the fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Grenz, 2000:179). Since the trinitarian God is a relational being, his image-bearers are relational beings (Bartholomew, 2009:172). Man's divine norm is therefore not isolation but community (Baloyi, 2013a:48). This is why it was not good in God's eyes for man to be alone. Marriage is introduced as an antidote to isolation, granting man companionship (Gen. 2:18). Although procreation is another function of Christian marriage (Gen. 1:28), it is not the sole objective of marriage (Berglund, 1975:14). Childless marriages are therefore not inferior and do not justify divorce or polygamy. Most importantly, Christian marriage serves the purpose of mirroring the covenant between Christ and the Church.

Although many in the Reformed tradition who embrace the idea of marriage as a covenant support the notion of the subordination of women, Vorster (2016) points out that "the concept of marriage as covenant does not necessarily entail patriarchalism and androcentrism" (Vorster, 2016: 6). Christian marriage is rooted in God creating humanity in his image as male and female (Köstenberger & Jones, 2010:22). This is the foundation of equality between husband and wife. As the *imago Dei*, male and female are created equally with only a functional differentiation (Vorster, 2016:6). This concept is further deliberated in Chapters 3 and 7.

Biblical marriage is therefore a union that is characterised by permanence, sacredness, intimacy, mutuality and exclusiveness.

2.2.2. African marriage

There are multiple different forms of marriage across Africa, but the main principles of African marriage are similar. Hastings offers a classical description of marriage in traditional African society. African marriage is understood as the permanent union of a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation and rearing of children, mutual companionship, and assistance (Hastings, 1973:27). Marriage in traditional African society is characterised by the following traits:

- (i) The arranging of when and whom young persons are to marry, where the opinion of senior members of the kindred is likely to be more important than that of the young people themselves.
- (ii) Clear rules to which kindred the children of the union will belong, as a marriage links people of two different kindreds.

(iii) Some way of compensating the other kindred for the 'loss' of their female member as a result of her being given into marriage.

(iv) The institutional provision against childlessness since marriage is related so closely to the continuance of society (Hastings, 1973:28).

Traditional African marriage is therefore hierarchical, patriarchal, patrilineal, and polygamous (Ekane, 2013:1). African marriage is not just an agreement between two individuals, but between families (Ansell, 2001:701; Mafela, 2014:4). African communities perceive marriage as a preservation of the family lineage (Mwiti & Dueck, 2006:171). Marriage in African society therefore involves the introduction of a new member to the clan, and as a result it cannot be left in the hands of an individual to choose their own marriage partner (Raphalalani & Musehane, 2013:19). It is the responsibility of the head of the family to either arrange marriage partners for family members or sanction the choice made by a family member (Baloyi, 2013b:10; Ekane, 2013:3). The bride's consent to the marriage is not essential as long as her father consented on her behalf (Ekane, 2013:3). Married life in traditional African societies is lived out within a patriarchal and patrilocal family structure where married sons remain with the patriarch. After marriage, the bride is expected to live at her in-laws' homestead under the supervision of her mother-in-law (Ndlovu, 2021:37).

In patrilineal societies, marriage rests on the foundation of the payment of bride-wealth, a custom of presenting a gift (traditionally cattle amongst Nguni tribes) to the bride's family as a token of gratitude, appreciating their role in raising the bride (Ansell, 2001:706; Mafela, 2014:6; Posel & Rudwick, 2014:4). The giving and acceptance of bride-wealth (*ilobolo* in Nguni languages or *magadi* in Sotho languages) establishes an alliance between the two families involved and validates the marriage (Baloyi, 2013a:21; Mafela, 2014:5; Montle, 2020:161; Mubangizi, 2012:4; Mwiti & Dueck, 2006:175). It signifies the compensation for and transfer of rights to the bride's reproductive and labour power, as well as the transfer of her offspring from one family to another (Ansell, 2001:702; Mafela, 2024:6). Although the payment of the bride-wealth gives the husband domestic and sexual rights over his wife (Ogbu, 1978:247), it does not amount to 'purchasing' the wife (Mafela, 2014:5; Mwiti & Dueck, 2006:175). "The husband does not obtain ownership of his wife, as he may not 'sell' her to another man and may be faced with her leaving him in the event of ill-treatment which are both actions inconsistent with ownership" (Knoetze, 2000:533).

This understanding is what led to the term bride price being changed to bride wealth from 1929 (Mwiti & Dueck, 2006:175). The term 'bride-wealth' recognises that the practice serves to transfer wealth (in the form of cattle) between the families (Rudwick & Posel 2015:14). However, the

misunderstanding of *ilobolo* prevails, making bride-wealth a source of unequal gender relations in African marriage, fuelling gender-based violence (GBV) (Montle, 2020:161). Studies have shown that in some societies, men still manipulate the institution of *ilobolo* to enforce the ownership of women (Ansell, 2001; Dlamini, 2022; Montle, 2020; Rudwick & Posel, 2015).

The driving motive of African life is the preservation of the clan and its culture (Welch, 1933:22), making marriage vital for the preservation and extension of the clan through procreation. It is for this reason that traditional African marriage is mainly aimed at procreation (Baloyi, 2014:22). Children are understood to not only belong to their biological parents but to the entire family, clan and community (Idang, 2015:108). Having children is therefore not a personal choice, but a fulfilment of one's obligation to one's family and community (Smith, 2001:139).

Childlessness in marriage is therefore a serious issue because it threatens the continuation of the lineage. Hence, childlessness is institutionally remedied through polygamy and levirate marriage. Polygamy was a solution where a marriage produced no children or where it only produced female children (Mugambi, 2002:533, Baloyi, 2013b:168). Since sexual activity was aimed at producing children, it was also common practice in traditional African communities for a menopausal woman to suggest that her husband get a new, younger wife as she had fulfilled her responsibility of producing children (Ndlovu, 2021:43). Levirate marriage also ensured the continuance of the family line. Levirate marriage is where the younger brother of a deceased husband takes the deceased's wife as his own (Ndlovu, 2021:44). This ensures the wife remains a part of the family.

Social change has, however, had an impact on the definition of marriage in African society. Urbanization has resulted in the erosion of traditional African value systems resulting in younger Africans adopting individualism and nuclear family patterns at the expense of a typically African communal family system (Ekane, 2013:1). The model of marriage in a nuclear household structure emphasizes the marital relationship as one characterised by love, intimacy, commitment and romance (Ekane, 2013:4, Monsma, 2014:26) resulting in modern Africans choosing their marriage partners themselves. In the process, the traditional function of marriage as creating and continuing a relationship between two families is lost.

A shift from a rural approach to life to an urban approach has also led to a shift in attitude towards children. Children were regarded as wealth and the ultimate goal of marriage, but now children present more expenses (Ndlovu, 2021:47). So smaller nuclear families are preferred. This is a result of the modernizing influences of wage employment, formal education and its associated wealth on childbearing behaviour (Biney et al., 2020:22). Although the practice of bride-wealth has persisted amongst the change in patterns of living in African society, how the practice is done has been affected by this change. Commercialisation has altered attitudes about bride-wealth,

increasing the amount required for it. Whereas the amount was determined by the girl's virtues of being a hard worker and a virgin, now a girl's social and economic status has become a crucial determining factor (Baloyi, 2013a:27). These high payments for bride-wealth result in young Africans resorting to cohabitation instead of marrying (Stats SA 2025b:35). Economic pressures that accompany urbanisation and modernisation have also discouraged polygamy and the patrilocal setting of traditional family life (Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba, 2016:313). Although new brides no longer live at their in-laws' homestead after marriage since sons now establish their own homes in urban areas, new brides are still expected to serve an induction period after marriage, where they live with their in-laws under the supervision of the mother-in-law (Ndlovu, 2021:128). This practice is known as *ukukotiza*.

2.2.3. Legal marriage

Marriage in South Africa is constitutionally recognised and safeguarded by legislation. The Constitutional Court observes that marriage and family are important social institutions in South African society (Department of Home Affairs, 2022:8). These institutions provide security, support and companionship for society members and bear an essential role in the upbringing of children (Department of Home Affairs, 2022:9). According to the White Paper on Marriage in South Africa (2022), marriage can be defined in line with the following characteristics:

- (i) a consensual monogamous and or polygamous legal, social and physical union;
 - (ii) entered into between heterosexual and or homosexual and or non-binary persons;
 - (iii) who are over the age of 18 years;
 - (iv) who undertake reciprocal rights and obligations of financial, emotional and psychological care and maintenance;
 - (v) who undertake reciprocal rights of emotional, physical and psychological intimacy.
- (Department of Home Affairs, 2022:8).

The plurality of customary and religious laws is a characteristic feature of the legal systems of most former European colonies in Africa (Oppermann, 2006:74). South Africa is a former Dutch and later British colony, and as a result, has a hybrid legal system. South Africa does not have a harmonised system of marriage but instead has parallel systems of marriage (Department of Home Affairs, 2021:45).

South African law recognises three types of marriages: civil marriages, customary marriages and civil unions. Civil marriages are regulated by The Marriage Act (No. 25 of 1961). The act governs the solemnization of monogamous marriages of heterosexual couples (Department of Home Affairs, 2022:11). The Recognition of Customary Marriages Act (No. 120 of 1998) allows for the registration of marriages under African customary law. Customary marriages are heterosexual

marriages negotiated and celebrated according to the prevailing customary law in the couple's community (South African Government, 2024). A customary marriage can be monogamous or polygamous. The Civil Union Act (No. 17 of 2006) regulates the solemnization and registration of civil unions. It provides for their legal consequences (Department of Home Affairs, 2022:14). Civil unions are solemnised either by way of a civil marriage or civil partnership between two people, regardless of gender (South African Government, 2024).

Although not recognised by South African law, there also exists religious marriages. These are marriages entered into in terms of a particular religion, such as the Jewish, Islamic or Hindu faith (Legal Wise 2024). Religious marriages have limited legal protection, even though they are not legally recognised in the country. For instance, courts extend many marriage-like rights and processes to spouses in Muslim marriages (Department of Home Affairs, 2021:34). The Constitution prohibits marriage discrimination based on sexual orientation, cultural and religious beliefs (Department of Home Affairs, 2021:15). A new marriage bill currently awaiting approval, Marriage Bill (B43-2023), seeks to rectify the inconsistencies and inequalities in the recognition of different marriage types in South Africa. The bill aims to provide a unified legal framework for all marriages, regardless of sexual orientation, religious beliefs, or cultural practices.

South Africa has two marital property regimes: marriage in community of property and marriage out of community of property. Marriage in community of property is the default marital regime meaning if people marry without an antenuptial contract, they are automatically married in community of property (Department of Home Affairs, 2022:38). In this regime, the estates of the spouses are joined with each spouse having an equal share in the joint estate, meaning the estate will be divided equally among the spouses upon the dissolution of the marriage. Parties who conclude an antenuptial contract before the marriage is solemnised are by default married out of community of property with accrual. In this regime, each party keeps their separate estate, but each party has an equal share in the growth of each spouse's estate at the end of the marriage (Department of Home Affairs, 2022:39). Parties who exclude accrual in the antenuptial contract get to keep their assets irrespective of when they were acquired.

Considering the significance of marriage from a religious, cultural and legal perspective, it is clear that marriage is not to be entered into without adequate preparation. The Department of Home Affairs acknowledges that there is a lack of adequate PMC on the consequences of matrimonial property regimes (Department of Home Affairs, 2022:41). Although PMC is no longer mentioned in the Marriage Bill, it was previously proposed in the Green Paper on Marriage in South Africa (2021) that: "Over and above encouraging premarital counselling, persons who wish to marry shall be required to undergo prescribed premarital counselling sessions prior to marriage. To ensure compliance with this requirement, persons who wish to marry shall be required to furnish

the marriage officer with written proof that they have indeed undergone premarital counselling. A standard form affidavit shall be provided by the DHA for these purposes. Premarital counselling must include explaining to couples the various marriage regimes and their implications” (Department of Home Affairs, 2021:57).

2.3. Theoretical Framework: Covenant Attachment Theory

Theoretical grounding provides a "framework for action" (May, 2001:37), helping to guide research and organise existing practical information (Murray & Murray, 2004:349). Although some PMC programs are based on multiple theoretical frameworks, such as family systems theory, Adlerian theory, and cognitive-behavioural theories, this study employs a covenant attachment approach, which can be helpful with religious couples interested in building a strong foundation for their marriage.

Ponzetti and Mutch (2006) lament how many marriage programs are based on popular psychological theories with minimal insight into the rich tradition and meaning behind marriage as covenant (Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006:227). The covenant attachment theory is a new conceptualisation developed by Maxwell et al. (2020) for therapists and clergy working with Christian couples. It is a constructivist grounded theory integrating attachment theory with the theological concept of covenant (Maxwell et al., 2020:111). The theory is based on a relationship system of Christian couples and suggests a “shared attachment with God through an attachment cycle of behaviours, emotions, and cognitions that systemically empowers all the relationships in the system” (Maxwell et al., 2020:121).

Attachment theory involves the safety, security and intimacy of an individual’s two primary relationships: parent/child and romantic partners (Maxwell et al., 2020:111). Bowlby (1969) first proposed it as an evolutionary behavioural system aimed at protecting infants from predators (Maxwell et al., 2020:111). It was Shaver et al. (1988) who introduced the idea of attachment theory working in adult romantic relationships (Johnson 2003:103, Maxwell et al. 2020:111). It was a revolutionary event for a theory of close relationships to offer “a coherent, relevant, widely applicable, and well-researched framework for understanding the complex phenomenon of the adult love relationship” (Johnson ,2003:103).

Until then, couple therapy had been missing a comprehensive theory of relatedness guiding couple counselling. According to this theory, following the primary caregiver in childhood, the spouse becomes the primary attachment figure. They act as the main source of security and comfort. Attachment to one’s spouse is critical in an individualistic, nuclear family setting where, without the active presence of the extended family, one only has one's spouse to rely on for emotional support (Johnson, 2003:105). Adults will display attachment behaviours in romantic

relationships based on the internal working models of attachment developed in childhood (Maxwell et al., 2020:111). The Internal Working Model (IWM) of attachment can be defined as “a set of conscious and/or unconscious rules for the organisation of information relevant to attachment” (Delius et al., 2008:396). The IWM of attachment begins as a mental and emotional representation of a child’s first attachment relationship, forming the basis of an individual’s attachment style. An attachment style refers to the way in which an individual relates to others. Attachment style “involves one’s confidence in the availability of the attachment figure for use as a secure base from which one can freely explore the world when not in distress as well as a safe haven from which one can seek support, protection, and comfort in times of distress” (Levy et al., 2011:193). Attachment styles can either be secure or insecure. Based on Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall’s (1978) method, there are four definitive attachment styles:

- (i) **Secure attachment** is characterised by “feelings of trust, safety, and comfort in relationships, a willingness to rely on others, and a belief that one is loved and valued” (Jan, 2024). Individuals with this attachment style comfortably express emotions and exhibit a positive self-image.
- (ii) **Ambivert attachment** (also called anxious attachment) is characterised by a concern over the uncertainty of a relationship. A person with this attachment style holds a negative self-image while holding a positive image of others. As a result, they “strive for self-acceptance by attempting to gain approval and validation from their relationships with significant others” (Guy-Evans, 2024).
- (iii) **Avoidant attachment** is characterised by “an individual’s tendency to avoid emotional closeness and dismiss the importance of intimate relationships, often as a self-protective measure” (Drescher, 2024a). Opposite to ambivert attachment, individuals with this attachment style hold a positive self-image and a negative image of others.
- (iv) **Disorganised attachment** (also called fearful attachment) is characterised by a fear of close relationships. A person with this attachment style displays paradoxical behaviour, “wanting commitment and closeness while simultaneously downplaying the importance of intimacy” (Drescher, 2024b). They have an unstable identity and often feel conflicted concerning how to behave in relationships.

According to Christian Scriptures, covenant is essentially a relational concept (Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006:224). Christianity observes three covenants: the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, the covenant between Christ and the Church, and the covenant between spouses and God (Ponzetti & Mutch 2006:224). Covenant relations are rooted in the Hebrew word *hesed*, which refers to a

sense of love and loyalty (Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006:226). In the Bible, *hesed* “indicates a stance of loyalty or solidarity leading to actions that go above and beyond what would normally be expected” (Linafelt, 1999:33). The core idea of *hesed* communicates loyalty or faithfulness within a covenantal relationship (Smith, 2001:24). It is loyalty to promises made (Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006:226). Thus, Christian marriage vows should be understood within the biblical concept of covenant. Covenant language adds a sense of sacredness in the attachment process, allowing couples to further develop meaning and purpose to their relationship with each other and God (Maxwell et al., 2020:120). Research suggests that the metaphor of the covenant between Christ and the Church encourages couples to value each other more, to strive to display behaviours such as love and patience and to invest more in their relationship (Maxwell et al. 2020:119).

The model of covenant attachment reflected in Figure 2 below suggests that the process of behaviours, emotions and cognitions work in the attachment cycle also applies to the process of attachment between marital spouses and God (Maxwell et al., 2020:118). Positive experiences of God can create an IWM of God as a secure attachment figure, affecting one’s ability to be a safe attachment figure for their spouse (Maxwell et al., 2020:119). Nurlu (2020) explains that when one positively perceives God and feels God considers them positively, one is more likely to have a positive view of self and others (Nurlu, 2020:340). As a result, secure attachment to God has been found to correct insecure attachment styles (Nurlu, 2020:240). Maxwell et al. (2020) put forward that a couple’s positive experiences of God can produce a Shared Working Model (SWM) of God as a safe attachment figure for the relationship (Maxwell et al., 2020:119). “In the same way a person’s IWMs are made up of view-of-self and view-of-other, a couple’s SWMs in their shared attachment to God are made up of view-of-God and view-of-relationship. These SWMs influenced the shared attachment behaviours of the couple in the same way IWMs act as procedural scripts in relationships” (Maxwell et al., 2020:119).

The model employs Butler and Harper’s (1994) divine triangle, which describes a couple’s relationship with God where each individual’s movement toward God reflects a movement toward each other. This is the concept of relational spirituality, which suggests that one’s relationship with God influences interpersonal relationships (Davis et al., 2009:267). The model also makes use of Woolley and Kallos-Lilly’s (2011) attachment cycle infinity loop, which is used in Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) to assess interactional patterns.

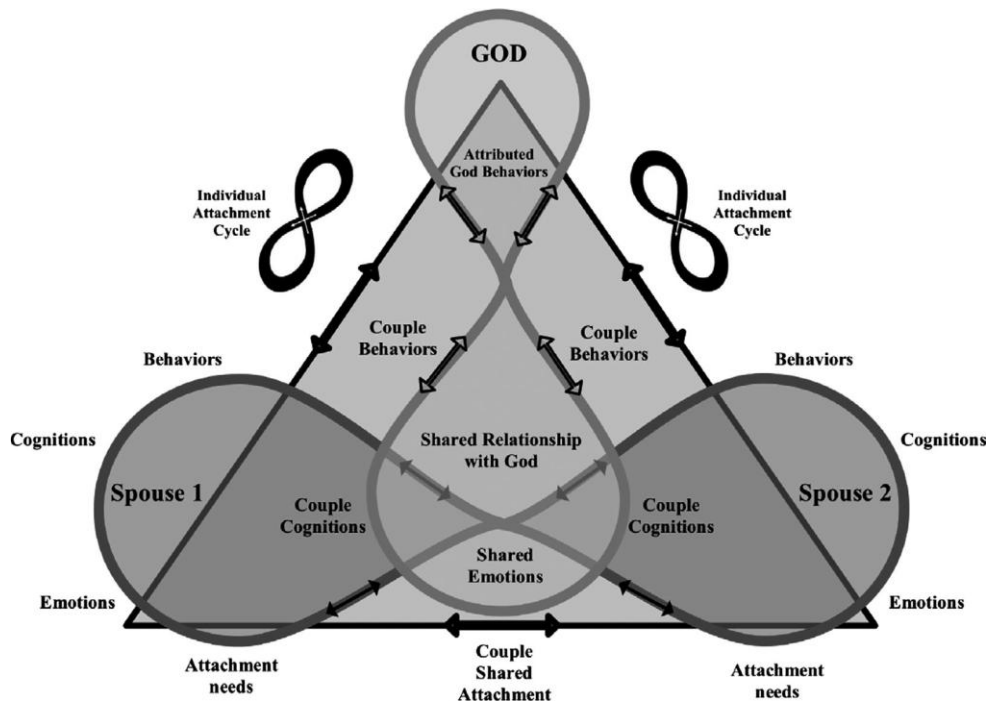


Figure 2: Model of Covenant Attachment (Maxwell et al. 2020)

“Arrows in the triangle represent individual movement toward God as well as individual movement toward spouse in the relationship when moving upward, toward the peak of the triangle. In doing so, couples can experience God as being closer to them, as indicated by the bidirectional arrow” (Maxwell et al., 2020:118). The infinity symbol illustrates “both the couple’s relationship with each other in the triangle process as well as the couple’s shared relationship with God, as shown by the vertical infinity loop. The arrows reflect the interaction process of behaviours, emotions, and cognitions in each cycle. The vertical cycle represents the couple behaviours as well as the couple’s shared emotional experiences and shared cognitions that the couple relies on to develop perceptions or an understanding of God in their relationship” (Maxwell et al., 2020:118). The goal of the covenant attachment model is to move couples up the triangle, closer to each other and closer to God both as individuals and as a couple (Maxwell et al., 2020:120).

PMC plays a critical role in preparing couples for marriage by guiding and informing them on the dynamics of a marital relationship and the necessary skills to sustain it. It is also essential for self-exploration and strengthening emotional bonds in couples. The covenant attachment theory was therefore chosen as it offers a way to understand both the relationship system in Christian marriage and the significance of attachment in a marital relationship.

2.4. Premarital counselling

“Marriage preparation has been a traditional component of family socialisation, supported by religious and social guidance on mate selection and marital role performance” (Silliman & Schumm, 2000:133). For centuries, congregations and communities have recognised that marriage is not an institution to be entered into without preparation (Humphreys, 2006:9). Following the establishment of marriage as a sacrament by the church in 1164, clergy were the primary contact with premarital couples (Summers & Cunningham, 1989:328). Prior to World War II, marriage preparation was undertaken by churches, community counselling and colleges (Silliman & Schumm, 2000:133). Following World War II, there was a shift in the field of psychology from individual problems to interpersonal interactions (Summers & Cunningham, 1989:328). This birthed the field of marriage and family therapy. This development in the field of psychology had an impact on the field of theology, leading to pioneering clergy initiating a movement of what is today known as pastoral counselling (Silliman & Schumm, 2000:133; Summers & Cunningham, 1989:328).

PMC is a preventative effort attempting to intervene at the transition point of the beginning of a marriage to give couples a stronger foundation for a stable and satisfactory marriage (Stahmann, 2000:104). PMC triumphs marital counselling in addressing the issue of marriage instability since many couples will only seek counselling when they are highly distressed, if they will even seek help at all (Williams, 2011:323). PMC is preventative, educational and curative (Stahmann, 2000:106). PMC is preventative, empowering couples with information and skills to deal with important issues before problems develop (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019:55). The benefits of participating in a marriage preparation program include enhanced communication and conflict management skills, more commitment to one's mate, greater positivity in marriage and reduced chances of marital distress and divorce (Duncan et al., 2010:623, Wilmoth & Blaney, 2016:859). Couples who undergo PMC are also more likely to seek help at earlier stages of marital distress, making it easier to resolve problems and avoid divorce (Carlson et al., 2020:54; Williams, 2011:319). The ability of PMC to prevent divorce rests on its effectiveness in improving marital relationships (Carroll & Doherty, 2003:26). By improving the prospective marital relationship, it is hoped that divorce will be reduced, enhancing the mental and physical health of the couple and family (Stahmann, 2000:105). According to Stahmann (2000), PMC has six main goals:

- (i) Easing the transition from single to married life
- (ii) Increasing couple stability and satisfaction for the short and long term
- (iii) Enhancing communication skills
- (iv) Increasing attachment and commitment to the relationship
- (v) Increasing couple intimacy

- (vi) Enhancing problem-solving and decision-making skills (Stahmann 2000:105).

Other important goals of PMC include assessing readiness for marriage, helping couples identify and discuss possibly problematic areas and assisting the premarital couple to examine, confirm or alter their decision to marry. Stahmann (2000) postulates that there is no evidence of adverse effects of participating in marriage preparation programs (Stahmann, 2000:107). However, Chisale (2016) argues that PMC fuels GBV by promoting dangerous masculine and feminine conceptualisations of marriage (Chisale, 2016:55). This happens when PMC is permeated with patriarchal ideologies. Based on her personal experience, she protests that “both traditional and Christian premarital counselling teachings are hierarchical and autocratic, pushing women into submissive roles that promote intimate wife abuse” (Chisale, 2016:66). When patriarchal norms and values inform PMC, it results in the denigration of the rights and dignity of women.

2.4.1. Determinants of effective premarital counselling

Evidence of the effectiveness of PMC has been established through meta-analyses and survey research. The three elements that affect the effectiveness of PMC are timing, process and content (Giblin 1994:148) as reflected in Figure 3 below.

When PMC takes place and for how long it takes place has an effect on how useful it is. The timing of premarital preparation needs to take into account the possibility of re-evaluating a relationship or a decision to delay or cancel the marriage. For this reason, PMC should not take place within close proximity to the solemnization of the marriage. Studies report that couples who participated in PMC within two months of the wedding found the experience less beneficial compared to couples whose wedding was more than two months away (Russel & Lyster, 1992, Stahmann, 2000, Williams, 2011). PMC is most beneficial when obtained early in the relationship and several months before the wedding (Stahmann, 2000:112). Mwit and Dueck (2006) recommend that PMC take place at least six months before the wedding (Mwit & Dueck, 2006:163).

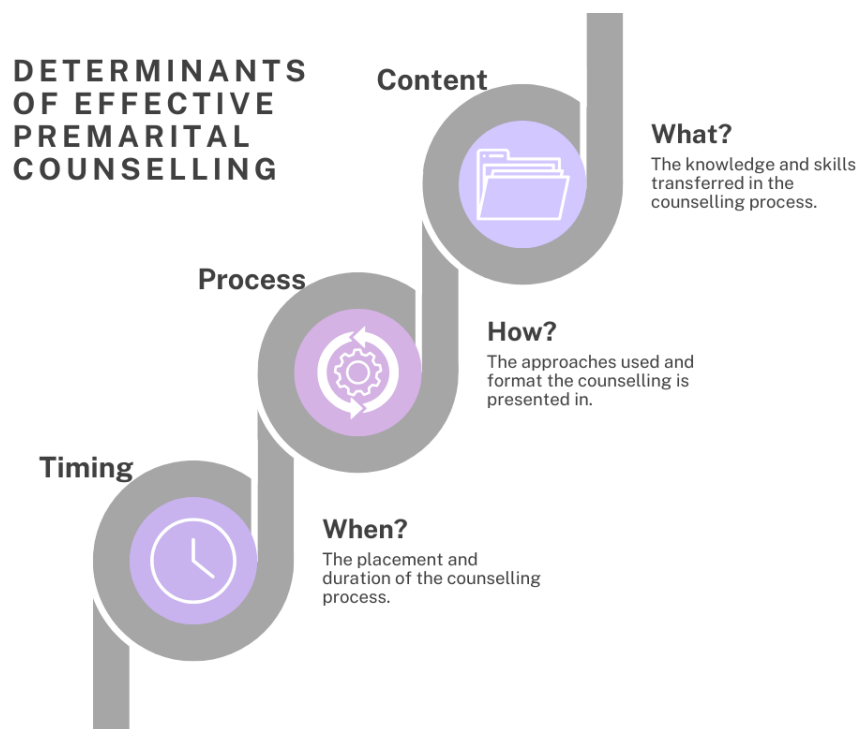


Figure 3: Determinants of effective premarital counselling (Giblin 1994)

The perceived helpfulness of PMC is positively related to the length of the program and whether participation was voluntary (Duncan et al., 2010:625). Williams (2011) recommended that for PMC to be beneficial, the couple should attend eight to nine sessions, with more sessions not necessarily being more helpful (Williams, 2011:320). Timing is equally important after the marriage has been officiated, as the six- to twelve-month period after the wedding presents a window of opportunity for couples to learn and practice marital coping skills when they really need them (Giblin, 1994:148; Moeti et al., 2024:5). The postnuptial follow-up session is therefore an essential part of PMC (Stahmann, 2000:112).

How PMC happens also has an effect on how beneficial it is. The process involves the approach and format of the marriage preparation. Information-based marriage preparation promotes understanding of concepts related to marriage through lectures, demonstrations, and presentations (Wilmoth, 2015:106). Skills-based PMC not only transfers knowledge but also provides guidance in practising relationship skills (e.g. communication skills, conflict resolution, problem-solving skills). Research has found skills-based marriage preparation to be more helpful in influencing marital outcomes (Wilmoth, 2015:106). This explains why the use of premarital assessment inventories has proven to be so effective (Giblin, 1994:148; Stahmann, 2000:112). More will be said on premarital inventories in the section to follow.

Approaches that help couples dialogue with each other are perceived to be more useful when compared to approaches methods that lecture (Giblin, 1994:148). This is because premarital participants expect to learn about themselves, their relationship and each other (Stahmann, 2000:111). According to research, couples consider spending time together and learning about each other to be the most valuable aspect of PMC (Murray, 2006:70).

Trained professionals can facilitate PMC or lay counsellors who either work individually or as part of a team. A setting where a team offers PMC has been rated the most helpful (Stahmann, 2000:112). PMC can be conducted in a group format or an individual couple format. The advantage of the group format is that couples get to compare and contrast their relationship with others, allowing them to normalise marital adjustment in healthy ways (Stahmann, 2000:112). It also allows couples to not only get feedback from the counsellor, but from other couples too. The limitation of the group format in PMC is that specific needs may not be addressed due to time constraints, program design or the domination of one couple or theme (Stahmann, 2000:112). Some couples may also experience challenges with interacting freely in a group setting. The individual couple format has many advantages. It allows the counsellor to focus attention and energy on one couple instead of having to deal with group dynamics (Stahmann, 2000:112). The topics the counsellor addresses can be personalised to meet the couple's specific needs and context (Stahmann, 2000:112). Also, the couple can focus on their issues without being sidetracked by the issues of others

PMC can also be self-directed, guided by books, online courses and inventories. Self-directed premarital interventions are more convenient, cost-effective and less intrusive (Duncan et al., 2010:633).

The effectiveness of PMC is also impacted by the content covered during the marriage preparation process. Research suggests that marriage preparation content should focus on dealing with the initial transitions of adjusting to married life (Murray, 2006:70). The content of marriage preparation programs is flexible and varies from one program to another. Generally, the content consists of topics that address marital issues, which are likely to cause conflict in the relationship. The content will almost always include communication and conflict resolution skills. These will be supplemented by other subjects consistent with the professional, pastoral and personal characteristics of the counselling provider who may choose which topics to address based on their experience, training, and preferences (Mujoko, 2013:26; Murray, 2006:78).

The content of PMC is also influenced by contextual variables such as the couple's relationship, religious beliefs, the sociopolitical context, family-of-origin influences, and cultural background (Murray, 2006:77). Couples do not value all topics treated during PMC equally since the context

of each couple's relationship differs. Premarital couples have been found to benefit from a knowledge of the human life cycle, developmental tasks, potential problems, communication, problem-solving, decision-making, anger management, and intimacy creation (Giblin, 1994:150). Other topics commonly addressed include expectations, family of origin, in-laws, commitment, sex and romance, marital roles, religion, finances and parenting (Adzovie & Dabone, 2021:11; Ansah-Hughes et al., 2015:72; Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019:55; Murray, 2006:70). It is also vital for the content to not only share knowledge but also to teach relationship skills by incorporating exercises.

2.4.2. Marriage preparation programs and inventories

Formal PMC programs were practised as early as the 1930s. The first formal premarital program was developed at the Merrill-Palmer Institute in 1932 (Carroll & Doherty, 2003:6). Premarital education programs are a knowledge and skills-based training procedure aimed at providing couples with information and resources on ways to improve their marital relationship (Carroll & Doherty, 2003:4). The programs have a preventive orientation. They are aimed at creating awareness and understanding of potential problems which may occur in marriage, as well as preventing or ameliorating such problems (Carroll & Doherty, 2003:5).

Marriage instability has led to the increased development of different marriage preparation programs. There are currently many marriage preparation programs and inventories, predominantly from the United States of America. Widely used programs and inventories include Relationship Enhancement Programme (RE); Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP); PREmarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement and Enrich (PREPARE/ENRICH); RELATionship Education (RELATE); Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study (FOCCUS); and Saving Your Marriage Before It Begins (SYMBIS). Below is an outline of four skills-based premarital programs which are not only widely used but are also empirically supported.

Relationship Enhancement (RE) was developed in 1969 by Louise and Bernard Guerney at Pennsylvania State University. It is amongst the earliest programs to be developed, taking an educational approach rather than conforming to the medical approach of the time, which emphasised diagnosis and treatment (Ginsberg, 2006:81). The theoretical foundation of RE program is based on psychodynamic, humanistic, behavioural, and interpersonal theories (Lieser et al. 2007:378). The ten RE skills that are taught are: Empathic skill, Expressive skill, Discussion/Negotiation skill, Problem/Conflict Resolution skill, Facilitation skill, Conflict Management skill, Self-Change skill, Helping-Others Change skill, Generalisation skill and Maintenance skill (National Institute of Relationship Enhancement, 2024). It is a humanistic model

which mainly teaches couples communication and problem-solving skills. These skills are practised through role-playing and discussions as the facilitators assess how effectively the couple uses these skills (Williams, 2011:312).

Couple Communication (CC) was developed in the early 1970s at the University of Minnesota Family Study Centre by Drs. Sherod Miller, Daniel Wackman, and Elam Nunnally (Couple Communication, 2024). It is a systems-based awareness and skill-training program teaching couples communication and conflict resolution skills (Silliman & Schumm, 2000:134, Williams, 2011:312). These skills can be taught to couples in group sessions totalling 8 hours or in couple sessions totalling about 12 hours. Its objectives are increasing self-awareness, awareness of the partner, and the relationship; teaching effective talking and listening skills; expanding options for enriching the relationship; and increasing satisfaction with resolutions (Lieser et al., 2007: 375). The program has been translated into over a dozen languages and is currently in its fifth edition (Couple Communication, 2024).

Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) was developed in 1980 by Howard Markman and Scott Stanley at the University of Denver. “PREP is an empirically informed and rigorously tested model for teaching couples how to communicate, manage conflicts without damaging closeness, protect friendship, enhance commitment, and clarify expectations” (PREP Inc., 2024). The program is designed to prevent marital distress and divorce through teaching couples to take control of their conflicts and handle disagreements constructively (Renick et al., 1992:142). PREP is a behavioural-cognitive skills-based preventative intervention program which teaches premarital couples’ skills essential for marital success. These skills include efficient and effective communication, problem-solving skills, conflict management and resolution, and preservation and enhancement of love and friendship. Its goals are to improve communication and conflict resolution skills, to explore commitment attitudes and choices, and to enhance the relationship bond (Williams, 2011:313). PREP has undergone several revisions since its establishment. The name has since been revised to the Prevention and Relationship Education Program. The latest version, PREP 8.0 v2, contains videos, activities and discussion questions and is available in English and Spanish (PREP Inc., 2024).

Practical application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) was first introduced by Lori Gordon in 1983 at the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. It began as a semester-long college graduate course at American University and evolved into an advanced professional training tool (PAIRS Skills, 2024). PAIRS is an educational program based on a multidimensional model integrating commonly accepted concepts, skills, and values about love, intimacy, and marriage (DeMaria, 2005:247). The theoretical foundation of the program involves concepts from areas such as experiential, object relations, communication, behavioural, and

family systems approaches (Lieser et al., 2007:376). The program emphasises learning skills and self-exploration (Williams, 2011:314), which allows the couple to enjoy their differences rather than viewing them as threats. PAIRS integrates theories and methods from psychology, education and psychotherapy, presenting them in an educational format (PAIRS Skills, 2024). Like other empirically based approaches, “PAIRS is an emotionally focused model designed to strengthen secure attachment and emotional bonds in couples through the teaching and training of strategies that enhance relationship competence and emotional literacy” (DeMaria, 2005:247-248). PAIRS is one of the most comprehensive, lengthy, and intense programs, amounting to one hundred and twenty hours (DeMaria, 2005:248, Williams, 2011:314).

Assessment is an essential component of PMC. Premarital inventories or premarital assessment questionnaires (PAQs) are a meaningful element of many PMC programs as they provide couples individualised feedback about their relationship, helping them identify strengths and growth areas (Williams, 2011:314; Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010:254). They are intended to facilitate a dialogue between the couple about their relationship and not necessarily a test if the couple should marry (Williams, 2011:314). The advantages of using inventories or PAQs include promoting couple-involvement, the couple’s investment in the process, and eliciting information more efficiently (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010:255). Inventories also provide information that makes it possible for the facilitator to focus on specific issues that are relevant for the couple (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010:255). Below is an outline and comparison of three comprehensive premarital inventories, which, according to Larson et al. (2002), are not only widely used but are also considered the most psychometrically sound.

Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study (FOCCUS) was developed in 1985 by a team of three family and marriage therapists: Markey, Micheletto, and Becker. It was further developed by SRI Research Centre, which conducted all psychometric tests on the inventory instrument in 1986, 1997, 2000, and 2008 (FOCCUS, 2024). In 2013, further research was conducted into the effectiveness of the FOCCUS inventory in the context of current, developing issues affecting couples. The Fourth Edition of the FOCCUS Pre-Marriage Inventory was released based on the research results (FOCCUS, 2024). The FOCCUS Pre-Marriage Inventory is a comprehensive, user-friendly, and affordable tool for both professionals and lay individuals who are involved in preparing couples for marriage. The 151-item inventory “assesses couples’ agreement, disagreement, or indecision about statements related to important issues, such as communication, problem-solving, religion, family and friends, careers, cohabitation, parenting, sexuality, finances, and more” (FOCCUS, 2024). The computer-generated report shows patterns of strengths and areas that need the couple’s attention. The trained facilitator is responsible for guiding the couple’s discussion based on the report. Being originally developed

by the Archdiocese of Omaha, it is based in the Roman Catholic Faith. It is, however, available in a variety of non-denominational formats. It is able to serve diverse populations, being available in six editions, six languages, and with sections tailored to specific couple situations (FOCCUS, 2024).

RELATE Relationship Assessment, previously known as RELATionship Education (RELATE), was developed by the Relate Institute at Brigham Young University in the early 1980s. It was developed through reviewing over fifty years of research that delineated the important premarital predictors of later marital quality and stability and continues to evolve with emerging research (Busby et al., 2001:308). The RELATE questionnaire is designed to help couples have meaningful discussions about criteria proven to affect relational satisfaction. It also helps couples with identifying both common ground and trouble spots in the relationship (RELATE, 2024). The RELATE assessment scores couples on ten aspects of relationship satisfaction: kindness and flexibility, emotional readiness, family background, relationship quality, effective communication, conflict resolution, sexual satisfaction, relational aggression, attachment and relationship effort (RELATE, 2024). The report produced by the assessment details how couples view themselves and their partner in each of these areas. The report includes discussion questions and online resources to help spark meaningful conversations. The assessment is available online without the help of a facilitator. Couples have the option to have a registered therapist look over their RELATE report and provide feedback and insight.

PREmarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement and Enrichment (PREPARE/ENRICH), previously known as PREPARE, was developed in 1977. In 1980, PREPARE Inc. was founded by David Olson and his wife, Karen Olson. PREPARE/ENRICH has two components. The first component is the assessment, which assesses satisfaction levels for premarital couples in twelve relationship categories, including personality, interpersonal dynamics, couple and family system, relationship strength and major stressors (Olsen-Sigg & Olsen, 2011:1). Assessment results are compiled into a Facilitator Report. It assists facilitators in gaining personalised insights into relationship dynamics, commitment levels, personality, spiritual beliefs, and family systems (PREPARE-ENRICH, 2024). The assessment is customised and strengths-oriented, to focus on what the couple needs. The second component is the program aimed at teaching relationship skills based on the assessment findings. The couple receives a Couple Workbook containing twenty exercises that the facilitator will guide them through. Its design allows it to be integrated into most theoretical and therapeutic models of couple counselling (Olsen-Sigg & Olsen, 2011:1).

Although some of these premarital programs and assessments are adaptable to cater for diverse populations, they are not necessarily designed to tackle the realities of the African Christian context.

2.4.3. Premarital Screening

From a health perspective, marriage requires the two people preparing to marry to pay attention to their health status and medical history. Premarital screening is one of the preventative measures that a couple can take to avoid health problems that can result from marriage. Premarital screening involves a panel of tests in which premarital couples are tested for genetic disorders, infectious diseases and other medical conditions to detect potential health problems and risks that may affect the couple or their offspring (Alkalbani et al., 2022:1, Elhadi et al., 2023:2; More, 2020:6369).

Genetic blood disorders tested include Cystic fibrosis, Sickle cell anemia and Thalassemia. Infectious diseases tested for include Hepatitis B and C, Syphilis, and HIV/AIDS. Premarital screening includes routine examinations such as Complete Blood Count (CBC), Complete Urine Analysis and Peripheral Blood Smears, Pelvic exams, Blood group testing (ABO-RH), Infectious diseases testing, Reproductive health testing and Genetic testing (More, 2020:6369).

Premarital screening “provides an opportunity of intervention including vaccination, genetic and behavioural counselling, guidance regarding contraception, medical treatment for infections or chronic diseases, and medication to decrease risks based upon identified disease, risks or anomalies” (More, 2020:6369). Its importance is in its potential to avoid the transmission of genetic disorders and other health risks across generations (Elhadi et al., 2023:2).

Genetic counselling after premarital screening is vital to bring understanding about the disease risk detected and create awareness concerning available preventive measures or treatments (Gbeneol et al., 2015:53, More, 2022:6372). Genetic counselling enables the premarital couple to make appropriate decisions about marriage, reproduction and health (Alswaidi & O'Brien, 2009:24). Genetic counselling is known to be unsuccessful at discouraging at-risk marriages (Elhadi et al., 2023:7). This is often a result of religious and traditional cultural beliefs as well as the timing at which the genetic counselling takes place. Premarital screening often takes place too late for premarital couples to change their decision to marry because of their commitment to the relationship by this point (Alswaidi & O'Brien, 2009:24).

Many Mediterranean and Islamic countries, such as Cyprus, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Palestine, Jordan, and Qatar, legally require premarital couples to undergo premarital screening before they can receive marriage certificates (Benere et al., 2019:21). This

could be because of the prevalence of cousin marriage in these countries. “Arabs have one of the world’s highest rates of genetic disorders, nearly two-thirds of which are linked to consanguinity” (Benere et al., 2019:24). Alkalbani et al. (2022) reiterate this when they say, “the greatest effect of consanguinity in Arab countries is the increase in the prevalence of rare autosomal recessive genetic disorders that are not present in other societies” (Alkalbani et al., 2022:2).

“‘Consanguinity’ refers to relationships by blood or common ancestry” (Alswaidi & O’Brien, 2009:24). Consanguineous marriage has a significant contribution towards a women’s adverse reproductive health and fertility behaviour and increases the offspring’s risk of genetic disorders (Elhadi et al., 2023:1). It can also lead to a higher rate of infant mortality and morbidity since the offspring is more likely to be born with congenital defects (Elhadi et al., 2023:1). Children born from consanguineous marriages are also “at a higher risk of developing genetic disorders and chronic diseases later in life” (Elhadi et al., 2023:1).

Premarital screening programs differ in their design and implementation in each of these countries. The design is dependent on the country’s “genetic disease prevalence and the availability of effective tests that allow a high rate of detection” (Benere et al., 2019:21). Although South Africa has a low prevalence of sickle cell disease, its demographics are changing due to immigration from Sub-Saharan countries where sickle cell disease is prevalent (Wonkam, 2012:752).

Due to Nigeria having a high prevalence of sickle cell disease, churches in southern Nigeria make premarital screening for the disease mandatory for couples who want their weddings conducted by the church (Gbeneol et al., 2015:52). This study by Gbeneol et al., (2015) found that this insistence of the churches on premarital screening carries almost the same force as the statutory programs of Middle Eastern countries (Gbeneol et al., 2015:52). It was, however, observed that religious organizations championing premarital screening were not adequately equipped to provide the screening (Gbeneol et al., 2015:53). A study conducted in Ghana found that although Ghanaian Christian leaders had a high awareness of sickle cell disease, some had a distorted understanding concerning vital details about the condition (Okwere et al., 2024:8). Training these religious leaders would enable them to engage their congregants better and give correct guidance concerning the control or prevention of the disease.

Sub-Saharan Africa is the epicentre of the HIV pandemic (Hampanda et al., 2023:1). In this region, two-thirds of HIV infections occur among stable couples (Hampanda et al., 2023:1). Couples HIV Testing and Counselling (CHTC) is a strategy designed to make HIV Testing and Counselling (HTC) more accessible to couples. The World Health Organisation (WHO) argues that CHTC can increase HIV testing among people in a stable sexual relationship (Hailemariam et al., 2019:1).

CHTC typically focuses on heterosexual couples who are already married. Nnaji et al. (2014) conducted a study into premarital HIV screening in Nigeria. According to the study, most churches and religious institutions require their members to undergo screening for HIV before their marriage can be allowed to marry (Nnaji et al., 2014:13). They argue that these mandatory premarital HIV screening infringes upon the human rights of people living with HIV/AIDS (Nnaji et al., 2014:13). “This act threatens the three key principles of HIV testing; that individuals freely consent to testing; that counselling is provided before and after testing; and that results are kept confidential” (Nnaji et al., 2014:13). The screening is accused of discriminating against people living with HIV and AIDS and discouraging sero-discordant couples from marrying. The stigmatization can lead to people obtaining fake results or opting not to marrying (Nnaji et al., 2014:14).

The study recommended that religious leaders be educated on voluntary counselling and screening as well as the rights of premarital couples (Nnaji et al., 2014:18). Mandatory premarital HIV screening has been found to be ineffective in reducing infection rates when compared to other methods such as public education, counselling and voluntary testing (Alswaidi & O'Brien, 2009:26). Where implemented in the United States, mandatory premarital HIV screening was discontinued due to legal concerns (Alswaidi & O'Brien, 2009:26).

Despite its importance, premarital screening is not widely practised in South Africa. A recent study (Hampanda et al. 2023) affirms that CHTC remains underutilised by couples in sub-Saharan Africa despite its many benefits and multiple access points (Hampanda et al., 2023:2).

2.4.4. Premarital counselling in the Church

The church has a long history of addressing couples before their wedding. As previously stated, clergy are the predominant providers of PMC. The majority of PMC is offered through churches as a prerequisite before being married by the church (Moeti et al., 2024:1, Williams, 2011:315). The marriage preparation process can either be facilitated by the clergy and/or mentor couples. The church's role in helping future spouses prepare for marriage and family life is, however, not a ministry that commences with engaged couples. Marriage preparation begins with educating and forming young people to form successful relationships in the future (Pyżlak, 2018:230). Marriage preparation should therefore not be treated as an event but as a gradual and continuous process. According to the Catholic model, there are three phases of marriage preparation: remote preparation, proximate preparation and immediate preparation. Remote preparation begins in the home, where children are trained to understand and respect important values in interpersonal and social relationships. In remote preparation, parents have the primary responsibility for preparing their children for marriage and family life (Pyżlak, 2018:231). In fulfilling this task, parents need the support of other families and communities, including the church. Clergy can assist parents in

their task by developing and offering children and adolescent programs spurring continuous formation as they grow, helping the young to learn to live in community (Pyżlak, 2018:232).

Proximate preparation takes place in the church, where the faith of young Christians is supported and strengthened. Young people are assisted in discerning their vocation, which is important to take place before commitment to marriage (Pyżlak, 2018:232). Immediate preparation takes place after engagement in the months and weeks preceding the wedding (Pyżlak, 2018:234). During this phase, the clergy evaluates the degree of the couple's formation and knowledge acquired during the proximate preparation. The clergy then fills any eventual gaps in the couple's basic formation (Pyżlak, 2018:234). Ultimately, the clergy needs to confirm the couple's readiness for marriage. When referring to pastoral PMC, most studies, including this one, refer to immediate preparation for marriage.

In their marriage preparation, clergy adopt an information-based approach which revolves around exposition of Bible passages which address marriage (Marks, 2007:47). This approach involves a lot of lecturing, which is considered to be less effective when compared to skills-based approaches. Schwartz and Thiesen (2003) agree that the emphasis on teaching skills during PMC is pragmatic but argue that the goal for PMC in a pastoral setting is not just to establish couples in marriage but to establish them in Christian marriage (Schwartz & Thiesen, 2003:11). PMC by clergy is not only aimed at relationship enhancement but is also aimed at teaching a theology on marriage. It is therefore crucial for pastoral premarital counsellors to communicate the biblical principles of marriage to establish a sound theology on marriage. This might be a component that adds to the effectiveness of pastoral PMC, considering that spirituality has been proven to predict relationship well-being (Klausli & Gross, 2021:180). In fact, belief in the sanctity of marriage can be a motivation for couples to nurture their relationship more (Klausli & Gross 2021:186; Mahoney et al., 1999:323, Nurlu 2020:243). Marriage preparation is one of the few interventions which link social issues with religion (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010:253).

It is advantageous for religious institutions and clergy to provide PMC because of the access they have to a high percentage of couples who want to enter marriage, their belief in the value of marriage and desire to prevent marital distress, the strong educational tradition and because of the level of community involvement in churches (Marks, 2007:44, Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010:253). Clergy have both the opportunity and capability to facilitate marriage preparation (Wilmoth, 2015:103), but questions remain about the availability or effectiveness of clergy-provided premarital programs (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010:254). Clergy have a history of being poorly prepared for their role as premarital counsellors (Summers & Cunningham, 1989:327). Jones and

Stahmann (1994) found that clergy provide PMC without any academic training in PMC (Jones & Stahmann, 1994:181). This leaves clergy to rely on their personal views and experiences as the primary source of knowledge during PMC sessions (Marks 2007:46; Mbunga 2010:67). Although many clergy in the United States report that they make use of assessment tools or premarital assessment questionnaires (PAQs) as part of their marriage preparation (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010:253), data from Africa reveals that the majority of PMC services offered by clergy and religious lay counsellors is unstructured (Christians, 2022:64; Osei-Tutu et al., 2020:205).

Research suggests that PMC practices may differ across different religious denominations (Murray, 2006:78). This can be a result of diverse professional training practices, theological orientations, institutional regulations, cultural influences, and/or regional traditions (Murray, 2006:78). The approach and techniques used by clergy are heavily influenced by the expectations of their particular denomination, often leading to clergy prioritizing the expectations of the church above the desires and needs of the premarital couple (Summers & Cunningham, 1989:329). However, clergy who adhere to the expectations of the pastoral counselling tradition tend to respect the desires and attempt to meet the couple's needs (Summers & Cunningham, 1989:329). Clergy believe that a wide range of topics are important to address in premarital counselling. However, the participants in this study indicated that certain topics were more important to address than others. The five topics that were rated as most important overall were (a) commitment to the marriage, (b) communication skills, (c) attitudes and beliefs toward marriage, (d) conflict resolution, and (e) the importance of spending time with one's partner." (Murray, 2006:76)

In many African churches, marriage preparation is not exclusive to the clergy. Speaking from their personal experience, researchers have documented undergoing PMC conducted by gendered groups from their church (Chisale, 2016:64, Dlamini, 2022:5). The Prayer Women's League "constantly reminded me about my expected role as a wife and woman in the community. Paul's letter to the Eph. was frequently interpreted by both my marriage pastor and women from my church to promote my subjugation in marriage" (Chisale, 2016:64). Similar to the traditional African PMC discussed in the next section, the PMC from church elders focuses on grooming the wife and inevitably promotes gender inequality (Dlamini, 2022:5).

2.4.5. African indigenous marriage preparation

Marriage in Africa is not an event that takes place at once but through a series of meetings, negotiations, and ceremonies (Twene, 2019:4). African marriage experiences more involvement from families when compared to some Western marriages, since African families are part of the negotiations and ceremonies that make up a marriage. Because marriage serves the purpose of

preserving and extending the clan, African families have a responsibility to participate in the establishment and success of all the marriages within their clan (Mbiti, 1969:133; Twene, 2019:19). Senior family members giving counsel to the premarital couple is therefore an integral part of the marriage process (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019:56; Osei-Tutu et al., 2020:204). How it is conducted varies across different African tribes, but *ukuyalwa* usually concludes the process of *ukulobola* (Hellemann & Sipungu 2024:6; Montle 2020:163). Traditional PMC addresses the couple on marital roles and responsibilities as well as expected behaviour (Kapolo, 2001:131; Moeti et al., 2017:249). It also seeks to create boundaries by warning the family members not to interfere in the couple's relationship (Kapolo, 2001:133). Traditional PMC is also used to instil traditional principles and practices (Hellemann & Sipungu 2024:5; Moeti et al., 2017:249). Advisors rely on "cultural knowledge and practices passed on from one generation to the other" to guide the couple (Hellemann & Sipungu, 2024:6). Proverbs, idioms and songs are therefore used to give marriage advice (Moeti et al., 2017:249).

It is rare to communicate concerning values, norms and institutions in the African context without using proverbs (Owu-Ewie, 2019:25). Proverbs are especially used by the elderly when counselling couples. Although these proverbs are regarded as wise oral literature, some of them show gender inequality (Chiliza & Masuku, 2020:59). The following Zulu proverbs are common sayings directed towards brides during traditional PMC:

"Umendo awuthunyelwa gundane" (a mouse cannot be sent to spy on marriage) and *"umendo kawubhulelwa"* (marriage cannot be divined for). Both proverbs mean a young woman does not know what kind of treatment she will receive in her new family. These sayings emphasise the unpredictability of marriage, stating that 'not even a mouse could be sent' to check for a woman what kind of marriage she would have (Chiliza & Masuku, 2020:63; Mathonsi & Mpungose, 2015:37). Marriage cannot be divined for. These sayings can be interpreted as preparing the woman for uncertainty and warning her to behave accordingly as one who has been forewarned (Chiliza & Masuku, 2020:63).

"Ukwenda ukuzilahla" (to wed is to throw oneself away). This proverb means that when a woman gets married, she is risking her life because she does not know what lies ahead in her marriage (Chiliza & Masuku, 2020:64). The woman is permanently leaving her family to join a new family. This is why when a married woman dies, she is buried by her in-laws. Throwing oneself also means forsaking oneself and prioritising the needs of your husband and new family (Chiliza & Masuku, 2020:64).

"Libanjwa lishisa ememdweni" (in marriage you hold it even when it is hot) and *"Emendweni kuyabekezlwa"* (in marriage one perseveres). The first proverb refers to how

a pot is handled and not released when hot. Just like how a woman will hold a hot pot even though it burns her while cooking, she needs to persevere when faced with difficulties in her marriage. Suffering in marriage is normalised. Through these proverbs, women are taught to endure even abusive behaviour from their husbands. Women are also expected to put up with their husbands' infidelity since men are traditionally and socially allowed to have more than one sexual partner (Chisale, 2016:62). In fact, a wife is discouraged from speculating about her husband's affairs by sayings such as "*indoda ayibuzwa*" (a man is not questioned about his whereabouts). She is never to complain about any assumed infidelity (Dlamini, 2022:14; Resane, 2024:6).

It is concerning that such assertions are not made to the man as a party in the marriage. African tradition unfairly places the responsibility of sustaining a marriage solely on the woman's shoulders (Chisale 2016:61; Mathonsi & Mpungose 2015:36). Dlamini (2022) clearly remembers the teachings she received from other women during her PMC: "I was told to cook for my husband and keep the house neat and tidy. The importance of keeping silent and serving my in-laws, prioritizing everyone other than myself was emphasised" (Dlamini, 2022:5).

Together with celebrating the marriage, traditional wedding songs communicate advice concerning marital gender roles and expectations. Traditional wedding songs sung during the various marriage-related ceremonies are also seen to perpetuate gender stereotypes. Nkosi et al. (2024) found five gender stereotypes portrayed in Zulu traditional wedding songs: "1) Women as servants in the household, (2) Women should submit to abusive husbands, (3) Women are "gold diggers," (4) Women's worth is their ability to have children, and (5) Women are immoral" (Nkosi et al., 2024:46). Songs such as the one below are commonly sung during Zulu marriage ceremonies, communicating the duties that the bride is expected to fulfil in her in-laws' home:

Umakot' ungowethu, siyavuma (The bride is ours, we agree)

Ungowethu ngempela, siyavuma (Indeed, she is ours, we agree)

Uzosiwashel'asiphekele, siyavuma (She will wash and cook for us, we agree)

Sithi helele, helele, siyavuma! (We say hurray, hurray, we agree)

At a deeper level, such songs not only express the traditional gender role of a wife but also communicate how a bride is more of a servant in her new household rather than a full member of the family (Nkosi et al., 2024:46). The bride is often overburdened with an unfair amount of housework and is restricted from participating in recreational activities (Nkosi et al., 2024:47). She is expected to awake early to retrieve water from the river, return to prepare food for the entire

family before commencing her daily chores (Nkosi et al., 2024:48; Resane, 2023:3). The wedding song below is a complaint concerning the lack of water in the house at daybreak:

Iqhude we ma, lakhala kabili kathathu (The rooster, oh mother, it crowed twice, thrice)

Sekusil'amanz'awekho ma (It is now dawn, there is no water, mother)

Sekusil'amanz'awekho! (It is now dawn, there is no water)

The lyrics of this song are written from the perspective of the groom's sisters, who are complaining to their mother about the bride's laziness. Such songs intimidate the bride by causing her to expect accusations and mistreatment from her in-laws. Songs like these also normalize the unhealthy relationship between the bride and her in-laws, particularly her mother-in-law who she lives under the supervision of. Another traditional Zulu wedding song depicting how in-laws tend to mistreat a bride:

Niboy'gcina, niboy'gcina, niboy'gcina lentandane (You should take care of, you should take care of, you should take care of this orphan)

K'sasa n'zothuyeba (Tomorrow you will say she steals)

Nith'uyathakatha (You will say she practices witchcraft)

Nith'udl'amaqand'umakoti (You will say the bride eats eggs)

The lyrics of this song plead with the groom's family not to mistreat the bride. The bride is metaphorically described as an orphan since she is now a new member in a new family (Nkosi et al., 2024:51). The song prepares the bride to face baseless claims and character assaults from her in-laws while being alienated from her own family. Another traditional wedding song depicts a mother begging her daughter's in-laws, particularly her mother-in-law, to please help her in taking care of her daughter:

Anibong'khulisela, isencane lengane (Please raise her for me, this child is still young)

Anibongilekelela, isencane lengane (Please help me, this child is still young)

Other variations of the song will use "*aniboy'nakekela*" (please take care of her). The lyrics of this song express the mother-of-the-bride's distress over the kind of treatment her daughter will receive in her new home.

It is not uncommon for wedding songs to not only portray mistreatment from in-laws but also mistreatment from the spouse as well. These songs depict a husband who cheats on his wife or physically abuses her (Nkosi et al., 2024:49). The Zulu wedding song below is one such song:

We sibali! We sibali! We sibali! (Hey, brother-in-law! Hey, brother-in-law! Hey, brother-in-law!)

Mbuyisel'ekhaya! (Bring her back home)

Usiz'ungamushayi! (Please do not hit her)

Ungambulali! (Do not kill her)

Um'ekwehlula (If you can't handle her)

Mbuyisel'ekhaya! (Bring her back home)

The lyrics of this song are written from the perspective of the bride's sister, who is pleading with her sister's husband not to mistreat her but to bring her back should she prove too difficult. As much as this song speaks to the groom, it intimidates the bride by depicting marriage as having the possibility of spousal abuse or even death (Nkosi et al., 2024:49).

Another common theme in traditional wedding songs is advice for the bride to persevere in marriage.

Bekezela mntanomuntu, bekezele' emendweni (Persevere child of someone, persevere in marriage)

Ngoba umendo wawuthunyelwa Umdali (Because marriage was sent to you by the Creator)

Bamba nomakushisa mntanami (Hold on even when it gets hot)

Kuyabekezelw' emendweni (In marriage one perseveres)

The lyrics of this song urge the bride to persevere in her marriage because marriage is a blessing from God. As a gift from God, she should not allow her marriage to be destroyed but should endure all the hardships that she faces in marriage. Such calls for the bride to persevere can be dangerous, as they can be applied in situations involving physical and sexual abuse. It is problematic that the messages of these songs reinforce gender stereotypes that oppress married women, failing to counsel African couples in building stable marriages.

Nkosi et al. (2024) recommend that Zulu communities be more discerning concerning which songs they sing during ceremonies, avoiding or recomposing songs which reinforce oppressive gender stereotypes and perpetuate the normalisation of abusive in-law relationships (Nkosi et al., 2024:12).

Although in some modern African communities, *ukuyalwa* is now strictly directed towards brides (Chisale, 2016:62; Makwanise & Masuku, 2016:11; Montle, 2020:163), John Kambalame in Kapolo (2001) points out that this was not always the case, as words of counsel were directed to both the groom and the bride (Kapolo, 2001:131). Where *ukuyalwa* is directed towards the wife, experienced women will take turns advising the bride based on their own experiences (Moeti et al., 2017:248). They will groom her, instilling a sense of discipline in her. This would help her to conduct herself in an acceptable manner in the eyes of her husband and her in-laws (Makwanise & Masuku, 2016:11). Her family will emphasise that she is their representative in the new family she is joining. Any bad behaviour is a reflection on them and how they raised her (Resane, 2023:3). From their study, Moeti et al. (2017) reveal that brides question what they are being taught, finding it outdated and trampling upon women's rights (Moeti et al., 2017:254). This is due to some proverbs, such as the ones stated above, being counterproductive to building a stable marriage. Some participants in the study felt that sessions should be interactive, allowing the bride to ask questions (Moeti et al., 2017:252). Participants also felt strongly about receiving counselling together with their grooms. Receiving counselling together ensures that the couple receives the same information that they can use in building a stable marriage (Moeti et al., 2007:254).

In traditional African society, PMC is a continuous process beginning in childhood up to marriage (Chisale, 2016:58). Marriage preparation forms part of traditional initiation or puberty rites in most African societies. Young men and women are ushered into adulthood by being educated on topics such as sexual behaviour, marriage and family life (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019:56). *Ukuyalwa* is not only premarital but takes place within marriage too. Since African families take responsibility for the marriages within their clans, they are responsible to mediate marital disputes (Hellemann & Sipungu 2024:6; Makwanise & Masuku 2016:3; Mohlatlole et al., 2017:256). Should the wife or husband misbehave and not conduct themselves as they should, the husband's family steps in to advise or even admonish the wrong party (Makwanise & Masuku, 2016:12). But should the husband's family fail in advising the wife, she is sent back to her parents to receive more advice concerning how to conduct herself in marriage (Makwanise & Masuku, 2016:12).

2.5. Summary and Conclusion

An understanding of PMC necessitates an understanding of marriage; thus, the chapter began by attempting to define marriage. Marriage is an institution rooted in the social context it is lived within; there is therefore no one definition of marriage that fits all contexts. The study defined marriage from a religious, cultural and legal context. In a Christian religious context, marriage was defined as a conjugal covenant reflective of the covenant relationship between God and his

people. As a covenant, marriage is sacred, permanent, mutual, intimate and exclusive. In an African cultural context, marriage was defined as a permanent union between a man and a woman aimed at the preservation of a clan and its culture. Marriage in most traditional African societies is hierarchical, patriarchal, patrilineal and polygamous. In a South African law context, marriage was defined as a consensual legal, social and physical union entered into between heterosexual, homosexual or non-binary persons who are over 18 years of age and who undertake reciprocal rights and obligations of financial, emotional and psychological care and maintenance as well as emotional, physical and psychological intimacy. South African law recognises three types of marriage: civil marriage, customary marriage and civil union. Marriage is evidently a complex, multidimensional experience of which adequate preparation is paramount.

The chapter discussed the framework the study is grounded in, the Covenant Attachment Theory, which offers a means to understand the relationship system in Christian marriage and the significance of attachment in a marital relationship.

The chapter further discussed PMC as a preventative effort aimed at giving couples a strong foundation for a stable and satisfactory marriage. Meta-analyses and survey research attest to the effectiveness of PMC. The usefulness of PMC is determined by when it takes place and for how long. It should not take place in close proximity to the wedding and should not go beyond nine sessions. The approach to PMC also determines its effectiveness. Skills-based PMC is more useful in comparison to information-based PMC. Also, the individual couple format outweighs the group format. The last determinant of the usefulness of PMC is content. A variety of marriage preparation programs and inventories have been developed, mainly from the United States. Widely used programs and inventories include Relationship Enhancement Programme (RE); Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP); PREmarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement and Enrich (PREPARE/ENRICH); RELATIONSHIP Education (RELATE); Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study (FOCCUS); and Saving Your Marriage Before It Begins (SYMBIS).

The chapter then delved into how holistic marriage preparation also involves a focus on the couple's health. Premarital screening ensures that couples pay attention to their health status and medical history before marrying. It consists of a panel of tests where the couple is tested for genetic disorders, infectious diseases and other medical conditions to detect potential problems and risks that may affect them or their offspring.

When it came to PMC in the church, the literature reviewed outlined that although PMC practices differ across different religious denominations, clergy generally utilise an information-based approach revolving around the exposition of Bible passages addressing marriage. Although clergy

have both the opportunity and capability to facilitate marriage preparation, clergy have a history of being poorly prepared for their role as premarital counsellors. In African churches, PMC is not exclusive to clergy but reflects African Indigenous marriage preparation practices by involving elders in the church. African indigenous marriage preparation involves senior family members addressing premarital couples on marital roles and responsibilities as well as expected behaviour. It also seeks to instil traditional principles and practices by guiding couples using cultural knowledge passed down through generations. Proverbs, idioms and songs are used as a means of delivering marital advice during traditional PMC.

The literature reviewed in this chapter offers insight into the practice of PMC both globally and in South Africa in particular. The discussion in this chapter brings to light the approaches utilised in preparing African Christians in South Africa for marriage. From this discussion, it is evident that there remains a need for contextually relevant strategies for PMC in black South African churches. To help develop such strategies, it is necessary to have an in-depth understanding of the African Christian context wherein said PMC takes place. Hence, the next chapter unpacks the complexities of marriage preparation in an African Christian context.

CHAPTER 3 INTERPLAY OF AFRICAN CULTURE AND CHRISTIAN TEACHING PRACTICES IN MARRIAGE PREPARATION IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

3.1. Introduction

This study is an exploration of the preparation of African Christians for marriage. This chapter discusses preparation for marriage in an African Christian Context by focusing on the tension between African values and Christian values, as well as modern values and traditional values, which inform PMC for African Christians. The discussion is based on literature. The researcher employs an indirect participatory approach by virtue of being a black (Zulu) woman and pastor with over a decade of experience presiding over an African Christian church. An indirect participatory approach in research is a method where the individuals or communities being studied are not directly involved in all stages of the research process. Instead of actively participating in data collection, analysis, and interpretation, their perspectives and experiences are gathered through intermediaries or representatives.

The discussion on the practice of PMC within the African Christian context in this chapter is located within the spectrum of historical developments. African Christianity is so diverse that some scholars instead prefer to speak of 'African Christianities' to emphasise the different stands of Christianity that exist in Africa. For instance, Ezeogu (1998) identifies four strands of African Christianity: Ancient Christianity, Missionary Christianity, Independent Christianity, and Immigrant Christianity (Ezeogu, 1998:27). Ancient Christianity dates to the earliest era of Christianity and is today represented by the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Missionary Christianity was founded between the 18th and 20th centuries by European and later American missionaries. It now comprises all mainline Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal confessions. Independent Christianity was founded by Africans who outgrew Missionary Christianity out of a need for cultural freedom and identity. It is represented by African Independent, Indigenous or Initiated Churches (AICs). The last strand of African Christianity is Immigrant Christianity, founded by European immigrants with no missionary interests or interest in native African membership. An example of this strand is the Dutch Reformed Church.

3.2. The notion of marriage preparation within an African and Christian context

Both Christian congregations and African communities recognise that marriage cannot be entered into without preparation (Humphreys, 2006:9). The Christian faith rests on a covenant relationship

between God and his people, of which marriage is a mirror. The marriage covenant is meant to reflect the covenant between Christ and the Church. The strong connection between marriage and the gospel makes marriage esteemed, hence its recognition as a sacrament.

The driving motive of life in African communities is the preservation of the clan and its culture (Welch, 1933:22). This makes marriage vital for the preservation and extension of the family lineage through procreation, which is the main aim of African marriage. In traditional African society, marriage is understood to be a permanent union aimed at procreation and child-rearing, mutual companionship, and assistance (Hastings, 1973:27). The significance of marriage in preserving the family, clan and culture is also reflected in how marriage is perceived as a social duty among Africans and how those who remain unmarried are considered outcasts. Mbiti (1969) best explains the significance of marriage in African society and the implications of remaining unmarried:

For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator. Therefore, marriage is a duty, a requirement from corporate society, a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and lawbreaker, he is not only abnormal but 'under human'. Failure to get married means that the person has rejected society and society rejects him in return (Mbiti, 1969:133).

Marriage evidently bears significance for both Christians and Africans; thus, both communities embrace marriage preparation as a key component of family socialisation.

Since marriage in African society serves the purpose of preserving and extending the clan, African families have a responsibility to participate in the establishment and success of all the marriages within their clan. *Ukuyalwa* is an African indigenous PMC in the form of advice-giving by senior family members (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019:56; Osei-Tutu et. al 2020:204) and is an integral part of the marriage process. *Ukuyalwa* often addresses the couple on roles and responsibilities as husband and wife, as well as the expected behaviour of each spouse (Kapolo, 2001:131, Moeti et al., 2017:249). Traditional marriage preparation is also used to instil traditional principles and practices (Moeti et al., 2017:249).

The church has a long history of addressing couples before marrying them. Although PMC practices differ across different religious denominations (Murray, 2006:78), PMC provided in churches mainly revolves around exposition of Bible passages on marriage (Marks, 2007:47, Mbunga, 2010:67). This is because it is not only aimed at relationship enhancement but is also

aimed at teaching a theology on marriage. The marriage preparation process in the church can either be facilitated by the clergy and/or mentor couples. In many African churches, however, the process also involves church mothers and fathers who advise the premarital couple. This is a kind of *ukuyalwa* in the church.

The interaction of the information and knowledge shared during marriage preparation in the two different communities needs to be understood, which is the focus of the next sections.

3.3. Tensions between Christian marriage preparation and traditional African marriage preparation

Considering the definitions of Christian marriage and African marriage, tensions are bound to surface when African Christians are being prepared for marriage. The notable differences between Christian marriage and African marriage that create tension for African Christians when preparing for marriage are discussed below.

3.3.1. Interaction with the (extended) family

Christian couples are prepared to live married life in a neolocal family setting where a couple's residence is located apart from the families of either spouse. This is based on a strict understanding of Gen. 2:24, which states, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh". When being prepared for marriage, Christians are therefore taught that their marriage is a new family unit which exists independently from the rest of the family (Ndlovu & Naidoo, 2023:14, Resane, 2023:6). Christian couples are therefore encouraged to buy or build a house that they will occupy as their home. Such teachings not only promote a nuclear family pattern but also discourage the involvement of extended family in the marriage.

From a Christian perspective, marriage is understood as an arrangement based on the free will of individuals, not an agreement between families. Family involvement is therefore viewed as an interference. The verse is also understood to mean that the marital relationship must be prioritised above the parental relationship (Ndlovu & Naidoo, 2023:14). Thus, premarital Christian couples are taught to be dedicated entirely to one another above every other relationship and to prioritise each other's needs above anyone else's.

Africans, however, ascribe to the communal values of *ubuntu*, and so African marriage stands on the principles of collectivity and interdependence (Siqwana-Ndulo, 1998:407). This

interdependence is reflected by the patrilocal family setting where a newlywed couple's residence is located at or centred around the residence of the husband's family. The concept of 'extended family' is foreign to traditional Africans, where family not only refers to a husband and wife with their children but also includes other relatives and sometimes non-relatives (Siqwana-Ndulo, 1998:407). This is why Africans refer to cousins, nephews, and nieces as brothers and sisters while uncles and aunts are addressed as fathers and mothers (Nwafor, 2016:4). Although urbanisation and the economic pressures that accompany it discourage this multigenerational family model in contemporary Africa, a heavy involvement of families still characterises African marriage. Although for shorter periods now, brides still spend time at the husband's homestead after marriage, serving their new families (*ukukotiza*). As a result, when being prepared for marriage, couples (especially the bride) are taught concerning how to behave in their interactions with their new family members.

Because the African family system prioritises the family's needs above an individual's, couples are also taught about their duties and responsibilities towards their families, especially financial responsibilities. This is especially the case when the individual getting married is the breadwinner in the family. African children become breadwinners because uneducated parents (especially single parents) living below the poverty threshold send their children to school with the hope that the child will take care of the family after completing their education (Khathide, 2011:118, Mathis, 2011:845). Black middle-class South Africans have termed this concept 'black tax'. Magubane (2016) defines black tax as an obligation to support one's extended family as a result of the continued inequality caused by the apartheid legacy (Magubane, 2016:1).

During *ukuyalwa* it is communicated that the couple is expected to involve families when experiencing marital disputes that can lead to separation, since the family is responsible for mediating such disputes (Mafela, 2014:7, Makwanise & Masuku, 2016:3). This is also because the decision to divorce cannot be taken independently but must be consensual among family members (Baloyi 2014:28; Khathide 2011:117).

This contrast in teaching concerning the role of the family creates a dilemma for African Christian couples in how they relate to their family after getting married.

3.3.2. The legitimacy of marriage

Missionary Christianity emphasises a church wedding for a marriage to be recognised. Christian couples are therefore expected to only consummate the marriage after the church marriage ceremony, where a priest or pastor blesses the couple. African Christians are given strict instructions concerning this during the PMC process because African culture determines the

validity of marriage through customary practice, particularly the payment of bride-wealth. African families, therefore, expect couples to go home together immediately after the traditional handing-over ceremony and consummate the marriage. In most cases, bride-wealth negotiations are concluded before the church marriage is officiated. Again, the African Christian couple finds themselves in a dilemma. They are challenged with meeting cultural demands without compromising their Christian convictions.

The plurality of marriage ceremonies for African Christians also informs the emphasis on financial readiness during PMC. African men will be questioned by both their families and their church leaders concerning financial readiness before proposing marriage. The discussion will essentially focus on the funds for bride-wealth. During PMC, finances will be discussed not only regarding once the couple is married but also in light of the marriage-related events that need to be financed. The marriage process is seemingly lengthier and with more traditional customs for African Christians who have strong rural ties (Ndlovu, 2021:145).

This can mean getting married is more costly and can lead to couples not waiting to fulfil all the traditional customs before being married by the church. It is not uncommon for the groom's family to negotiate that the bride be handed over even before *ilobolo* has been paid in full. In such cases, the bride's family sets a threshold for *ilobolo* after which they will hand the bride over to her new family. Adages such as "*intombi ayiqedwa*" in isiZulu or "*ikhazi aligqitywa*" in isiXhosa, which loosely translated mean "a girl is not finished", pointing to how *ilobola* is never paid in full, express this practice (Hunter, 2016:284). It is for this reason that South African courts validate marriages even where *ilobolo* payments are incomplete (Mary-Jane Mphahlele Attorneys Inc, 2023).

African Christians are caught between three marriage systems, with the cultural and religious systems each prioritising its own demands. This leaves the legal demands of marriage often neglected in the PMC process conducted by both the families and the church. As a result, couples are not aware of the legal implications of certain traditional customs. Oftentimes, couples are not aware that they are already legally recognised as customarily married once the bride is handed over to the groom's family. In most cases, African couples will still conclude a civil marriage after being traditionally married, as there are no laws prohibiting this (Motshwane in Tiwane, 2023).

Couples who would want to be married out of community of property are often disappointed to learn that the antenuptial contract should have been drafted before *ilobolo* negotiations commenced (Motshwane, 2019). Discussions over marital property regimes are possibly purposefully neglected because of how marriage contracts are perceived in both traditional African and conservative Christian circles. Marriage is either viewed as a family matter or a sacred matter which is beyond legislation. Discussing marriage contracts during PMC is perceived as

counterproductive to preparing couples for marriage, as it is concerned with preparing for the end of a marriage. Talks around the marriage ending are avoided to discourage the couple from embracing the idea of divorce, since both African and Christian traditions emphasise the indissolubility of marriage. This focus on the marriage ending by divorce fails to acknowledge the possibility of the marriage ending by death. Christians often view marriage out of community of property as compromising the “oneness” that is foundational in marriage as reflected in Gen. 2:24. The contract gives allowance for couples to share everything except their assets. It gives couples an escape instead of being prepared to share in their partner’s suffering in the case of some awful eventuality. It essentially goes against the vows “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer”.

3.3.3. Religious beliefs

As previously stated, *ukuyalwa* is utilised by elders to instil traditional principles and practices (Moeti et al., 2017:249), many of which are rooted in the African worldview. According to an African worldview, the dead and the living are interdependent. The dead need the attention, respect and sacrifices of the living to be fully integrated in the spirit world. On the other hand, the living need the protection and blessing of the dead (Kasi & Matthew 2019:1; Ngubane 1981:89). During *ukuyalwa*, elders will educate the couple about the principle of appeasing dead family members in order to attract their blessing over the marriage. This is because of the African traditional belief that the blessing and success of a marriage lies with the family’s ancestors (Posel & Rudwick, 2014:63). The acceptance and blessing of the marriage by the ancestors will result in children being born (Radcliffe-Brown & Forde, 2015:184). Failure to appease the ancestors will bring misfortune upon the union.

The Christian worldview is, however, different. Based on Ecc. 9:6, the dead are understood to have no part in anything that happens on earth. Also, God denounces consulting the dead in Deut. 18:11 and Isa. 8:9. African Christians are therefore discouraged from interacting with dead family members, understanding the veneration of the dead to be idolatrous. Christians also believe that marriage is divinely blessed through the priestly blessing, and children are understood to be a blessing from God (Ps. 127:3). It is God who opens and closes wombs (Gen. 29:31).

African Christians typically have two responses to this difference in worldviews. Those from historic mission churches (e.g. Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and Lutheran) are known to struggle with dualism - practising the African way of life while simultaneously adhering to Christian principles (Van der Merwe, 2016:571). These Christians subscribe to both worldviews and will therefore satisfy both African and Christian requirements in their marriage process. African Christians who belong to Evangelical, Pentecostal and Pentecostal-Charismatic traditions are more likely to subscribe to the Christian worldview over the African worldview. These Christian

traditions emphasise a belief in the infallibility of Scripture and so prioritise compliance with the Bible over anything else. These African Christians are more likely to be at odds with their traditional families during the marriage preparation process, as they will refrain from cultural rituals performed for the sole purpose of appeasing the ancestors. For example, they will not slaughter an animal during *ilobolo* process as one of the rituals done to secure the ancestors' blessing over the marriage (Ndlovu, 2021:138). Because African families are hierarchical, this can cause unrest in the family. The traditional African household is organised in a patriarchal hierarchy where views that are contrary to the authority are perceived as disrespectful and amounting to disloyalty towards the family (Haselau et al., 2015:177).

3.4. Tensions between traditional patriarchal values and modern egalitarian values

Traditional value systems have been eroded by social change such as urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation. A shift from a rural approach to life to an urban approach, together with increasing education, has led to a shift in attitudes towards various aspects of marriage. As a result, tensions abound when contemporary African Christians are prepared for marriage by elders who still hold onto traditional values.

3.4.1. Gender roles

Marital roles are accorded to men and women based on a societal group's expectations, values and beliefs about gender (Phalatsi-Shilubana, 2024:78). PMC plays a significant role in guiding the couple concerning the role they are supposed to play as husband or wife. Marital roles in modern society are not what they used to be, as there has been a shift in role expectations in line with social change. This is mainly a result of the rise in the recognition of women's rights.

The valuing of women's rights by modern society has affected attitudes towards the role and status of women in the family. In the traditional household organised in a patriarchal hierarchy, the father is accorded the position of head of the household, subordinating women to men. This is why in the traditional African household, the wife's primary role is to satisfy her husband sexually, to bear him children, and to cook and clean for him (Phalatsi-Shilubana, 2024:74; Sathiparsad et al., 2008:6). The husband is the sole provider of the household consequently the wife holds little power within the marriage and family (Monsma, 2014:25). Women's education and participation in the labour force as a result of industrialization has however affected this power dynamic.

Contemporary households are organised according to more egalitarian models of marriage characterised by fairness and flexibility, where husband and wife share household responsibilities

(Kornrich et al., 2013:1). The husband is actively involved in housework and childcare, and the wife equally participates in generating the household income. African customs such as *ilobolo* and controlling requirements for new brides, however, continue to enforce patriarchal values in contemporary African marriages.

Because *ukuyalwa* usually concludes the process of *ukulobola* (Hellemann & Sipungu 2024:6; Montle, 2020:163), the wife will be taught about the significance of having *ilobolo* paid for her during *ukuyalwa*. *Umakoti* is taught that because her husband has paid *ilobolo*, he deserves unreserved respect and acknowledgement as the head of the household (Rudwick & Posel, 2015:6). Her female relatives instruct her to perform her duties without complaining, as complaining would imply that she was not well-trained, thus bringing shame to the family. *Umakoti*, who complains about her duties of serving her husband and in-laws, stands to be reminded that *ilobolo* was paid for her (Dlamini 2022:12; Mathonsi & Mpungose 2015:37). In this way, *umakoti* is taught the language of self-silencing, which leads to women staying in abusive marriages. Chisale (2018) defines self-silencing as “a socialised behaviour, particularly in women, aimed at preserving or fostering an intimate relationship” (Chisale, 2018:5).

During *ukuyalwa*, the wife is particularly oriented on how to conduct herself not only before her husband but also her in-laws too (Makwanise & Masuku, 2016:11). During the period of *ukukotiza*, the bride lives under the supervision of her mother-in-law and is subject to strict observance of *ukuhlonipha* (showing respect). This includes walking with averted eyes and dressing modestly such as wearing long dresses and skirts, long-sleeved dresses and shirts as well as a head-wrap (Dlamini, 2022:13). There are things *umakoti* is prohibited from doing like eating certain foods, saying certain words and going into certain houses or rooms in the homestead (Hlongwane 2024; Nkosi et al., 2024:52). For instance, she may not under any circumstance enter her father-in-law's bedroom. In fact, she may not be in the same room as her father-in-law or even cross paths with him. *Umakoti* is also to refrain from directly or publicly voicing her opinions (Dlamini 2022:7; Rudwick & Posel, 2015:5). *Umakoti* is expected to wake early, clean and prepare meals for the entire family (Resane, 2023:3).

This behaviour extends beyond the period of *ukukotiza* to whenever the couple visits the homestead or when the in-laws visit the couple. Some of these rules are relaxed over time but this subservience that is institutionalised early in the bride's relationship with her in-law's stands in stark contrast with her rights to dignity and equality (Dlamini, 2022:10; Mubangizi, 2012:41).

As previously mentioned, these assertions made during *ukuyalwa* reflect gender-inequality as no heavy demands are made on *umkwenyana* (son-in-law). The single popular proverb that points to relations between *umkwenyana* and his in-laws, '*umkhwenyana yisigodo sokuqhuzula*' (the

son-in-law is a log from which to chip) points to how *umkwenyana*, in his role as a breadwinner, is one the family can ask when they have a need. African marriage, Zulu marriage to be exact, appears to be nonreciprocal (Mafela, 2014:5). As much as African marriage unites two families, only one family seems to gain an additional family member. Through marriage, the male's family gains while the woman's family loses (and is compensated through *ilobolo* for the loss). Traditionally, the husband is never understood as having joined the wife's family; hence, rituals are only performed to receive the wife into the man's family. This lack of mutuality is also expressed in language. The terms used to communicate the state of being married are gender specific in the Zulu language. When a woman is married, it is said '*uganile*' (active tense) while to a man it is said '*uganiwe*' (passive tense) (Hunter, 2016:293). This implies that the woman performs the action of marrying (*uyagana*) while the man receives the act of marriage (*uyaganwa*). All of this exemplifies how contemporary understanding of human rights clashes with cultural perceptions and practices.

The Christian household is also seemingly organised in a patriarchal hierarchy since, according to the household code in Eph. 5, the woman's role is to submit to her husband, who is her head. This Scripture, together with Gen. 2, which describes the woman as her husband's helper, is traditionally used by Christians performing PMC to support the subordination of women in marriage. This has led to the conclusion that African culture and Christianity are 'comrades in arms' against *umakoti* (Resane, 2023:9). However, concurring with Dlamini (2022), it is worthwhile to argue that it is the poor interpretation of biblical texts which lead to biblical marital roles being understood to illustrate the role of a submissive wife in a manner that promotes perceptions that sustain notions of suffering and anguish (Dlamini, 2022:4).

As previously mentioned, Christian marriage is rooted in God creating male and female in his image and likeness (Köstenberger & Jones, 2010:22). This is the foundation of equality between husband and wife who, as the *imago Dei*, are created equally with only a functional differentiation (Vorster, 2016:6). Though different sexually and functionally, man and woman are equal as persons (Bacchiocchi 2001:13; Talbert, 2001:16). Thus, man was never meant to rule over his wife. Domination and inequality in the relations between men and women as seen in marriages in the ancient East and throughout human history are, in fact, "evidence of fallenness" (Talbert, 2001:19). Mankind's fall into sin resulted in a deviation from God's ideal of marriage. Gen. 3:16 depicts how the loving harmony that was meant to characterize the relationship of husband and wife was replaced by a struggle in which the woman wants to control her husband who responds by unduly asserting his authority over her (Köstenberger & Jones, 2010:27). "As a result of sin,

responsible headship degenerates to an inappropriate exercise of power over the woman” (Block 2003:43). In fact, Vriezen in Vorster (2016) concludes that all forms of patriarchy in Bible times is a result of sin and is not reflective of the creational order (Vorster, 2016:6).

The concept of redemption in Jesus teaches the redemption of humans from sin which corrupts the relations of man and woman, restoring fallen humankind and thus restoring God’s intent for marriage (Talbert, 2001:26; Vorster, 2016:7). Patriarchalism and androcentrism are therefore traces of fallenness which are contradictory to the reconciliation in Christ (Vorster 2016:7). Since the subordination of women in marriage is a deviation from God’s ideal for marriage, it is necessary to present an interpretation of Eph. 5 and Gen. 2 which best reflects God’s intent for the woman’s role in marriage.

²¹ Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.

²² Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.

²³ For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the Saviour of the body (Eph. 5:21-23 NIV).

First-century Mediterranean societies in which Christianity originated were patriarchal. Paul wrote the letter to the church in Ephesus to give instructions on matters of faith and practice (Maisiri, 2015:36). The household code falls within Paul’s description of “the wise life of the believer” (Thielman, 2010:457). Paul advises Gentile believers on how to live now that the gospel has converted them. Although the framework of his advice is based on the first-century Greco-Roman context, Paul infuses it with the theology he started off with in the first three chapters of this letter (Thielman, 2010:478).

The misunderstanding the submission of a wife to her husband is usually rooted in the separation of v. 21 from the ‘household codes’ in Eph. 5 (Maisiri, 2015:39). Verse 21 stands as a superscription to the entire household code, meaning all relations in the family including that of husband and wife should be governed by mutual submission in reverence to Christ (Maisiri 2015:39; Mwiti & Dueck, 2006:179; Vorster 2008:477). “Eph. 5:21 expresses the calling to self-denial in the Christian marriage and family” (Vorster, 2008:477). This interpretation is also supported by the fact that v. 22 is grammatically connected to v. 21. In the original text, v. 22 does not contain a verb but leans on the verb *hypotassomenoi* (submit) in v. 21 (Maisiri, 2015:40; Thielman, 2010:483; Unachukwu, 2024:7). These verses, therefore, must be read together to make sense. Moreover, the verb *hypotassomenoi* (submit) in these verses is in the present middle or passive form, meaning it is not a compulsion or external pressure but instead an internal

prompting (Maisiri, 2015:40). This “suggests that the subject chooses to submit voluntarily, acting as a free agent” (Unachukwu, 2024:7).

The divine arrangement of husband as head of the wife does not mean that the wife is inferior to the man and is therefore subordinated to him. In this context, headship does not speak of dominance or superiority, it instead “expresses the idea of service and benevolent leadership” (Unachukwu, 2024:8). Although the term “head” (*kephalē*) carries overtones of authority, Paul “qualifies the husband’s authority by describing his headship as patterned after Christ’s headship over the church” (Thielman, 2010:486). In affirming Christ’s authority over the church, Paul emphasises the use of this authority to serve the church as its Saviour. Throughout this letter, Paul has shown Christ’s authority not as a means to control the church, but his authority and power is used for the church’s benefit (see 2:13, 16; 4:7-16; 5:2). Paul describes “the wife’s submission as recognition of the authority of a husband who imitates the self-sacrificial, nurturing and supporting roles that Christ fills in respect to the church” (Thielman, 2010:489).

The woman’s role as her husband’s helper is also one communicated with subservient overtones by Christian premarital counsellors.

¹⁸ The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him (Gen. 2:18 NIV).

Imes (2024) puts forward that as representatives of God’s presence on earth, man and woman are to rule together on God’s behalf (see Gen. 1:26-28) (Imes, 2024). They are not to rule over each other, but they are to work together as a team. A ‘helper’ is a full partner in the work God has assigned to humans (Imes, 2024). Vorster (2008) holds the same view, stating that as an image-bearer, the woman assists the man as a partner based on co-operation and not subordination (Vorster, 2008:469). The woman being the man’s helper does not imply inferiority; instead, it means the woman can meet needs which cannot be fulfilled by the one needing her help (Handaric, 2021:119; Walton 2001:185). As a helper, “she is one who provides what is lacking in man and helps man to do what he cannot do alone” (Abasili, 2017:34).

In the rest of the Old Testament, the word *‘ēzer* (helper) is repeatedly used in reference to God (cf. Gen. 49:25; Exod. 18:4; 2 Chron. 32:8; Ps. 10:14; Ps. 33:20; Ps. 146:5; and Isa. 41:10–14). As a “helper” God does not occupy a subservient role to those He helps (Bacchiocchi, 2001:14; Handaric, 2021:120; Imes, 2024; Ndlovu, 2021:55). Other portions of the OT where the word *‘ēzer* appears are when it refers to allied soldiers who assist in battle (e.g. Josh. 1:14 or 1 Chron. 12:1–22) (Imes, 2024). These are not servants or subordinates but another squadron of troops that fight alongside. Imes (2024) opines that the word “helper” does not do justice to the role God

designed for women and suggests “necessary ally” or “essential partner” as better translations of the word (Imes, 2024). Walton (2001) suggests “counterpartner” as a better translation (Walton, 2001:186).

When PMC is permeated with patriarchal norms and values, it fuels GBV by promoting dangerous masculine and feminine conceptualisations of marriage (Chisale 2016:55; Maisiri 2015:19). Literature affirms that patriarchy and culture contribute to the root cause of GBV (Buqa, 2022:4). In 2019, gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) was declared a national crisis by the president of South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa. The following year, the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (NSP–GBVF) was launched, aimed at tackling all forms of violence and abuse against women and children in South Africa. The policy seeks to understand the root drivers of GBVF in South Africa, how to address them, as well as how to provide support and protection for victims of GBVF (Sonke Gender Justice, 2024). It involves various sectors, including state structures such as the South African Police Service (SAPS), the Department of Health (DOH), the Department of Social Development (DSD), the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (DOJCD), as well as the private sector. This policy is in addition to the Domestic Violence Act (No. 116 of 1998), which “enables victims and survivors of domestic violence to apply for an interim protection order and warrant of arrest against the perpetrators of domestic violence” (Mkwananzi & Nathane-Taulela, 2024:2).

Despite these interventions, South Africa continues to experience high rates of GBVF. South Africa’s femicide levels are almost five times the world’s average (Mkwananzi & Nathane-Taulela, 2024:2). Fifty-six percent of the reported femicide cases are women who have been killed by a spouse or intimate partner (Sonke Gender Justice). The survey findings from the First South African National Gender-Based Violence Study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council reiterate that “the persistence of GBV reflects deeply ingrained societal norms and structures that perpetuate male dominance and reinforce gender hierarchies and power imbalances within families and communities, leading to female subordination, systemic inequalities, and violence against women” (Zungu et al., 2024:2).

When presented with statements that were designed to measure gendered norms, attitudes and gendered power relations, 10.7% of the male survey respondents who were or had been in relationships believed that a woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together while 8.3% believed that there were circumstances that warranted a woman deserving a beating (Zungu et al., 2024:18). Most of these respondents believed that a woman should obey her

husband and 37.5% of them believed that a man should have the final say in all family matters (Zungu et al., 2024:18). Although most men were aware that marital rape is a criminal act, 22.5% of men who were or had been in relationships believed that a woman cannot refuse to have sex with her husband (Zungu et al., 2024:18). From the female respondents, 13.3% of females who were or had been in a partnership agreed that a man paying *ilobolo* for his wife meant that he owned her, and so 9.2% of these respondents believed that she could not refuse him sex and 9.1% agreed that she deserved punishment when wrong (Zungu et al., 2024:18).

Over 3.3 million female respondents indicated having experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime (Zungu et al., 2024:8). Of these women, 64.2% reported the violence to their families. In contrast, 23.1% of them did not disclose of the matter to anyone (Zungu et al., 2024:16) and 7.8% percent of these respondents consulted a religious leader seeking support (Zungu et al., 2024:18). The data from this ground-breaking study reveals “deeply ingrained gender norms and power dynamics, with strong cultural reinforcement of traditional gender roles and a troubling acceptance of male aggression and dominance” (Zungu et al., 2024:19). These findings point to an urgent need to challenge the root social and cultural factors that drive GBV by carefully defining gender roles during PMC.

Modern *makotis* appear to be aware of the harmfulness of the gender disparity of *ukuyalwa* that they receive from both their elders, their families and their churches. They question the sexist teachings, finding them outdated and trampling upon their rights (Hellemann & Sipungu 2024:5; Moeti et al. 2017:254; Ndlovu 2021:150). Commenting on the patriarchal undertone of the teachings she received, Sipungu in Hellemann and Sipungu (2024) explains that although she “felt very honoured” to be welcomed into the circle of married women” she “did not enjoy” the part of the ceremony that gave advice that emphasised the “domestication of the bride and the reproduction narrative” (Hellemann & Sipungu, 2024:5).

Contemporary African brides also take issue with how *ukuyalwa* is only directed towards them as *makotis*, to the exclusion of their husbands who are supposed to be an equal party in the marriage (Dlamini, 2022:5; Ndlovu, 2021:142). This gender inequality of *ukuyalwa* is a result of the influence of modernization which is at the root of the erosion of African values. John Kambalame in Kapolo (2001) points out that during *ukuyalwa* in traditional African society, words of counsel were directed to both the groom and the bride (Kapolo, 2001:131). In fact, PMC in traditional African society was a continuous process beginning in childhood up to marriage (Chisale, 2016:58). This is why marriage preparation is a key part of traditional initiation or puberty rites

where young men and women are ushered into adulthood by being educated on topics such as sexual behaviour, marriage and family life (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu 2019:56).

Ntombana (2009) explains how Xhosa male initiation (*ulwaluko*) plays an educational role where young men acquire cultural knowledge as they “receive instructions in courtship, social responsibility and marriage practices” (Ntombana 2009:76). The teaching takes place in different stages of the initiation process and through different role players. *Amakhankatha* (traditional guardians) are responsible for teaching the initiates while they are at the initiation lodge. In the past, men would also visit the initiation lodge and spend some time with *abakhwetha* (the initiates) - warning, teaching and guiding them by sharing their own life experiences (Ntombana, 2009:79). *Ukuyala* also marks the beginning of *umgidi* – the graduation/homecoming ceremony held for *amakrwala* (newly emerged men) (Hellemann & Sipungu, 2024:8). Here the elderly men are first given time to share words of wisdom, followed by elderly female relatives (Hellemann & Sipungu, 2024:8).

Ulwaluko has however been negatively affected by modernization. The ceremony has been reduced to just circumcision (Hellemann & Sipungu, 2024:4), losing its educational role. In the past, initiates spent three to six months in initiation - “a month was set aside for nursing the initiate after the operation and the rest of the time was for learning” (Ntombana, 2009:79). Now, initiates only stay between three and four weeks where most of the time is spent nursing initiates to health, leaving no time for learning (Ntombana, 2009:79). It doesn’t help that the guardians that are supposed to educate the initiates evade their responsibilities. Whereas in the past, they were expected to stay with the initiates full time and observe abstinence from alcohol and women (Ntombana, 2009:80), guardians now spend time away from the initiation lodge or even get drunk while at the initiation lodge (Ntombana, 2009:81).

Such erosion of traditional practices leaves a need to modify current marriage preparation practices to correct gender disparities. This is particularly significant considering that contemporary *makotis* subscribe to egalitarian marriage values. As a result, they feel strongly about receiving counselling together with their grooms. They believe that receiving counselling together ensures that they receive the same information that they can use in building a stable marriage (Moeti et al., 2007:254). This is why, in addition to the PMC provided by their families and churches, contemporary African Christians also seek out professional PMC from trained practitioners.

3.4.2. Fertility and sex

Closely linked to gender roles are perceptions of fertility and sex. Literature has outlined that the primary purpose of African marriage is the sustenance of the lineage through procreation (Baloyi 2014:22; Hastings 1973:27; Welch 1933:22). During *ukuyalwa*, elders will therefore emphasise the importance of frequent sex for childbearing. Procreation is, however, communicated as the responsibility of the wife (Chisale, 2016:61). *Umakoti* is taught that she is joining her new family for the purpose of *ukuvusa umuzi* (to build the 'house') through childbearing. This is why *ilobolo* was paid for her – to represent the transfer of her sexual and reproductive rights from her family to her husband's family. *Ilobolo* is a central element of kinship and marriage systems in patrilineal societies where a woman surrenders her paternal kinship, and her children identify with their father's kin (Resane, 2023:4).

African wives carry the responsibility of ensuring the family name does not diminish by producing children to carry the family name (Resane, 2024:6). *Umakoti* is therefore expected to fall pregnant within the first year of marriage (Chisale, 2016:61) as the marriage can only be considered successful or complete once a child is born (Baloyi 2013a:36; Mbiti, 1969:133). Giving birth confirms a woman's status as a wife (Nwaomah & Dube, 2018:413) and birthing a male child considered the epitome of womanhood (Resane, 2024:6). Hence, infertility is usually blamed on the wife (Chisale, 2016:60; Hellemann & Sipungu 2024:7; Nwaomah & Dube, 2018:412; Resane 2023:4). This explains why childlessness and son-lessness is traditionally remedied through the taking of another wife (Resane 2024:6).

The childless wife is labelled *inyumba* (barren) without medical verification and without the husband's virility being medically validated because the African worldview does not consider man to be the source of childlessness (Nkosi et al. 2024:50; Nwaomah & Dube, 2018:412). It was only when it became evident that the husband was impotent by failing to impregnate his wives that he would discretely arrange an assignation between his wife and a relative (Baloyi 2013a:36). It is also common practice for a couple to consult a traditional healer for spiritual cleansing and rituals meant to address infertility.

PMC in the church also emphasises fertility, especially amongst Christians who endorse procreation as the primary purpose of marriage. In Gen. 1:28, God blesses the first couple, saying they should 'be fruitful and increase in number. This is often strictly understood to mean that procreation is the sole objective of Christian marriage. Vorster (2008), however, argues that this understanding poses ethical problems as it makes childless marriages inferior (Vorster 2008:466). As in African culture, childbearing was a determining factor of womanhood for Hebrews in Bible times. Married women were responsible for contributing to their husband's genealogical line

(Nwaomah & Dube, 2018:411). This is seen in how the marital blessing in Gen. 24:60 and Ruth 4:11 involves the building of the 'house' through the wife bearing many children. Married women who had no children were depressed by the stigmatisation of childlessness as seen in Rachel (Gen. 30:1) and Hannah (1 Sam. 1:8) because a barren or miscarrying womb was associated with a curse (cf. Num. 5:21-22 and Hos. 9:11,14). However, the Bible narratives concerning childless marriages (except for Michal's marriage to David) give hope to couples facing childlessness since God eventually opened the wombs of the women who were previously barren (Nwaomah & Dube, 2018:412). As a result, conservative Christians have reservations about fertility treatments and encourage couples to put trust in God as a remedy.

Köstenberger (2003), however, argues that barrenness is not necessarily an indication of God's disfavour but one of the many effects of fallenness (Köstenberger, 2003:273). He states that although the redemption in Christ bestows eternal life, it unfortunately does not reverse general consequences (Köstenberger, 2003:274). This means Christians can remain childless without any fault of their own. More liberal Christian leaders, therefore, encourage couples to explore medical interventions, especially those that do not raise ethical concerns, for example, by involving a third party.

Urbanisation and modernisation have impacted childbearing behaviour in South Africa. Geographical location and socioeconomic status such as level of education, employment status and household wealth play a role in determining fertility (Biney et al., 2020:4). Fertility rates among women living in urban areas are lower when compared to those in rural areas (Biney et al., 2020:5). Increased education and employment amongst women have also been linked to decreased fertility (Biney et al., 2020:4). This is because educated women are more likely to correctly and consistently use contraceptives, thus delaying childbearing and elongating the period between subsequent births. Due to motherhood and employment being competing roles, employed women are often in favour of fewer children (Biney et al., 2020:4). Moreover, employed women with higher income have lower fertility when compared to those with lower earnings (Biney et al., 2020:4).

However, it would appear that among South African married woman, culture still has a significant influence on childbearing behaviour seeing that fertility is generally higher among African women (married *Nguni* women) specifically when compared to other races (Biney et al., 2020:21). In dealing with infertility, contemporary African Christian couples are more likely to seek medical treatment for infertility since, being more educated, they are aware that infertility is a medical condition that can affect both men and women.

Together with being aimed at procreation, sex within PMC in African contexts is communicated in androcentric terms. Sex is not expressed as an act meant to bring mutual satisfaction but is communicated as a duty women perform to satisfy men. This could be based on the belief that men need sex more than women. Phrases such as 'give him his cake' and 'serve him his food' (Chisale, 2016:63) are used to lecture *umakoti* about sexual intimacy. Gendered PMC talks and 'bridal showers' are known to be sexually explicit as the bride is given tips on how to please her husband sexually. It is a common assumption that by paying *ilobolo* a man is guaranteed unlimited sex in marriage (Chisale, 2016:63; Madiba & Ngwenya, 2017:59; Maisiri, 2015:30; Zungu et al., 2024:18).

Umakoti is therefore cautioned never to deny her husband sex. *Umakoti* is often warned that failure to satisfy her husband's sexual desires may lead to him seeking satisfaction elsewhere. In this way, a woman is conditioned to take the blame for her husband's infidelity (Chisale, 2016:62). African PMC, in fact, normalises a man's infidelity through the use of sayings and proverbs which create allowance for men to have extramarital affairs. Chisale (2016) narrates how during *ukuyalwa* she was "reminded that '*indoda yinja*' (a man is a dog), meaning that a man like a dog cannot be tied down to one sexual partner, hence as a wife I should not be surprised when my husband has other sexual partners" (Chisale, 2016:62). Sayings such as '*indoda ayibuzwa*' (a man is not questioned about his whereabouts) discourage a wife from speculating about her husband's affairs.

Of late, *umakoti* is also told that '*ifoni yendoda ayitintwa*' (a man's phone must not be touched), discouraging wives from going through their husbands' cellphones. Resane (2024) explains the Sesotho proverb '*monna ke mokopu oa nama, empa mosadi o iphutha joale ka kolo*' (A man is like a pumpkin plant that spreads around, but a woman must control herself like the inner leaves of cabbage) to mean that it is permissible for a man to have more than one sexual partner, and his wife should not complain about it (Resane, 2024:6).

Sex is also commonly communicated from an androcentric perspective in Christian circles, too. Sex is often one-sided, focusing on the man's need for sexual release. This could be because most pastors involved in PMC are males and therefore speak of sex from a male perspective, where a healthy sexual relationship is characterised by the man reaching orgasm. There is little talk about emotional intimacy and the wife's satisfaction. In social media polls questioning how sex is communicated in the evangelical church, 95% of the respondents indicated that the message about sex focuses on the husband's fulfilment while ignoring the wives (Gregorie et al., 2021:39). Similar to the traditional African perception of a husband's entitlement to his wife's body,

Christians affirm the husband's entitlement to his wife's body based on the selective reading of 1 Cor. 7:4. Emphasis is unfairly placed on how 'the wife's body does not belong to her alone', ignoring the rest of the verse which speaks to the woman's entitlement to her husband's body. There is an undeniable reciprocity that permeates Paul's advice to married Christians in this passage:

² But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.

³ The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.

⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.

⁵ Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Cor. 7:2-5 NIV).

In contrast to a typically Greek conception where a man is active and the woman is passive in the sexual act, Paul puts forward that both the man and the woman are sexual actors (Wanamaker, 2005:843). Paul encourages an active sex life in marriage for moral reasons – to discourage sexual immorality. He is clearly discouraging the practice of sexual abstinence in marriage, which was deemed virtuous at that time. His argument implies that "marriage is a place where sexual desires may legitimately be fulfilled" (Wanamaker, 2005:845).

This Scripture portion outlines how Christian husbands and wives have a mutual obligation to one another to fulfil their conjugal duty to each other. Neither spouse has the authority or the right to withhold without consent. The wife having no authority over her own body is not surprising considering the patriarchal culture of the first century; it is however, unusual to hear of a man having to yield his authority to his wife (Verbrugge & Harris, 2008:125; Wanamaker, 2005:845). The reciprocal language employed here presents the wife as an equal partner and dispels the idea that the wife alone is responsible for fulfilling her connubial sexual duty. Garland (2003) better articulates this when he says, "Paul does not frame this relationship in terms of the husband's rights and the wife's duties, nor does he expect the wife to submit passively as a compliant bed partner" (Garland, 2003:337).

Through marriage, both man and woman have given themselves over to each other, and both have sexual needs that both parties are responsible for satisfying. Failure to do so is perceived

as defrauding one's spouse of their conjugal rights. According to the text, only two conditions justify a married couple's abstinence: it must be mutually agreed upon and must be for a limited time. Some understand the 'mutual consent' to mean that the wife cannot deny her husband sex if he disagrees with her about not engaging in sex. This is, however, not what Paul meant. When the context of this letter is considered, this Scripture portion speaks about how "abstinence cannot be imposed on a spouse but must be a decision reached by mutual consent for the purpose of prayer and for a limited time" (Garland, 2003:334). A spouse cannot decide to indulge in their own private, spiritual discipline and deny the rights of their spouse to whom they belong (Garland, 2003:337).

The context within which Paul writes to the Corinthians is key to understanding the meaning of this text. Many make the mistake of treating 1 Cor. 7 as teaching a theology on sexuality, marriage and divorce rather than seeing it for what it actually is - Paul responding to a set of issues around marriage "that threatened to disrupt the church community in Corinth if not resolved" (Wanamaker, 2005:839). The repetition of "now concerning" in the letter invokes the idea of intercommunication between the Corinthian church and the apostle (Verbrugge & Harris, 2008:123; Wanamaker 2005:840). It appears the Corinthians have sought Paul's direction regarding their own practices concerning issues around sex and marriage. Paul is therefore stressing the danger involved in their current practices, i.e. the practice of celibacy in marriage and repudiating sexuality (Garland 2003:334). Sexual asceticism was prevalent in Corinth (Verbrugge & Harris, 2008:125). In this portion of his letter, Paul is affirming that marriage is a fully sexual relationship by arguing "why sexual relations in marriage are binding on spouses and why sexual abstinence in marriage is both impractical and inappropriate" (Garland, 2003:333).

Unfortunately, this passage has been used to claim that biblical marriage is implicit consent to sex at all times. The misinterpretation of this passage is misused to claim that the Bible does not recognise marital rape, as the wife, by yielding authority over her body to her husband, must always consent to sex. Verbrugge and Harris (2008) specifically explain what Paul's comments concerning the yielding of one's authority over their body to their spouse do not mean. It does not mean a spouse can do to the other whatever they want, irrespective of what that spouse wishes (Verbrugge & Harris, 2008:126). Since the principles of love govern Christian marriage, there is no room for any spouse to seek their own way selfishly, but spouses give up self-determination to pursue pleasing their partner (Garland, 2003:337). There is no room for spouses to "treat one another as objects for sexual self-gratification" (Garland, 2003:337). There is no room for sex being tainted by domination and manipulation; thus, neither husband nor wife can force the other spouse to do anything against their will (Strickland, 2024).

When PMC endorses patriarchal or androcentric views of sex which emphasise a husband's entitlement to his wife's body, it conditions wives to be compliant to sexual abuse in marriage. According to Strickland (2024), "Marital sexual abuse is a broad term that can encompass many heinous and exploitive acts. The worst violations occur when someone demands, requires, or takes sex by force, as in instances of rape or forced sex acts. Other abusive acts include the unwanted intrusion of pornography or objects into sex, undesired sexual activities, peeking, or spying. Sexual abuse in marriage can be manipulative and coercive. In cases of marital sexual coercion or sexual assault, an oppressor uses unrelenting pressure or threats to leverage a sexual encounter even after a victim expresses discomfort or refusal" (Strickland, 2024). It cannot be denied that couples will struggle with differences in sexual appetites and comfort levels. It is therefore crucial for PMC to equip couples with skills to allow them to discuss their differences healthily, without the use of pressure, manipulation or coercion.

The control of males over female bodies has also been linked to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Even when wives suspect their husbands of infidelity, they cannot negotiate safe sex with them. Respondents in a study conducted by Madiba and Ngwenya (2015) reported awareness of their husbands' marital affairs. Though they suggested condom use to prevent contracting HIV, their spouse refused (Madiba & Ngwenya, 2017:57). A wife suggesting condom use or refusing unprotected sex with her husband is seen as questioning her husband's authority and may result in violence (Madiba & Ngwenya, 2017:56). Men believe they cannot be told by a woman how and when to have sex (Madiba & Ngwenya, 2017:59). Chabata in Maisiri (2015) notes a common response Zimbabwean men give when their wives suggest condom use: "*Dzakaenda dzakapfeka macondom here?*" (Did the cattle we paid go with condoms on?) (Maisiri, 2015:30). A South African female participant in a research study conducted by Madiba and Ngwenya (2017) commented that her husband's response to condom use was: "*I did not pay lobola (bride price) to have sex in a plastic, why did I pay lobola (bride price) if you have to give it to me in a plastic?*" (Madiba & Ngwenya, 2017:59).

The payment of *ilobolo* is evidently used to silence a woman's voice in sex-related matters, increasing her vulnerability to HIV. It is no wonder that HIV infection rates among women in sub-Saharan Africa are significantly higher than among married women than in single women (Madiba & Ngwenya, 2017:55). It becomes vital for PMC to address power imbalances to ensure couples experience healthy sexual encounters. Although younger African women are known to question some of the societal gender norms around sexuality because of their education, financial independence and greater sexual freedom (Madiba & Ngwenya, 2017:56), there remains a great need to correct false beliefs and unbiblical teachings about sex and fertility.

3.4.3. The indissolubility of marriage

Marriage is understood to be sacred due to its cultural and religious significance. As a result, marriage is meant to be indissoluble, and marriage preparation plays a key role in safeguarding and strengthening marriages against the threat of dissolution.

From an African perspective, marriage is a permanent union binding not only to the married individuals but also to their families (both living and dead). The rituals performed throughout the marriage process make African marriage extremely hard to dissolve. Families also make great efforts to reconcile couples when they consider separating. Marriage in traditional African societies where bride-wealth is of high social importance had a rare occurrence of divorce because it meant the repayment or repossession of the bride-wealth (Ndlovu, 2021:61). Also, the decision to divorce could not be taken by the couple on their own but had to be consensual among family members as well (Baloyi, 2014:28; Khathide, 2011:117).

In traditional African societies, the husband usually initiated divorce and it was usually based on his wife's ill behaviour such as witchcraft and adultery (Arugu, 2014:382; Baloyi & Buffel, 2021:3; Makwanise & Masuku, 2016:3). The taking of another wife was considered as a means of preventing divorce where separation was considered on the grounds of the wife's infertility. The wife was however limited in initiating divorce on grounds of her husband's ill behaviour majorly because of her family who would resist the dissolution of the marriage since it would imply the repayment of *ilobolo* (Sennott et al., 2021:58). This is why during marriage preparation, it is emphasised that *umakoti* should endure all difficulties to preserve her marriage. The stigma attached to divorce in African societies is that a failed marriage brings shame to her family, as it is always assumed that she failed in marriage because she wasn't brought up right. Again, this highlights how the wife unfairly shoulders the burden of sustaining her marriage.

Marriage preparation in the church also places an emphasis on the sanctity and indissolubility of marriage. Christian couples are taught about the permanency of the marriage union based on Jesus' comments on Gen. 2:24 in Matt. 19:

³Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

⁴"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female,"

⁵and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'?

⁶So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

⁷“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

⁸Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.

⁹I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery (Matthew 19:3-9 NIV).

From Jesus’ comments in this text, it is clear that marriage is meant to be a life-long covenant. Through marriage, the man and his wife become one, and their union is not to be broken. Jesus explains that divorce is a result of hard-heartedness and is inconsistent with the original institution of marriage reflected at the beginning. Together with this, Christians are also taught that divorce is a sin based on Mal. 2:16. The verse states that God hates divorce, therefore making it sinful. Even though some conservative Christian traditions teach that only death releases a person from the covenant of marriage, Jesus does make an exception for divorce in the case of infidelity in the above text (cf. Matt. 5:32). This means divorce is not absolutely prohibited. In 1 Cor. 7:12-15 the apostle Paul adds another justifiable reason for divorce:

¹² To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her.

¹³ And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.

¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

¹⁵ But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace (1 Cor. 7:12-15 NIV).

Based on these portions of the Bible, Christians are taught that adultery and abandonment are the only biblically sanctioned grounds for divorce. This leaves Christians vulnerable to being trapped in abusive marriages. Biblical counsellors, however, argue that unrepentant abuse can be considered as a form of ‘unwillingness to live with’ one’s spouse (in the context of verses 12

and 13 above), therefore allowing for divorce as an escape from an abusive spouse (Gifford, 2020). Divorce on grounds of abuse is also argued based on God's intolerance for injustice and oppression (Plyler, 2020:34).

Divorce in South Africa is governed by the Divorce Act (No. 70 of 1979). A divorce can only be granted by a High Court or a Regional Court. South Africa utilises a 'no fault' divorce system where divorce is not based on fault and is not based on whose fault it was (Legal Wise, 2025a). The 'no fault' system allows for divorce to be granted where one party believes that "there has been an irretrievable breakdown of the marriage relationship and that there are no reasonable prospects of restoring it" (Divorce Laws, 2025). This means that a marriage can be dissolved even though one party is not in agreement. The Divorce Act stipulates the circumstances that are acceptable as evidence of the irretrievable breakdown of a marriage:

- The spouses are not living together for a continuous period of one year;
- abusive behaviour by one spouse towards the other spouse or the children;
- adultery;
- habitual criminality;
- drunkenness or drug addiction; or
- loss of love and affection between the spouses (Legal Wise 2025a).

Although there is no defence against divorce on account of an irretrievable breakdown, the court may postpone the divorce proceedings or dismiss the claim should there appear to be a possibility of reconciliation through counselling (Divorce Laws, 2025a). Another ground for divorce according to the Act is the mental illness or continuous unconsciousness of a party to the marriage (Divorce Act 70 of 1979:4).

The latest divorce statistics in South Africa show that divorce is on the incline. Divorce increased between the years 2013 and 2017, decreased between the 2018 and 2020 and increased again thereafter (Stats SA, 2025a:19). According to an amalgamation of legal records, academic studies and anecdotal evidence by Family Law and Divorce Lawyer Bertus Preller (Divorce Laws, 2025b), the thirteen commonly identified reasons for divorce in South Africa include: disparity in priorities, differences in parenting styles and responsibilities, financial discrepancies, sexual incompatibility, infidelity, addiction, social media overindulgence, marital abuse (physical, financial, emotional, or psychological), communication breakdown, mental health issues, long distance relationship challenges, spouses growing apart, and religious, cultural, or ethnic variances (Divorce Laws, 2025b). Understanding the prevalent causes of divorce serves as a practical guide for marriage

preparation, as it identifies the potential challenges in marriage which couples can be prepared beforehand to navigate.

There appears to be a greater social acceptance of divorce in modern-day South Africa. The change in the perception of marriage has resulted in divorce being more socially accepted. From being viewed as a social duty or a sacrament aimed at procreation, there has been a shift toward a view of marriage as affective and aimed at personal fulfilment (Hobbs, 2019:4). This individualistic view of marriage results in divorce no longer being perceived as a shame or tragedy. Also, increased education and employment amongst women have resulted in women being exposed to contemporary ideas of marriage and attaining economic freedom. This makes women more open to initiating divorce as they can now afford the usually high legal costs of divorce proceedings. Having their own earnings and being financially independent from their husbands, wives now feel they can sustain themselves when the marriage dissolves. The most recent statistics show that more wives than husbands initiate divorce proceedings (Stats SA, 2025a:21).

Although a high proportion of divorcees do not specify their occupation at the time of divorce, statistics reveal that both male and female divorcees are largely employed in professional, semi-professional and technical occupations (Stats SA, 2025a:23). A study conducted by Kreager et al. (2013) found that educated and high-earning women are more likely than uneducated, low-earning women to leave unsatisfactory marriages where the women are victimized (Kreager et al., 2013:578). In contentious and violent relationships, “these resources create alternatives for women that then increase the likelihood of divorce” (Kreager et al., 2013:578).

Although now seemingly accepted as a societal norm, divorce remains a painful and traumatic experience. Muchena et al. (2018) state that “divorce has been rated as one of the most stressful life experiences, second only to death, with a pervasive impact on the life situation of those who experience it” (Muchena et al., 2018:1). As previously stated, divorce poses physical and psychological health risks on all members of the family system (Baloyi & Buffel, 2021:5, Bramlett & William, 2002:3). Divorce is also associated with social problems since divorcees are more likely to lack social support and are prone to self-stigmatised detachment (Muchena et al., 2018:2). When compared with married individuals, divorcees report less happiness, more health problems, more social isolation associated with social network changes, a greater risk of mortality and more negative life events such as a decline in the standard of living, change in residential arrangements, conflict over child custody etc. (Amato, 2014:10; Bramlett & William, 2002:4; Damota, 2019:6; Muchena et al., 2018:8). However, individuals in turbulent, low-quality marriages tend to experience low levels of psychological and physical well-being similar to divorcees

(Carlson et al., 2020:51; Hertzog, 2010:31; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005:1377). This is because the health benefits of marriage are limited to high quality marriages (Hertzog 2010:1). It is not marital status alone but marital quality that plays a role in an individual's health and well-being. Marital quality influences the number of physical health conditions an individual experiences and the recovery period from diseases. Thus, the goal is marital stability which transcends the continuation of a marriage but prioritizes the well-functioning of a marriage.

It is important that PMC in African Christian contexts take all of the above dynamics into consideration. It is also essential to consider the role the family can play in averting divorce. The literature reviewed has shown how urbanisation has impacted the traditional African family structure. Due to the neolocal setting, extended family can no longer function effectively in intervening to resolve marital conflicts as in the past (Arugu, 2014:375). Baloyi and Buffel (2021) argue that "there is a need to resuscitate and promote the indigenous African methods of counselling and therapy, in view of facilitating restoration of the sanctity of and permanent nature of marriage" (Baloyi & Buffel, 2021:10).

3.5. Critical engagement of the biblical theology of marriage in marriage preparation

This chapter discussed marriage preparation in an African Christian context by focusing on the tension between African values and Christian values, as well as modern values and traditional values, which inform PMC for African Christians. In the discussion, a convergence between traditional patriarchal values about marriage in African and Christian teachings was observed. This unanimity is, however, often based on misinterpretations of the Bible. Although references have been made to biblical texts in this chapter, they were made in strict relation to the value being discussed and therefore do not paint a complete picture of biblical marriage. It is hence necessary to fully describe God's ideal for marriage as laid out in Scripture.

¹⁸ The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

¹⁹ Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.

²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam, no suitable helper was found.

²¹ So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs[g] and then closed up the place with flesh.

²² Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³ The man said, "This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh (Gen. 2:18-24 NIV).

A biblical theology of marriage has the creation order as its foundation. The first three chapters of Gen. are the origin and prototype of marriage (Vorster, 2008:466). This is attested to by both Jesus and Paul referring to the Marriage Text in their teachings. Barth in Shenk (2018) calls 'The Marriage Text' the climax and conclusion to the creation accounts in Gen. 1 and 2 (Shenk, 2018:24). Gen. 2:18 interestingly introduces the Marriage Text with the only negative assessment in the creative narrative: 'it is not good' (Shenk, 2018:29). This is a radical departure from the 'good' or even 'very good' in the first account in Gen. 1. The negative assessment is not of something God created, but a declaration God makes that something is missing from what he has made (Bacchiocchi, 2001:13, Shenk, 2018:31). It is a statement of non-functionality (Walton, 2001:196). It is not good for the man to be alone because in his aloneness, he does not image God (Shenk, 2018:31). Man is created in God's image and likeness and must therefore express the relationship dynamic of God. The triune God of the Bible exists in community since He is comprised of the fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Grenz, 2000:179). Man's divine norm is therefore community, not isolation.

God remedies the problem of isolation by making a suitable helper for the man and presents her to him. The declaration about marriage in Gen. 2:24 implicitly describes marriage as a covenant relationship consisting of leaving, cleaving and becoming one (Bacchiocchi, 2001:16). It is only later in Scripture that God will explicitly define marriage as a covenant of companionship in such passages as Prov. 2:17, Ezek. 16:8 and Mal. 2:14.

Leaving all other relationships, including parental relationships, is the first step in establishing a marriage covenant (Bacchiocchi, 2001:16; Longman, 2015:142). Leaving does not imply evading responsibilities towards one's parents, but only that the marital relationship is prioritised above all other relationships (Abasili 2017:36; Bacchiocchi, 2001:17; Baloyi, 2013a:50). Leaving means independence from one's parents and detachment from their authority (Ndlovu, 2021:151). In marriage, "the man transfers his primary familial loyalty from his parents to his wife" (Abasili, 2017:36). This is significant considering that in the ANE world, as in most African settings, filial duty was understood to be sacred. Leaving makes way for the next essential component of a

marriage covenant: cleaving. “The Hebrew word for “cleave”, *dabaq*, suggests the idea of being ‘permanently glued or joined together’ (Abasili, 2017:37; Bacchiocchi, 2001:18). In this verse, the word is used metaphorically to accentuate the strong bond in marriage. It implies an exclusive and permanent belonging together. Cleaving, therefore, reflects covenant-fidelity. It dictates that spouses ought to be wholeheartedly committed and unswervingly loyal to each other.

“Becoming one flesh” is the third essential component of a marriage covenant. This concept points to how marriage is a sexual union, as Paul will refer to this text when discussing sexual intercourse in 1 Cor. 6:16. However, this is not all it means. ‘Becoming one flesh’ points to the complete unity of husband and wife, which takes place gradually. It speaks of profound harmony and intimacy. Köstenberger in Vorster (2016) explains that ‘one flesh’ “entails the establishment of a new kinship relationship between two previously unrelated individuals by the most intimate of human bonds’ (Vorster, 2016:4). The oneness in marriage also points to the exclusivity and permanency of marriage and implies equality between the husband and wife.

From this, we gather that God’s ideal for marriage is that it is a life-long covenant characterised by complete devotion, unwavering commitment and increasing unity. God’s ideal for marriage is however not sustained after mankind’s fall into sin in Gen. 3. Through their disobedience, mankind abrogated their covenant with God, distorting the marriage covenant as well (Bacchiocchi, 2001:52; Vorster, 2016:8). The wife became subjugated to the husband; the exclusivity of marriage was undermined by polygamy and the permanency of marriage challenged by divorce. Nonetheless, God uses marriage as a key metaphor to reveal His covenant relationship with His people throughout the Bible. God uses Hosea’s marital experiences to reveal Himself to Israel as a compassionate, forgiving husband (Bacchiocchi, 2001:22). Prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekial and Isaiah later use the imagery of marriage. These prophets portray God’s unfailing love as that of a husband forgiving and restoring an unfaithful wife. In this way, God sets a standard for marriage, revealing that it is a covenant centred around love and faithfulness. In his teachings, Malachi explicitly describes marriage as a covenant to which God is a witness and guarantor (Bacchiocchi, 2001:23; Block, 2003:44). Malachi emphasises the binding nature of the marriage covenant by mentioning God’s hatred for divorce. Divorce is perceived as an offence because it reflects a lack of reverence to God and an act of treachery against one’s spouse (Block, 2003:51). In the NT, Paul uses the marital relationship to illustrate the covenant between Christ and His bride, the church. The covenant is centred around mutual submission, sacrificial love and oneness.

Scripture reveals God’s ideal for marriage as a sacred and permanent covenant characterised by mutual trust, stewardship and love. Patriarchal and androcentric descriptions of marriage in bible narratives should therefore not be regarded as biblical instructions for marital life (Vorster,

2016:7). Instead, such narratives should be understood as descriptive, narrating historical events and detailing the aftermath of the Fall. Only the Marriage Text in the creative order is prescriptive, thus establishing ethical principles and norms for marital life that are applicable in today's context (Vorster, 2008:466).

3.6. Summary and conclusion

This chapter discussed the interplay between African culture and Christian teaching practices when preparing African Christians for marriage. It was first established that both Christian and African communities embrace marriage preparation as a key component of family socialisation. The chapter then discussed the tension between the different value systems that inform PMC for African Christians. First, the tensions between Christian marriage preparation and traditional African marriage preparation were discussed. The strict understanding of Gen. 2:24 means that premarital Christian couples are taught that their marriage is a new family unit which exists independently from the rest of the family (Ndlovu & Naidoo, 2023:14). A nuclear family pattern is therefore encouraged, while the involvement of extended family in the marriage is discouraged, being viewed as interference. The advice shared during *ukuyalwa* is, however, based on communal values of *ubuntu*, and so African Christian couples are to expect and accommodate the involvement of extended families in their marriage. Couples are taught about their duties and responsibilities towards their families, especially financial responsibilities. *Makotis* are expected to spend time at their husbands' homes after marriage, serving their new families (*ukukotiza*). African couples are also expected to involve families when experiencing marital disputes since the family is responsible for mediating such disputes.

The chapter also discussed how African Christians are caught between different marriage systems, which determine the validity of marriage differently. Christianity teaches that a priestly blessing validates a marriage during a church marriage ceremony, while African culture teaches that marriage is validated by the payment of bride-wealth and the bride's handing over to her husband's family. With the cultural and religious system each prioritising its own demands, the legal demands of marriage are often neglected. Couples are frequently not taught about the different marital property regimes, nor are they alerted about the legal implications of certain traditional customs.

The tension between Christian beliefs and African beliefs also features during PMC. According to an African worldview, the dead and the living are interdependent, and the blessing and success of a marriage lies with the family's ancestors whom the couple must appease. The Christian worldview, however, upholds that the dead have no part in anything that happens on earth and that consulting the dead is sinful.

The chapter also delved into the tensions between traditional patriarchal values and modern egalitarian values. Under the influence of urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation, attitudes have shifted concerning gender roles, fertility, sex and the permanency of marriage.

Marital roles are not what they used to be. The rise in the recognition of women's rights, together with women's education and participation in the labour force, has affected attitudes towards the role and status of women in the family. Unlike traditional households, which are organised in a patriarchal hierarchy, contemporary households are organised according to more egalitarian models of marriage. However, customs such as *ilobolo* and controlling requirements for *makotis* continue to enforce patriarchal values in contemporary African marriages. The Christian household is also seemingly organised in a patriarchal hierarchy when considering the woman's submissive role and her role as helper. It is, however, the poor interpretation of biblical texts which leads to biblical marital roles being understood to illustrate the role of a wife with notions of suffering and anguish, since Christian marriage is rooted in the equality between husband and wife, who are created equally in God's image and likeness. When PMC is permeated with patriarchal norms and values, it promotes dangerous masculine and feminine conceptualisations of marriage, which fuel GBVF.

Traditional perceptions of fertility and sex also reflect a gender disparity. Because the main aim of African marriage is procreation, elders advising premarital couples emphasise the importance of frequent sex for childbearing. This is, however, communicated as the responsibility of the wife since *ilobolo* was paid for her to represent the transfer of her sexual and reproductive rights from her family to her husband's family. Infertility is therefore blamed on the wife and is remedied through the taking of another wife. PMC in the church also emphasises fertility, especially amongst Christians who endorse procreation as the primary purpose of marriage. Contemporary African Christian couples are, however, aware that infertility is a medical condition that can affect both men and women and are therefore more likely to seek medical treatment for infertility. In both African and Christian contexts, sex is communicated in patriarchal and androcentric terms as a duty women perform to satisfy men instead of an act meant to bring mutual satisfaction. This unfortunately, conditions wives to be compliant with marital sexual abuse. Due to education, financial independence and greater sexual freedom, younger African women are known to question some of the societal gender norms around sexuality.

From both an African and Christian perspective, marriage is a permanent union. In the African context, this is because marriage is not only binding to married individuals but also to their families (both living and dead). Also, the rituals performed throughout the marriage process make African marriage extremely hard to dissolve. From a Christian perspective, marriage makes a man and

his wife one – a union that should not be broken. There is, however, a greater social acceptance of divorce in modern-day South Africa. This is a result of a change in the perception of marriage from being a social duty or sacrament to an affective relationship aimed at personal fulfilment. This individualistic view of marriage results in divorce no longer being perceived as a shame or tragedy. Also, increased education and employment amongst women make them more open to initiating divorce as they can afford the usually high legal costs of divorce proceedings and can afford to sustain themselves when a marriage dissolves.

The discussion notes that some of the gender disparity in African marriage preparation is a result of the erosion of traditional practices. It also notes how the poor interpretation of biblical texts leads to Christian PMC being permeated with patriarchal and androcentric views. It is for this reason that the last section of the chapter focused on describing God's ideal for marriage as laid out in Scripture. Gen. 2:18-24 is foundational to a biblical theology of marriage as it is the origin and prototype of marriage; hence, the discussion focused on this Marriage Text. Marriage is described as a sacred, lifelong covenant marked by mutuality and complementarity, exclusivity, intimacy and mutuality.

Through the discussion of tension between African values and Christian values as well as modern values and traditional values which inform PMC for African Christians, this chapter offers further understanding of the nature and content of PMC among African Christians in South Africa. It also provides an understanding of the approaches utilised in preparing African Christians for marriage and their reception of these approaches. The following two chapters will present and unpack the interview findings to further understand the current practice of PMC in black South African churches.

CHAPTER 4 PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS: CLERGY

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study as they are related to the data obtained from the participants. Two different groups of participants were interviewed: clergy and married individuals. This chapter presents the findings from the interviews conducted with the clergy.

4.2. Themes of the study

Themes emerged by systematically working through the data, assigning open codes, and grouping similar data into categories. The categories were then grouped into emerging themes. Analysis was conducted through the research objectives that guided the research process. The diagram below (Figure 4) represents the themes of the study, grouped according to each research objective. This section will unpack each theme and provide an interpretation of the themes supported by either the context or the literature.

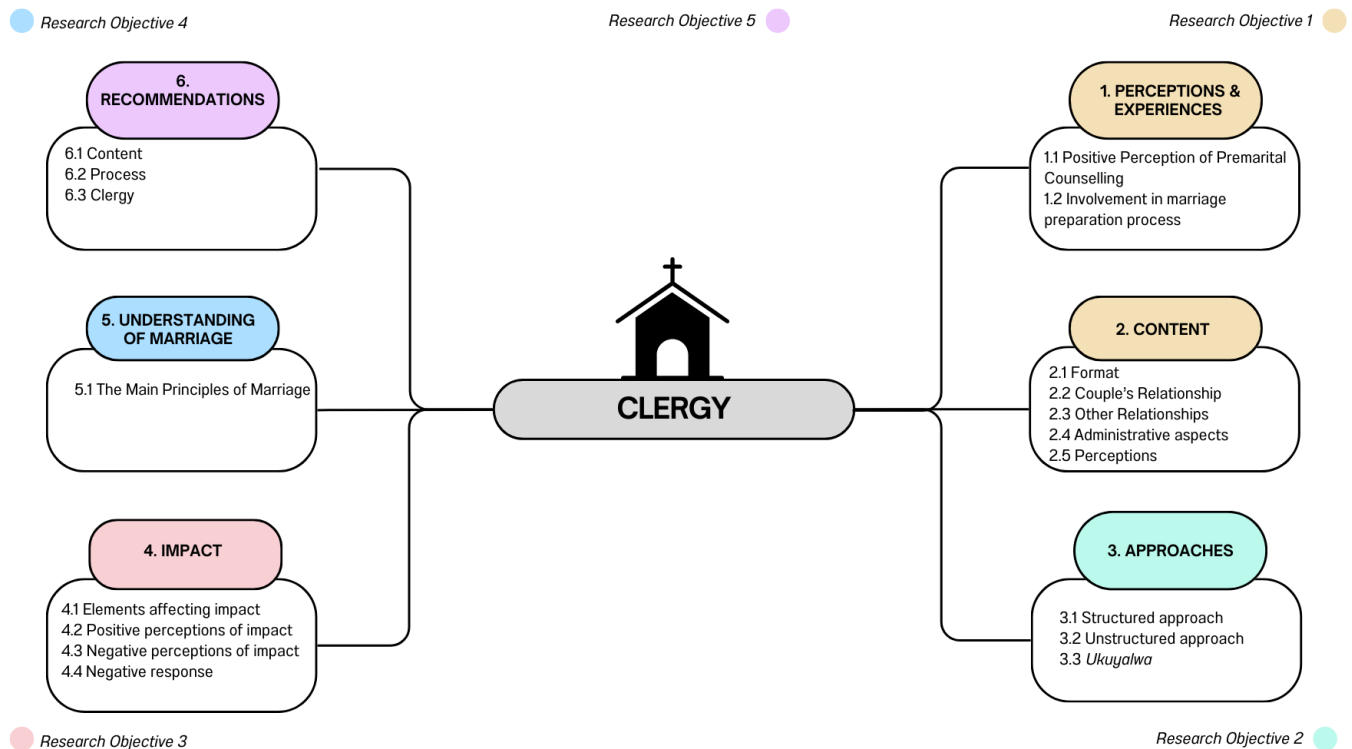


Figure 4: Diagram Presenting Themes: Clergy

4.2.1. Theme 1: Perceptions & Experiences

From the interviews conducted with the clergy based on their experience with PMC, it is evident that preparing people for marriage is perceived as an integral part of pastoral care. In order to understand the nature and content of PMC offered in South African churches, participants were asked to explain why they thought PMC is important and how they were involved in the PMC process in their church. Through the constant comparison of the codes identified from the data, the codes were merged based on similarity. Analysis of these codes revealed two significant sub-themes related to the theme of perceptions and experiences of PMC. These sub-themes held constant across all participants, namely:

- Positive perception of premarital counselling
- Involvement in the marriage preparation process

These sub-themes are analysed in detail below.

4.2.1.1. Positive perception of premarital counselling

The data collected shows that clergy perceived PMC to be essential and beneficial to the couple's relationship in various ways. Different reasons were mentioned that made PMC necessary for couples, according to the clergy. Some of the comments that reflect the significance of PMC are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 3: *"Since you guys have made this decision...here are some of the things that you need to be cautious of".*

Participant 6: *"So that they may know what they are getting into".*

Participant 11: *"It is critical to open their eyes of what is coming" and also "because most of these guys, you know when they come, they said, 'you know what, if I didn't know what I know I would have ran away'".*

From the quotes above, it is clear that the importance of PMC is creating awareness with regards to marriage. Equipping couples and creating awareness is consistent with the general objectives or goals of PMC programmes outlined in literature by Stahmann (2000), Sauerheber and Bitter (2013), and Cobbinah and Osei-Tutu (2019).

The perceived importance of PMC is also reflected in how PMC is mandatory in most of the participants' churches. These were some of their responses when asked whether PMC was mandatory or optional in their church:

Participant 1: *"It is compulsory in our church."*

Participant 4: *"It is a must. In fact, according to us as Christians, no, even in my church, no, it is a must because we are avoiding this thing of divorce."*

Participant 5: *"No, no. Those who will be blessed by me, they must go through premarital counselling."*

Only three participants indicated that participating in PMC was optional in their church. For some, it is, however, encouraged as Participant 7 explains: *"The short answer is that it is not mandatory, but it is more, you know emphasised or suggested...it is not mandatory."*

4.2.1.2. Involvement in the marriage preparation process

It is apparent from the data that clergy are involved in PMC in varying ways. All but two of the participants indicated having direct involvement in the PMC process in their church. This is what they had to say:

Participant 2: *"I sat in their premarital counselling when the senior pastor did it"*

Participant 5: *"We got a lady who will do the premarital counselling and then uh when she's done, she's gonna refer them back to me...From there, they come to me, I'll ask them few questions also just to test if they are really ready for this. And then uh, because usually our counsellor doesn't go on things like lobolo stories and everything but I'll ask 'do you have enough money to pay lobola or have you paid lobola' and all those things? But from there, if they pass the exam or my test and then I'm gonna bless them."*

Participant 5 accredited designating a counsellor to church growth. He explains: *"Initially I used to do it by myself, but now as the church grows, I realise no is not gonna be possible."* It would seem that church membership size is a determining factor in how involved the clergy is in preparing couples for marriage.

The rest of the participants indicated being directly involved in preparing the couples in their church for marriage, as reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"I'm heavily involved. I'm involved from the beginning throughout the counselling journey"*.

Participant 4: *"I don't assign it to any other person"*.

Participant 10: *"It is something that I'm deeply rooted in. It is predominantly run by myself, yes"*.

Participant 8 explains the personal reasons why she at first refrained from conducting PMC: *"Initially you know I had my own insecurities because I'm a divorcee. And so I would ask other*

pastors to do it. But one day I woke up and thought, you know, I've got so much to offer as a divorcee to these couples. And so I'm doing it myself. I'm doing it myself".

A majority of the clergy also involve their spouses in the process. Seemingly, this is done so that both genders that make up the couple are comfortable during the couple counselling sessions. The involvement of the spouse also allows for some sessions to be done separately as individual counselling in the hopes that communicating with the same gender in the absence of the other partner might encourage transparency. Some of the comments that reflect the involvement of spouses in PMC are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"My husband's gonna be there - just to ease the male, the male individual in the room. But then what will also happen, other than the six sessions? There will usually be like two or so sessions that we do separately with them. My husband just has to talk to the gentleman by himself. I talk to the lady."*

Participant 4: *"When we do a premarital counselling, both of us, we are there" and also "I give my wife to sit down with the girl that wants to get married. I give them time to do that. To ask quite a number of things, even getting to, you see, they even get into the bed side... It is very important. So those are secret things that you must tell my wife. I'm also doing the same".*

Participant 9: *"I do it with my wife because I want also the woman part in the conversation to feel comfortable because as much as, you know, if you were to sit with the couple, a woman would feel more comfortable with you being a pastor because, you know...you realise that the openness becomes there, the assurance that, you know, even what I say, you know, I'm not gonna be overpowered."*

Clergy sometimes refer their congregants to other pastors for PMC, and they too, get asked by other pastors to conduct PMC on their behalf. The following excerpts reveal that clergy are open to the idea of referring and being referred to for PMC:

Participant 1: *"If ever I feel somewhere along the line there is a need to, you know, have a referral. I do that, especially if I do pick up something that I feel OK this one might be - might need some kind of you know, umm somebody else you know, then I would do that".*

Participant 6: *"In my church I do it or else I prefer some else from outside, like the pastor that I can trust and somebody who is mature and also some pastors I collaborate with will also do it the way I do it. They'll say 'pastor we have people we want to bring to you for premarital counselling'"*.

Participant 8: *“And I do allow that and say OK, go to pastor so and so and he or she is good at this thing, you know. Because I'm a woman, I always recommend women pastors who are also psychologists”.*

What these quotes demonstrate is that clergy view PMC as a pastoral duty; hence, even in referring, they will refer to other pastors. In the one comment mentioning referring to professionals, it is professionals involved in pastoral ministry.

4.2.2. Theme 2: Content

In order to further understand the nature and content of PMC offered by clergy in South African churches, participants were asked to give an overview of the content they cover when preparing couples for marriage. Through the constant comparison of the codes identified from the data, the codes were merged based on similarity. Analysis of these codes revealed five significant sub-themes related to the theme of the content of PMC. These sub-themes held constant across all participants, namely:

- Format
- The couple's relationship
- Other relationships
- Administrative aspects
- Perceptions

These sub-themes are analysed in detail below.

4.2.2.1. Format

The data collected shows that the content covered during the PMC conducted by clergy is primarily presented in the form of advice and teachings from the Bible, as per the following quotes:

Participant 3: *“I also recommend that they look at this and this because you can't impose” and also “If you want to do something different, in a different way, you're welcome to do it your own way but these are my teachings”*

Participant 11: *“I basically advise, you know I don't really umm give them to say you must do this, you must not do this, you must do this. You leave everything for them to choose, you know.”*

This advice that clergy give to couples seems to be based on their own views and experiences. The quotations below are the basis of this assumption:

Participant 6: *"If you as a counsellor you've been through that situation just tell them, 'hey guys, I went through this as well, it was like this, it was like this' and also 'say 'guys I also went through this' and it is so easy to counsel people about something you've also gone through than to counsel people with theory"*

Participant 11: *"Even though I said we don't highlight everything, but some of the key things, you know that we have experienced ourselves, that we have gone through ourselves."*

These excerpts agree with other research that it is not unusual for the counselling content to be based on the views and understanding of the clergy providing the counselling (Marks, 2007:46; Mbunga, 2010:67).

According to the participants' responses, a significant focus of PMC by clergy is teaching about marriage from a biblical perspective. PMC presents pastors the opportunity to teach about the biblical values of love, marriage and family, which not only help a couple grow in their relationship with each other, but also in their relationship with Christ. This is why; in presenting their content, clergy will draw from Bible passages. The following quotes demonstrate this:

Participant 3: *"I told them that if you will be married according to the Christian faith, it is in community of property, that is according to the will of God. When the Bible says you are one, it is in community of property"*

Participant 11: *"when I engage with them, I talk scriptures and try to bring them home and bring to reality"*

More will be said on clergy teaching from the Bible in the discussion concerning approaches in section 4.2.3.

It is apparent from the data that the content covered by clergy during their PMC is a broad array of subjects. The approach adopted by the clergy dictates the subjects covered. Most clergy will customise the content so that it is relevant to the type of couple they are dealing with. Some of the comments that reflect this:

Participant 1: *"So most of the sessions will be the same. Umm God's design for marriage, finances na, na, na...but then we have that one that's customised to deal with either the blended family model and the other coparenting and all of those things"*

Participant 3: *"so we deal with those things, but it is not with every people who are getting married, only those who have those issues...So we treat each case the way it is presented, then we deal with it. And also you'll find that when we're dealing with people,*

remember their characters are not the same. Yeah, so you cannot have something written down that this is what I'm going to involve because people are different so you deal with people the way they come to you."

Participant 8: *"I treat various topics with them, but I don't generate those topics. Those topics are generated by our first interaction."*

From the quotes mentioned above, it is clear that clergy are concerned with being relevant to the contexts of the different couples that they provide PMC to. Participant 3 expressed this best when saying, *"remember, when you do this marital counselling, one thing that is always on my mind, is that I'm not doing it for me, but I'm doing it for them, you see. So, it is therefore important for me to ensure that they are benefiting more than I do, because it is about them"*. What these quotes demonstrate is that clergy follow the expectations of the pastoral counselling tradition by respecting the desires of the couple and attempting to meet the couple where they are (Summers & Cunningham 1989:329).

4.2.2.2. Couple's Relationship

It is apparent from the data that the bulk of the information the clergy share during PMC concerns matters related to the couple's relationship. Issues of communication, sex and romance, expectations, reasons for getting married, health disclosure and one's upbringing are amongst the most frequently discussed topics in this category. Some of the comments that reflect the emphasis on the couple's relationship are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"We also look at the issues on their health. Health is also a big one. Health disclosure – what sickness do you have? Do you have any history of - anything in your family that we must know about, just who put it out there. So that you know you're praying in the right direction if there is a history of a certain recurring condition in your family. If it is a new couple, they have to go and get an HIV test...actually both of them even if it is blended we tell them to go get an HIV test and disclose it and shared with each other."*

Participant 7: *"Then I also do expectations because a lot of disappointment is on that. Uh, yeah, and there we go through dealbreakers, there are some expectation that a person might have had for all these years because they saw a couple and said I also want this and then eventually he gets somebody but then the expectation that he had do not fit the personality of the person, obviously there will be a clash. And so to give them an opportunity to say all the expectation, whether realistic, unrealistic"*

Participant 9: *"In terms of communication - communication becomes a key that sometimes, when I'm upset, I keep quiet. You know, you were like that, you know, but now*

things need to be sorted out. Crucial conversations need to happen because you are no longer alone, there is now another person here"

Participant 10: *"And then what are my reasons for getting married? Just to be able to establish their 'why'. Do they understand what they're doing, from each individual part."*

Participant 11: *"When I do premarital counselling, we go as far as talking about our marital responsibilities or our marital duties in simple terms or in a straightforward terms to say, let's talk about sex in marriages" and also "there are key things that really affects Christian's marriage and one of those things is sex in marriage"*

This focus on the couple's relationship is reflective of the primary goal of PMC, which is assisting in strengthening relationships and preventing their failure (Adzovie & Debone 2021, Udofia et. al 2021, Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu 2019, Duncan et. al 2010).

4.2.2.3. Other relationships

The data further shows that the content clergy cover in their PMC also focuses on external relationships, which influence the couple's relationship. These include family, children, friends, and previous relationships. The guidance given to couples concerning family included the subjects of family background, family involvement, boundaries, and blended families. Awareness is created around how the couple's background and upbringing influence their marriage. The comments that reflect the influence of family background are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 6: *"And also, their background. Where the lady comes from, where the guy comes from and the kind of a family set up because some of the contributing factors can be positive or negative is because of the family set up."*

Participant 7: *"Since premarital is coming together of two people that have different backgrounds and that have different personalities, one area that I start with is just finding out what environment the person has been brought up, how they came to know Christ - just the background of the person of both of them" and also "You find sometimes your family uh background might have a – not always a negative, but obviously it will have an impact in your marriage."*

Participant 8: *"So the approach involves firstly getting the background of the couple. I want to know where they come from, how they grew up, you know, because then you pick up certain nuances in that you know, how they grew up, did they grow up with both parents? Did they grow up with a single parent? And how has that affected their outlook on marriage? You know those questions? So I get a background on them individually."*

Participants also cautioned couples against involving their families in their marriages. The couple were warned concerning interference from their own families as well as in-laws, and was discouraged from discussing their marital problems with their families. The following is what the participants had to say concerning family involvement:

Participant 3: *"Because one of the things that I maybe usually say to them is that 'remember, if you have issues of disagreement, the first person you can consult for advice, let it not be a family member because they can easily take a side, you see. But rather come to me as a pastor or look for a pastor you can trust because they will be neutral in that case."*

Participant 4: *"Involving you see, even your parents you see, in most cases parents, not the father, mostly the mother, you see many boys love their mothers. If you were to observe, mothers love their sons... I talk to the child very strong, I said no...you don't tell your parents about your husband. No. But you can't tell them because immediately they're going to hate that person. After hating him you are going to reconcile...they are left in that hatred that this one is mistreating our child. That's what I counsel them in."*

Participant 7: *"In-laws, obviously in terms of what's the expectation and how you deal with that" and also "Cause you know our black culture, you cannot say, 'OK, bye I'm married now'. So there is that. And so there is also, you know uh preparation that you need, to do with your parents and all that. Yeah so I go through that in detail."*

Participant 9: *"And then is the thing of us managing our own families...because God said man will leave his father and mother and be joined with his wife for a very good reason. Families, they can interfere a lot if you don't put them in the right place. And normally you - again you don't find it - it is not often that you find it is a problem from the family of the wife, but normally from the family of the man. Because this member is especially added to this family."*

By Participant 9 saying, *"families, they can interfere a lot if you don't put them in the right place"*, it is evident that couples are strongly advised to create boundaries which restrict family interference. Other participants also emphasise the need to set boundaries as reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"We also look at boundaries. So we create like a house and then we speak about what is within the walls, what is outside of the these walls. And then we do windows. What is going in through the windows that we didn't invite in?" and also "Family boundaries and making sure that people know their place."*

Participant 5: *"Families they are difficult and we in our counselling try to tell them there must be boundaries that how far can they go. Especially on the males side."*

Based on the understanding that marriage is to preserve the family and clan, African families have a responsibility to participate in the establishment and success of marriages within their clan (Ndlovu 2021:80). Given the above, it is apparent that participants perceive this involvement to have a strictly negative impact on the marital relationship.

The data additionally indicates that the participants also provided couples with advice concerning children. Depending on a couple's situation, guidance is given around parenting, step-parenting and co-parenting. This is where the issue of blended families also came in. Some of the comments that reflect the different aspects of parenting in its various contexts are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"The other thing that comes up, which is a dynamic with the blended families, is the hierarchy of priority and hierarchy of responsibility. So you find that now I've lived with my two children. They are my world and my everything. Now you bring in the godly order in this whole thing. Now, this husband needs to find somewhere, where's he gonna fit in now?"* and also *"And how do you deal with co-parenting dynamics. Now there is a father here - you are in this marriage - but there is a father of these kids, there is a mother of these kids."*

Participant 3: *"And then in some cases you might find that another enters marriage already having children. Then we touch on those things that when it is so, how do you guys handle such a situation which in most cases we don't just give them this is how you should act, but in such a case we ask them rather. That what is your plan."*

Participant 5: *"If she's got a child. I'm gonna ask her, how are you meeting the child. And the father of the child got access because usually where lies the problem, the social workers will tell you, you will access to see your child. And then which is the right thing to do, but it goes beyond that. Then when it comes with these people there were lovers it is very much easy to rekindle the love. So now how we gonna work around that?"*

Participant 7: *"And then I also go through uh parenting uh because parenting uh I mean, we don't have classes for parenting, but just the principal, just to check if both are - have the same concept as far as parenting is concerned. Some people don't necessarily - sometimes they don't even know until you actually ask them, you know, what kind of parenting do you want? What kind of kids do you want to bring up?"*

Two participants indicated that they conducted family counselling sessions where blended families were involved.

Participant 1: *"We sit with the children. Yeah. So that's the time - that's where we get involved to try and just figure out if the children have a certain level of understanding of what this marriage or this family dynamic is going to look like."*

Participant 6: *"You cannot counsel people who've divorced, people whose spouse have died...without counselling the children. Because the very storm that this couple went through, the children have also gone through. So, it is important that you deal with both the children and the parents".*

The couple's social life was also addressed. The participant guided the couples through discussing how they would manage their friendships as per the following quotes:

Participant 1: *"So you have time: what is your time going to look like when you get married? It is our time, my time. How's that time conversation going to look like? Our time, my time as in me time. Our time together as in as husband and wife. My time with friends, my time with family."*

Participant 3: *"Then maybe it will be something else that touches social life. How they should appreciate socialization. How do they socialize with external people, like for example you have your own friends before you get married".*

Participant 8: *"The issue of friends. How do you deal with friends? You know how much time do we give to friends?"*

From the data it is clear that previous relationships are a familiar subject that participants address with couples who were remarrying. Couples were advised not to allow their previous experiences to interfere with the new relationship, as per the following quotes:

Participant 1: *"Because we find that and we found that in the umm - they actually have the hardest time in a new marriage because they're carrying their former picture of marriage and their former experience. And unfortunately, whether they are aware of it or not, especially those who are widowed or divorced, they actually impose a lot of their previous spouse's experience to the new spouse. So you need to be able to say to them this is a brand new marriage by the way, and that's why we are here. So the premarital for them helps them to know this is a brand new, brand new marriage".*

Participant 4: *“What were you doing with your previous spouse? This is another person now and their mentality is not the same” and also “And remember the other party still has an interest...and that person can disturb this marriage purposefully”.*

Based on the responses mentioned above, it can be deduced that clergy are conscious of the interdependent nature of marriage and the importance of managing the relationships interlinked with the marriage to ensure marital stability. Through the questions they pose to the couple, they create awareness around potential problem areas and assist the couple in decision-making. This is in line with one of the main objectives of PMC, which is to guide couples to answer important questions and help them explore what behaviours they need to change (Adzovie & Dabone, 2021:11).

4.2.2.4. Administrative aspects

The data collected shows that the administrative elements of marriage also form part of the content covered by clergy in their PMC. These include financial management, wedding arrangements, living arrangements and the legal aspects of marriage. Almost all the participants stressed the significance of money in marriage and its impact on the marital relationship. The following is what the participants had to say:

Participant 1: *“And then you speak to them also about finances. That's obviously a big one. We get them to share their salaries, pay slips and stuff. Ey, which is sometimes a hurdle. But guess what? We are here now (laughs) It can't be a secret anymore. So speaking about finances, looking at their behaviour towards money. So then they have a certain activity like that. So we say if you took both these salaries - so they do it as individuals - you take both your salaries, how would you use this salary?”*

Participant 8: *“Money, money, money. Hey money's big with couples, you know. It is the money part.”*

Participant 11: *“I prefer not to direct people on how everyone does things. You know, there are times where we talk finances, you know, and it is different per family, you know. It does not mean if it has worked with me, it will work with other one. But we do touch on finances because finances really can create serious conflicts in marriages. So we do touch finances”.*

Participants also discussed wedding day arrangements. Discussions involve the type of wedding the couple will have, and how the church and their families would be involved. Some of the comments that reflect the wedding are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"And then it is the wedding day, of course. And obviously just finding out what's on their checklist. What's stressing them out? Umm how are they feeling about it and giving them obviously umm giving them the potential hurdles to say 'guys, it is one day, but it is got the potential to break you also because of things that will come up - family boundaries and making sure that people know their place. The involvement you want, the colors, everything to make sure that they are really in one accord regarding how the wedding day is going to play out. And most importantly, that they don't go - they don't become indebted in the whole process."*

Participant 5: *"And then after that...we get involved in the wedding...because what I said here in our church, it is either me to bless the couple or our senior pastors. You don't choose your own pastor to bless you" and also "So I know sometimes we clash with young people and but we said it is a standard at our church. If you getting married, you must be blessed by a pastor or I must delegate somebody".*

Participant 10: *"Wedding preparation, which would speak to the formalities that from here, what needs to be done and the involvement of families, the lobola part" and also "So if it is a godly wedding - because weddings, funerals, parties, whatever is the only time you can introduce God to your family. 'So you wanna introduce God to your family? Or do you wanna make it wordly like them? It is up to you.' If it is godly, then we're able to advise that from church, this is how we would do it. The matrimony, reception, however, you guys would want it. Speeches, whatever. And then walk them through that so that even when family wants to speak into it, it is done within that. That's more our part."*

Two participants emphasised that a wedding is not necessary for a couple to be married, especially when the couple's finances are not favourable. The following excerpts reflect this:

Participant 9: *"I must also specify...I always encourage...that don't put yourself under pressure with white wedding. They jump in, they cause more debt in their marriage, now they are frustrated cause finances."*

Participant 11: *"I encourage them to say you don't need to kill a cow for us to bless you and then you are married. You know you can come on Sunday, you don't even have to prepare lunch. The fact that you came and we lay hands and we, we know we agree. I know the Bible says whatever we agree here on Earth, heavens agrees with us. Yeah, so*

I have couples who didn't have money to say we must make a wedding and all that. I said 'no, there is no need for a wedding'.

Living arrangements were also discussed during the PMC sessions. Couples were asked about their plans concerning where they would live after being married. Some of the comments that reflect living arrangements are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"Where do you wanna live. You know, you may be living where you're living now, but what's your future plan?"*

Participant 4: *"Then the other thing it is where do you want to stay? I usually uh discourage the people to – this thing of ukukotiza. I discourage - mostly I said no, you can go to those people after marriage, sit only a week, then you go. You go. Because I encourage mostly the boys that you must prepare first. You must prepare where you want to stay."*

Participant 5: *"So from there one question which is critical, where are you gonna stay after the marriage? Because I always say, we Venda's we believe in houses. A man must have his own house, that's our culture...because we believe everybody must have a house. So now then, here my youth, they know that I say you don't get married if you're staying in a shack (laughs)"*

Participant 10: *"Now that you're married you're living together, what does it mean? Who's relocating? How do you start your journey?"*

Ukukotiza is the induction period after marriage where the bride lives with her in-laws under the supervision of her mother-in-law (Ndlovu 2021:128). It is apparent that clergy who are older (both Participants 4 and 5 are over sixty years of age) consider cultural perceptions when giving their guidance pertaining to living arrangements.

Only two participants mentioned the legal aspects of marriage as part of the content they cover during their PMC as demonstrated in the following quotes:

Participant 1: *"And then later on we look at issues around the marriage contract. It is important for them to know the different options they have with the marriage contract and the pros and the cons. And building that unity, regardless of the - how do you become one regardless of the marriage contract."*

Participant 7: *"The kind of marriage that they want, do they want uh in community of property, prenuptial and all that. What's their idea in terms of the kind of marriage that they want"* and also *"I just put it there because especially for the church because we*

concentrate, yes, you're going to be blessed and that's that. And then you find three months down the line these people have not even went to sign."

Participant 7 goes on to explain that the church tends to "advocate for this of the blessing, prioritise that more than the legal". This is reflected in how the majority of clergy did not discuss the legal aspects of marriage.

4.2.2.5. Perceptions

It is apparent from the data that clergy seek to determine and influence the perceptions of their counselees during PMC through questioning, teaching and advising counselees. They question and inform perceptions on the understanding of marriage, spirituality, infertility and the interaction between faith and culture amongst other things. Some of the comments that reflect the emphasis on perceptions are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"Do you not want children? Without being negative, but saying what happens if you don't have children and giving them a picture of saying you are not an incomplete family without children, you know?"*

Participant 5: *"So now we're trying to bring people back to understand why must we get married. It is not just to have somebody, to have a girlfriend, to have a boyfriend, you must honor God with this marriage. That's why we need people that understand that what I'm doing is the design or brain of God."*

Participant 7: *"And just to assess spiritually where you are. Are you a committed really Christian, a true believer? Are you living according to the principles of God or you just a church goer and to also face the fact that you might have seen a sister singing there, but you really don't know spiritually where they stand. I mean, that's not a sign that a person - so that I also go deeper a bit."*

Participant 8: *"So primarily we would then advise - because again one of the things we try to teach is OK, yes, it is a family, it is two families coming together, but it is also remembering...that's wedding part. But marriage is your journey. But what's your foundation? So if your foundation is God and his word, it needs to find expression in the how and the what, so that even when families want to do things that might be traditional, what's your stance? Because if you lose that upon entry, then it becomes the - so I think that's why then foundationally it would be they know God, they're saved, they are children of God."*

Matters of perspective are, of course, very subjective, so I did find that clergy have varying opinions, especially when it comes to the interaction of faith and African cultural practices.

Previous studies outline that PMC generally focuses on the following areas: communication, conflict resolution, marital roles, in-laws, religion, sex and romance, financial management, and parenting (Adzovie & Dabone, 2021:11; Ansah-Hughes et al. 2015:72; Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu 2019:55). This held true with the findings of this study. However, judging by frequency, the results of my study reflect that the top five subjects addressed by clergy in their PMC are: finances, family involvement, children, the wedding and family background. None of the clergy participants indicated using any of the widely used premarital inventories. This is consistent with a study conducted by Wilmoth and Symser (2010), which found that a large majority of clergy do not use an assessment or instruments in their premarital education (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010:263).

4.2.3. Theme 3: Approaches

From the interviews conducted with the clergy based on their experience with PMC, it is evident that clergy adopt different approaches to how they conduct PMC. In order to understand the approaches currently utilised in preparing African Christians for marriage, South African churches, participants were asked to explain the programs, approaches or techniques that are involved in the PMC process in their church. Through the constant comparison of the codes identified from the data, the codes were merged based on similarity. Analysis of these codes revealed three significant sub-themes related to the theme of approaches to PMC. These sub-themes held constant across all participants, namely:

- Structured approach
- Unstructured approach
- *Ukuyalwa*

These sub-themes are analysed in detail below.

4.2.3.1. Structured approach

It is apparent from the data that a standardised program characterises a structured approach. The program usually has a set number of sessions with content outlined for each session. It will involve identifiable techniques as well as tools such as questionnaires and tests. The clergy (or designated counsellor) are, in most cases, trained in the technique. With a structured approach, there is also a set duration for how long the counselling process should last and its proximity to the wedding. The comments that reflect a structured approach are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"So my pastor and pastor's wife umm basically used this model with us and when they did it they were training us into it" and also "it would be between maybe three months and six months where we would have six sessions with a couple"*

Participant 5: *"She's a trained counsellor" and also "The way I build it, I build it actually. So I took some stuff from other people and also use my own personal experience... It makes it easier for my counsellor because I give her the document and then I know she will ask the appropriate questions and then she can ask others but these ones she must go through them."*

Participant 7: *"So I did Christian counselling" and also "And then the next thing would be finding out who they are, uh a temperament test, personality test that I do"*

Participant 10: *"I'm just gonna quickly walk you through the Before I Say I Do template of some of the questions that we ask so that it gives you - this is one of the first meetings that we have, which is a questionnaire that is administered to both parties"*

Although none of these clergy have adopted any of the widely used PMC programs, the PMC process in their churches is well organised.

4.2.3.2. Unstructured approach

The data collected shows that a lack of standardised program characterises an unstructured approach. The number of sessions and duration of the counselling are not predetermined. The content of the sessions is usually based on the clergy's own discretion. The basic tool in this approach is the Bible and the clergy's own understanding and experiences. The comments that reflect an unstructured approach are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 3: *"I not do not have, we do not have formal programs that we follow in that regard, but I prefer personally that if they come to me I listen to their story first. Then when I listen to their story, their story will actually guide me as to how many sessions we are going to need with this couple."*

Participant 11: *"I'm very much open minded and I am not someone who likes processes because everything is different. I don't - I'm not very traditional, you know? It is different with each couple, you know?" and also "And yeah, so but basically umm the process is Word-based you know? The process is what is it that the Word says about marriage you know?"*

These findings demonstrate that it is common for PMC in churches to revolve around exposition of Bible passages on marriage, to have no standardised curriculum or approach or any rules

concerning the number of sessions, duration of each session and approach of counselling, as also found by Marks (2007), Mbunga (2010) and Bawa (2018).

It is, however, encouraging that some clergy expressed an openness to more structured approaches, as Participant 3 put it: *“I’m open if there is another idea, I have no problem in following it. Remember, like I said, it is not about me, it is about the people who have to be helped. So anything that can improve them being helped is welcome.”*

4.2.3.3. Ukuyalwa

Ukuyalwa is a custom where the bride is given advice by older women concerning how she needs to conduct herself in marriage (Makwanise & Masuku 2016:11). Though the custom is now limited to brides, it was initially aimed at both the bride and groom (Kapolo 2001:131). It is an indigenous African PMC adopted by African churches in various forms. The data collected shows that in some churches, it is referred to as a bridal shower or kitchen party, where the focus is on advising the bride. It can also be in the form of an advice-giving church service aimed at both the bride and groom. In African churches, *ukuyalwa* is used to supplement pastoral PMC. The comments that reflect the practice of *ukuyalwa* are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *And then also the mothers and the fathers, you know? So at church bayakuyala you know, as well, you know. The mothers will have a session with you.”*

Participant 3: *“In the ministry we’re in, though there are those service where the church mothers will sit and talk with the girl, and the fathers sit and talk with the young man, but I make it my responsibility to sit with the both of them. Because remember, when they are called by the church mothers and fathers, sometimes it is more like a teaching, more like a sermon and stuff like that.”*

Participant 7: *“Uh but coming to this one of ours in the church, we call them showers right? Of one Sunday and all the mothers surround you and all that.”*

Participant 9: *“There is the mother’s one because, you know, you can speak from the point of view of being pastor, but I think the woman speaking with the mothers, that one actually has also its own rule, it also has its own place. So they sit with the mothers, the woman sits with the mothers, also a man will also sit with the fathers, ask questions and they also advise him but you also give him the chance to ask question. So yeah, it is part of the preparation.”*

Participant 11 has made changes to how the custom is practised in his church: *“Where the ladies would sit with a woman and say you must pray and do this, you must do that and all that. What*

we do, what I have brought in with this marital counselling. I would take the lady and then give her to men. I will be part of that kind of counselling and then she hears it from the horse's mouth, you know? What is it that we expect as men. Same with a man on the other side. What is it that - you know we are really failing, we're trying to advise a woman as women and they still fail because they don't really know what we are - we need as men, you know."

This excerpt, as well as the practice of forms of *ukuyalwa* in the church, points to how African Christians modify cultural practices to integrate them with ministry practice and exemplifies how African indigenous PMC can be enculturated by the church for the strengthening of marriages. It is also evident that African Christians continue to uphold the African communal duty of preparing young couples for marriage since *ukuyalwa* is reflective of the communal nature of African communities.

4.2.4. Theme 4: Impact

In order to evaluate how the current PMC approaches address African Christian's marriage needs and realities, participants were asked how effective they found their approach. Through the constant comparison of the codes identified from the data, the codes were merged based on similarity. Analysis of these codes revealed three significant sub-themes related to the theme of the impact of the approaches to PMC. These sub-themes held constant across all participants, namely:

- Factors affecting impact
- Positive perceptions of impact
- Negative perceptions of impact

These sub-themes are analysed in detail below.

4.2.4.1. Factors affecting impact

In their responses, participants highlighted that there were different factors affecting the impact of PMC. There are factors contributed by the couple, such as the couple's commitment to the counselling process. The comments that reflect the influence of the couple's commitment on the impact of the counselling are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 2: *"So I think, yeah, it has every potential to be effective. And for those who listen, and for those who saw the value in what was being done for them, it has worked."*

Participant 10: *"The effectiveness thereof really hinges on the individual's accountability because it is that - from my observation - because when people are accountable, it*

becomes easier to monitor and evaluate and to keep them aligned to what they committed to."

Participant 11: *"So, sometimes I don't think it is really the effectiveness of what we do, it has to do with those whom we are talking to, whether they are really willing, you know."*

This finding is similar to findings from Christians (2022) that counselling providers attributed the effectiveness of PMC to the couples' commitment to the process (Christians, 2022:74).

For Participant 10, it was difficult to assess the effectiveness of PMC because of the movement of church members after marriage. This is what he had to say: *"They get married, they've never been part of what we teach and then shortly after that they're gone. Another maybe she's from church, the guy's not from church. And then so it is hard to monitor the effectiveness cause they're far."*

Factors affecting effectiveness were not only observed from counselees, but from counsellors too. The pastor's role was perceived by some as a barrier hindering transparency, therefore affecting the impact of PMC. This is reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 7: *"The fact that you are wearing a senior, I mean a pastoral hat, there is just a boundary, there is just something that you are not able to reach."*

Participant 8: *"So that people don't see me so much as a pastor. And as a holy person, you know. So that people are not overwhelmed by the anointing. And it comes from firstly acknowledging that there is a particular covering over you that may overwhelm people. So try and make people feel at ease so that they're able to talk about things that they would normally not be able to talk about, you know. Make the subject of sex easy for them, you know. Don't sound too serious, you know."*

The counsellor's age was also a matter of concern for Participant 7, who is also a Christian counsellor by profession. She expressed that she does not think PMC would *"really be as impactful or relevant"* should the age gap between the counsellor and counselees be significant. She elaborates further: *"There is just that, a disconnect, that even the way that they would look at me, it would be that 'ey my mother', you know? So, for me, I'm conscious of it. So I'm hitting my 50s. I am left with three years...so meaning by 50 I would not be offering premarital to the late 20s or even early 30s".*

4.2.4.2. Positive perceptions of impact

It is apparent from the data that clergy hold a positive perception of the impact of PMC. When asked how effective participants found their approach to PMC, all participants reflected that they found it to be effective. Some of the comments that reflect this effectiveness:

Participant 1: *"So it looks like it is quite effective."*

Participant 3: *"so far, um, I haven't seen it fail me, it has worked for me."*

Participant 10: *"I think it is effective because for me it worked, it is part of the process that we went through with our spiritual authority, myself and my wife, and we've seen how it is working for us, yeah."*

Participants judged this effectiveness through the positive feedback they received from couples who underwent their PMC as per the following quotes:

Participant 1: *"I think if I'm gonna use the feedback of the people we are helping and their feedback has always been 'I didn't know this. I'm so happy we came here. I didn't think I needed to think about that'. Or 'yoh we didn't realise that's a conversation we had to have'"*

Participant 8: *"You know, one of the things that you do as a coach that you are told to do is that at the end of each session, you have to ask the couple, you have to ask the person you're coaching, 'how did you find this session? Was it effective?' You know, and you hope people are honest when they say, you know what I have found it umm beneficial I - there are things that I have learned that I can apply in my marriage'."*

Participants also judged the effectiveness of their approach through the sustained marriages of the couples who underwent their PMC, as per the following quotes:

Participant 3: *"Um I don't know, maybe there are people that we've married that have divorced, I'm trying to remember...if there are any, they probably didn't tell me...but I've seen it work with others"*.

Participant 5: *"Presently I can say to you it is working for us. Why I say that you know we've got what we call a quarterly report which is for everything, what's happening in the churches, even marriage, death, birth for the last three months. And then by the end of the year, we'll look over those three monthly quarter reports. So I can tell you our divorce rates here in our church is very low"*.

Participant 11: *"Because for now it looks like it is working. Uh, I think the couple that I have blessed probably umm, the first one maybe 10 years in marriage"*.

4.2.4.3. Negative perceptions of impact

Some participants held a negative perception of the impact of *ukuyalwa* in the church. In their comments, they reflected that they either questioned the effectiveness or found *ukuyalwa* to be ineffective. Below are the comments that reflect this:

Participant 2: *"Honestly, as we have them now these kitchen parties and whatever they call it for the guys - that thing doesn't work. It honestly does not work."*

Participant 7: *"Uh but coming to this one of ours in the church, we call them showers right? Of one Sunday and all the mothers surround you and all that. I think the intention is good, but the effectiveness of it might not necessarily - it is left to be questioned."*

Participant 1, who herself went through *ukuyalwa* in her church before marrying, submitted that the teachings were *"one-dimensional"*, not accommodating the person they were addressing. She goes on to explain: *"because there is things that the mothers told me that I ended up realizing that with I'm doing this no longer because I'm me, you know and this is our thing. I'm just doing this because the mothers said 'you must', you know."*

4.2.4.4. Negative response

Contrasting the positive feedback from couples noted above, participants also reflected on the negative response to PMC they occasionally encountered from couples. Couples either avoid the PMC process or fail to pay attention during sessions. The comments that reflect the couple's negative response are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"We've had an issue as well where they were not paying attention in the sessions. They were doing it as a, you know, tick box exercise and not to internalise. And then they had major issues"*.

Participant 3: *"So I always advice that it start there rather than here. Here, as I said in the beginning, you speak with them but sometimes they don't hear you."*

Participant 5: *"They can't hear anything we're saying. Because they make the same mistake we talked about, not because they're stupid, but at that time they were just thinking about the wedding day"*.

In his responses, Participant 5 also reflected on how couples would avoid PMC. He explains: *"Those who will be blessed by me, they must go through premarital counselling. But I know some they run away (laughs) they go and do things outside our area and then they come 'now I'm married'"*. In other instances, *"they don't come, they end up going get married by the courts."*

For all these participants, PMC was mandatory before performing a wedding ceremony. Scholars have noted this negative response as a disadvantage of making PMC mandatory. Literature indicates that those who benefit most from PMC are those who voluntarily seek it out rather than those who are forced into it (Minzenmayer, 2018:17; Stahmann, 2000:111).

4.2.5. Theme 5: Understanding of Marriage

In order to understand the theological understanding of marriage within the pluralistic South African context, participants were asked what their understanding of marriage was. Through the constant comparison of the codes identified from the data, the codes were merged based on similarity. Analysis of these codes revealed one significant sub-theme related to the theme of the understanding of marriage. This sub-theme held constant across all participants, namely:

- The Main Principles of Marriage

The sub-theme is analysed in detail below.

4.2.5.1. The Main Principles of Marriage

The underlying principle of marriage, as described by all the participants, was that marriage is a monogamous and heterosexual union designed by God at creation. Some of the comments that reflect this underlying principle:

Participant 5: *“Marriage is institution that has been designed by God from creation”.*

Participant 6: *“According to my understanding marriage is union between two people”.*

Participant 8: *“A marriage to me is a union of two people umm a male and a female in the context of the Christian religion.”*

Participant 11: *“So basically there must be an agreement between two people and those two people in our belief, it should be a man and a woman” and also “So marriage to me, I would align it in what God designed from the beginning”.*

Participants evidently view marriage from a Reformed perspective, which upholds that the creative order is foundational to the biblical idea of marriage. The first three chapters of Genesis therefore, form the origin and prototype of marriage (Vorster 2008:466). Hence, marriage is understood as an exclusively heterosexual monogamous relationship.

It is apparent from the data that clergy perceived marriage to be a journey centred around the couple becoming one, as per the following comments:

Participant 2: *“And when the Bible says, umm, they shall become one - the becoming one has proven through time that it is not an easy thing.”*

Participant 10: *"Marriage to me would be a journey of two individuals coming together and becoming one" and also "For this reason a man shall leave his mother and father and cleave to - so it is the process of becoming one. It is that process of leaving what you've known - your mother, your father, your family of origin and becoming one with your spouse."*

Participant 11: *"We forget that the Bible says the two shall become and to become is a process."*

Oneness is one of the main principles of marriage according to the creative order. Oneness signifies how the two people share each other's lives in a complete and dedicated manner (Voster, 2008:467).

Some participants also commented that marriage is a permanent union. The comments that reflect the permanency of marriage are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 3: *"According to faith, it is a coming together that is, I'd say, permanent" and also "God says once you come together you are one, then we know that he's not approving divorce".*

Participant 10: *"I think my life would be better with this person. My permanent friend that I can literally live the rest of my life with."*

Participant 11: *"Marriage is not a contract, it is permanent, you know, and based on our belief."*

Divorce is inconsistent with the original institution of marriage as reflected in the creative order because when Jesus comments on Gen. 2:24, he makes it clear that marriage is a union that is not to be broken (Ngundu, 2011:45).

In their description of marriage, most participants also described marriage as a commitment based on love and aimed at family-building. Some of the comments that reflect this description:

Participant 1: *"It is two people who would like to enter into a commitment to build a family together"*

Participant 2: *"Love, I think is primary in marriage."*

Participant 3: *"In short marriage is a coming together of two people, a male and a female who come together in agreement to build a family together" and also "they have to love each other".*

Participant 4: *“That’s where marriage started, it is a making of the two people together and make one flesh and so that they can have children together and the nation should go on”.*

According to the creative order, one of the primary purposes of marriage is procreation (Ndlovu, 2021:58). Participants put building a family through childbearing at the centre of marriage.

4.2.6. Theme 6: Recommendations

In order to assist in identifying the strategies that can be developed to enhance the theory and practice of pastoral PMC for African Christians, participants were asked how they would recommend that PMC be improved. Through the constant comparison of the codes identified from the data, the codes were merged based on similarity. Analysis of these codes revealed three significant sub-themes related to the theme of recommendations for improving PMC. These sub-themes held constant across all participants, namely:

- Content
- Process
- Clergy

These sub-themes are analysed in detail below.

4.2.6.1. Content

In their responses, participants emphasised improvement that needed to be made to the content of PMC. Participants recommended that there be a structured program, that the information shared be contextual and more practical.

Participants recommended that PMC have a structured program that guides the clergy on what to say and do during sessions. The comments that reflect PMC being more structured are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *“I think a structured program. Yoh like nothing beats that. A structured program where you know what you are doing. You know, before a couple would come they’d find the activity sheets are on the table or like there is a pen and a paper on the table. It is structured. You know what I’m saying? Like they can actually track and say ‘we started here with these sessions and ended here and these are the things we learnt in the sessions’”.*

Participant 2: *“To have a formal sort of structure that these are the things - the basic that we cover.”*

Participant 7: *“So if we elevate the premarital to that, that we are equipping our church through having a well-defined program of premarital, have training, whether we call it courses whatever.”*

Participant 10 emphasised that churches have a clearly defined marriage process that acts as a standard rite of passage into marriage. This is how he explained it: *“Not to leave it to chance, but to really have a rite of passage for each and everyone who wants to go into marriage so that they know the steps that we have... So being able to have systems in place, or a rite of passage for congregants or individuals who wanna get married, to prepare them for marriage.”*

Participants also suggested that the content covered during PMC be more contextual and relevant to the world in which African Christians exist. This calls for clergy to inform themselves concerning the context in which the couples exist within so that they can update the content of their PMC to remain relevant to the couples they minister to. The comments that reflect the need to contextualise the content of PMC are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 2: *“It is important to recognise the context of where couples are now is really completely different, and the generation we have now, millennials, Gen Z, the people who are getting married now... So, you've got to, I think, be considerate of the time the couple is in, try to inform yourself as well as the counsellor that what are the things that are key now happening now in churches?”*

Participant 5: *“When HIV and AIDS came into the picture, we did everything that we must, we encouraged people to test... We never include those things in our counselling procedure but now we realise that this is important... That's why I say now you must always update.”*

Participant 11: *“With us and things remain the same forever and ever. And they are not relevant to the changing world and we are not saying the world should influence uh what God has designed, but we must be relevant, you know what I'm saying?”*

Participants also emphasised the need for the content of PMC to be more practical and interactive. Below are the comments that reflect this:

Participant 2: *“Speak things that are - be real man in your conversations. Don't skimp. Don't give me too little. Give me directly what I need for what I'm about to go into. Engage me in conversation... Engaging people because that would directly feed into the context they're in. If you give them straight. We don't talk enough about issues of debt.”*

Participant 11: *"I believe that somehow, we tend to shy away from the reality of things and really certain things wants us not to be too spiritual about them... I would suggest that uh let us be real with regards to marriage when coming to pre counselling."*

4.2.6.2. Process

Participants recommended things that could be included in the PMC process that could make it more effective. These include marriage discussions with youth and focusing on marriage enrichment after the wedding. Participants recommended that churches should not wait until someone is getting married to begin premarital education, but that the church should continuously teach their youth groups about marriage. Below are the comments that reflect this:

Participant 3: *"I think what needs to improve in churches is not to wait until our young people are in relationships before we start talking about marriage with them... starting premarital counselling when people have committed that they're getting married, it is too late... if you have young people in the church, call them and have sessions, and have those discussions. Don't avoid them because no one amongst them is getting married. Let's start talking to them about those things whilst they are still young."*

Participant 4: *"Start teaching the youth at the church time and again, you must teach the youth. And you get into them the marriage part of it. They are not there, but you just touch that portion, that 'let's talk about marriage now. I know you are not married, but how do you want your marriage?'"*

Participant 10: *"Teaching on marriage ahead of time, creating that awareness ahead of time? Personal goals that prepares you for marriage ahead of time, so I think that would be the first thing."*

These quotes demonstrate that marriage preparation should not be a one-time occurrence but an ongoing process beginning during adolescence, as outlined by Pyżlak (2018).

Participant 5 recommended that PMC sessions start early and that they are not close to the wedding day. He says, *"I will suggest that if the churches can have it earlier, as early as possible"*. Stahmann supports this finding, stating that PMC is most beneficial when obtained early in the relationship and several months before the wedding (Stahmann, 2000:112).

Some participants recommended improving marriage enrichment programs or couples' meetings after the PMC is completed. The comments that reflect the improvement of marriage enrichment are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 4: *"Pastors and churches must improve the couple's meetings."*

Participant 10: *“So I think the marriage enrichment as well would help a great deal after the pre-marriage then afterwards, then just that journey of continuous learning, improvement and growth.”*

For participant 1, this focus on marriage enrichment must focus on improving the postnuptial sessions, particularly allowing couples to approach even before their scheduled postnuptial sessions. She explained it this way: *“I think the part - maybe the area of improvement would be an area of saying to them ‘you don’t have to wait for the one year session’. You know what I’m saying? Like, if it is really not going well in between, come and tell us, you know. So sometimes you find that some people feel cause you gave them the tools, you don’t expect them to come to you again and say I’ve got the same issue that we spoke about before we got married. So I think that’s the area where we need to maybe improve the communication or the follow up in my view because sometimes you find that yoh they allow a certain issue just to kinda you know grow and just sit there until they’ll go and say things on that particular day”* (Participant 1). Stahmann affirms the importance of the post-wedding follow-up session (Stahmann, 2000:112).

4.2.6.3. Clergy

Participants also made recommendations for clergy involved in PMC. It was recommended that clergy receive training for conducting PMC and that churches outsource PMC services.

Participants indicated that the theological training they received did cover pastoral counselling, but felt it was not enough preparation to conduct PMC. Seminary training has been found to be insufficient in preparing clergy to be efficient premarital counsellors (Moeti et al., 2024:5). Training is necessary to empower clergy to prepare couples for marriage. The comments that reflect the training of clergy for PMC are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *“My recommendation is that maybe there should be a program that pastors are trained in premarital counselling, whether in the way that we did it or in a way where they actually do a course... So, my recommendation is a course, a training and even if you call somebody to come and train you at church or a few of the pastors for that one day, it will go a long way than just winging it.”*

Participant 2: *“I wasn’t sufficiently prepared especially from a theological background. When I think back to seminary days, it just covered it as a board context.”*

Participant 8: *“I think we need to be prepared as pastors for these sessions.”*

Participant 10: *“At Bible school it was only second year where we learnt about marriage, relationships or something like that. But also I was younger then, but also trying to*

remember the – recall the content, I think it was not specific for empowering a pastor or a leader. ‘This is the process, or this is how you go about counselling a couple, preparing them for marriage.’”

Some participants reflected that they relied on training besides their theological training to conduct PMC. Below are the comments that reflect this:

Participant 8: *“I enjoy it because I come from a coaching background.”*

Participant 10: *“Even for myself, I think one of the things that helps the church I’m implanted in, a bit of the background I have in terms of seminary, but also psychology.”*

Previous studies have documented that most clergy reported that seminary had not adequately trained them for pastoral counselling (Summers & Cunningham, 1989:331). This creates a need for the development of programs that prepare clergy for their role as premarital counsellors (Summers & Cunningham, 1989:334).

A few participants suggested that clergy should outsource PMC services to trained professionals or other clergy who are better skilled in it. The comments that reflect the outsourcing of PMC services are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 7: *“I don’t know, there is a monopoly of some sort that if I’m a pastor it means those who are here, they must be counselled by me, but I am not equipping myself. I’m not studying, I’m not doing the research. I’m not, you know, doing all I can so that I can be ready for really, really, genuinely doing a good job... So going back to the outsourcing, definitely I think, um but for that to happen the set man, the pastor needs to give up this notion that they are the best to do counselling... And pastoral care does not necessarily mean that the set man is the one that needs to do all of pastoral care.”*

Participant 8: *“If we find that we don’t have the skill umm let’s interact with other people. Let’s not be afraid to reach out to other people and say ‘help me’. So maybe we need to even have a database of Christian marriage counsellors who we can tap into. And also feel free - I know that some couples would say I don’t want to go to my pastor. And I do allow that and say OK, go to pastor so and so and he or she is good at this thing, you know. Because I’m a woman, I always recommend women pastors who are also psychologists.”*

Participant 9: *“If the Body was working together, then you’ll have an independence, you know, where Christians can go to a place to say let’s go for counselling even if it is not in our church, you know?”*

4.3. Summary and conclusion

This chapter presented the empirical results from interviews with clergy participants on their experience with PMC. The data revealed that clergy perceive PMC to be essential and beneficial to the couple's relationship in creating awareness with regard to marriage. The perceived importance of PMC is reflected in how PMC is mandatory in most of the participants' churches. The majority of clergy participants are involved in preparing couples for marriage. Church membership size seems to be a determining factor in how involved the clergy is in PMC. A majority of the clergy also involve their spouses in PMC to make both male and female comfortable and to allow for gendered individual counselling. Clergy are also open to referring couples to other pastors for PMC, while they too, receive referrals from other pastors. This demonstrates their perception of PMC as a pastoral duty.

The content covered during the PMC conducted by clergy is primarily presented in the form of advice and teachings from the Bible. The approach adopted by the clergy dictates the topics addressed. Most clergy will customise the content to be relevant to the couple. The bulk of the content covered by clergy relates to the couple's relationship, addressing issues like communication, sex and romance, expectations, reasons for getting married, health disclosure and one's upbringing. Because clergy are conscious of the importance of managing relationships interlinked with the marital relationship for marital stability, the content they cover also focuses on other relationships which have an influence on the couple's relationship, such as family, children, friends, and previous relationships. Couples are cautioned against involving their families in their affairs and are offered guidance concerning parenting, step-parenting and co-parenting. Some participants even conduct family counselling as part of PMC when the couple already has children. Clergy caution remarrying persons about the influence of their previous relationship and offer guidance on managing a social life. Clergy also cover the administrative aspects of marriage in their content. Clergy stress the significance of financial management to couples. Wedding arrangements are also discussed, with a focus on how the church and families will be involved. To minimise costs, some participants emphasised that a wedding was not required for a couple to be married. Clergy also asked couples about their planned living arrangements, with older participants displaying a consideration for cultural customs concerning living arrangements for newly married couples. Only a few clergy participants include a discussion on the legal aspects of marriage during PMC. The content of PMC conducted by clergy reflects how clergy seek to determine and inform the perceptions of couples, especially pertaining to the understanding of marriage, spirituality, the interaction between faith and culture, as well as infertility.

Clergy adopt different approaches to PMC. None of the clergy participants in this study adopted any of the widely used PMC programs or inventories. Only a few clergy participants utilise a structured approach. According to the data, a structured approach is characterised by a standardised program which has a set number of sessions with content outlined for each session. There is a set duration for how long the counselling process should last, and it is proximity to the wedding. It also involves identifiable techniques and tools which the clergy are trained in. The majority of clergy utilise an unstructured approach, which is characterised by a lack of standardised program where the number of sessions and duration of the counselling are not predetermined. The content is usually based on the clergy's own discretion, and the basic tool is the Bible and the clergy's own understanding and experiences.

Data collected shows the existence of a form of *ukuyalwa* in African churches. When focused on the bride, it is referred to as a bridal shower or kitchen party, where older females will give marital advice. It also exists in the form of a church service aimed at advising both the bride and groom. *Ukuyalwa* is seen to supplement the PMC offered by the clergy. The practice of forms of *ukuyalwa* in the church points to how cultural practices are modified to be integrated with ministry practice and exemplifies how African indigenous PMC can be enculturated by the church for the strengthening of marriages. Some clergy, however, held negative perceptions of *ukuyalwa*, either questioning its impact or finding it to be ineffective.

In evaluating the impact of PMC clergy pointed out the factors affecting the impact of PMC, such as the couple's commitment and the influence of the pastor's role. PMC is considered effective when the couple is committed to the PMC process, which happens when couples participate in PMC voluntarily. Clergy experienced a lack of commitment from couples, either by couples avoiding the PMC process or by failing to take the sessions seriously. The weight of the pastor's role and their age can be a barrier hindering transparency, thus negatively affecting the counselling process. Nonetheless, clergy hold a positive perception of the impact of the PMC they provide, judging by the positive feedback from couples. Clergy also evaluated the effectiveness of their approach to PMC by the sustained marriages of the couples they provided PMC to.

The clergy's understanding of marriage is based on a Reformed perspective. "Reformed" here refers to a doctrinal shorthand for marriage as a monogamous and heterosexual union designed by God at creation and is not an ecclesial identifier. Marriage is a journey centred around becoming one and is permanent. It is a commitment based on love and aimed at family-building through childbearing.

In their recommendations for improving PMC in the church, clergy suggested that the content of PMC be more structured, contextual and practical. A structured program would guide clergy on

what to say and do during sessions. For the content to be more contextual and relevant to African Christians, participants suggested that clergy inform themselves concerning the context in which the couples exist to keep their content updated. Clergy also emphasised the need for the content to be more practical instead of being clothed in spiritual jargon and for the process to be more interactive. Clergy also recommended that churches begin PMC early as part of youth ministry programs. It was recommended that PMC sessions not be held too close to the wedding and that postnuptial sessions be improved. Although the theological training clergy participants received covered pastoral counselling, they felt they were not adequately prepared to conduct PMC; thus, they recommended that clergy receive training for conducting PMC. A few participants suggested that clergy should outsource PMC services from trained professionals or other clergy who are better skilled in PMC.

These findings provide an understanding of the current PMC practices in black South African churches from the perspective of clergy members. The next chapter will bring further understanding from a different perspective by unpacking the data collected from interviews conducted with married individuals.

CHAPTER 5 PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS: MARRIED INDIVIDUALS

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I continue to present the findings of the study. In the previous chapter, findings from the interviews conducted with the clergy were presented. Here, findings are presented as they relate to the data obtained from interviews conducted with married individual participants.

5.2. Themes of the study

Themes emerged by systematically working through the data, assigning open codes, and grouping similar data into categories. The categories were then grouped into emerging themes. Analysis was conducted through the research objectives that guided the research process. The diagram below (Figure 5) represents the themes of the study, grouped according to each research objective. This section will unpack each theme and provide an interpretation of the themes supported by either the context or the literature.

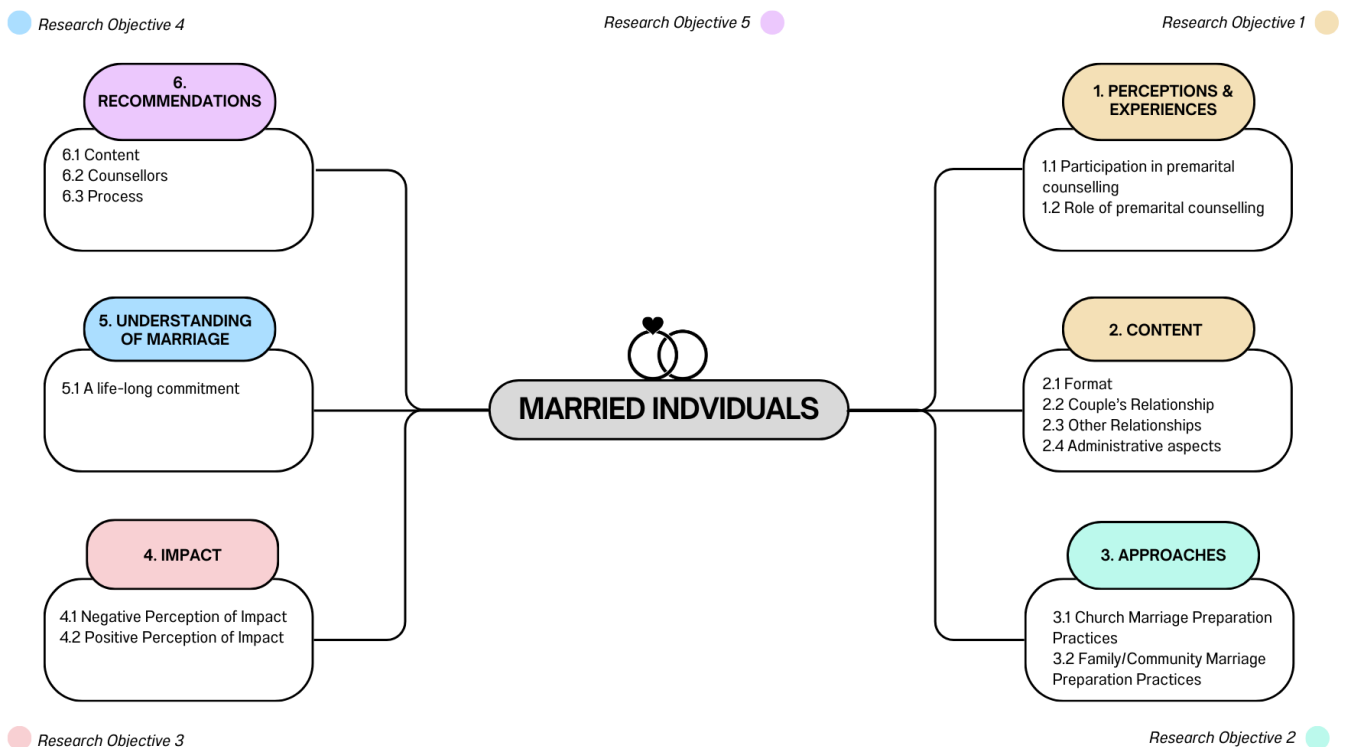


Figure 5: Diagram of Presenting Themes: Married Individuals

5.2.1. Theme 1: Perceptions & Experiences

In order to understand the nature and content of PMC offered in South African churches, participants were asked to explain why they thought PMC is essential and what experience of PMC they had. Through the constant comparison of the codes identified from the data, the codes were merged based on similarity. Analysis of these codes revealed two significant sub-themes related to the theme of perceptions and experiences of PMC. These sub-themes held constant across all participants, namely:

- Participation in premarital counselling
- Role of premarital counselling

These sub-themes are analysed in detail below.

5.2.1.1. Participation in premarital counselling

The data collected shows that a majority of the participants did not receive formal PMC. Eight out of twelve of the participants indicated that they had never participated in any formal PMC. In this context, formal PMC refers to couple counselling sessions or group counselling sessions where the couples are provided PMC by a church leader/s or couple/s in the church.

Some of the comments that reflect the lack of participation in formal PMC are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"No, that never happened. We never went for premarital counselling with my husband before we got married."*

Participant 2: *"But my side is that I encourage that premarital counselling should be there and it is a very important thing to prepare these people. But on my side, I did not undergo that."*

Participant 3: *"I didn't have formal pre counselling, it was pre counselling from different people who said different things."*

Participant 12: *"And with the premarital counselling in the formal sense I can't say much about that because we didn't have any of it."*

For most of these participants, formal PMC was not part of their church marriage procedure. Participant 12, however, did not receive PMC even though it was part of their church procedure. She attributes this to the fact that her father is her pastor, who was meant to do the session. She explained: *"We were meant to (chuckles) we were meant to, we planned to and it just never went through...we even asked for a referral...cause I thought that my father maybe had reservations*

cause it is me you see. Cause they had one-on-ones with another couple that got married two weeks before we did. We got engaged around the same area, around the same time, so I think my dad had one-on-one sessions, maybe to and we were supposed to but I mean when it is your kid. So I said to him no you can refer...we actually never got premarital counselling! They owe us."

Some of the participants who did not receive formal PMC wished they had or believed that undergoing PMC would have made a difference for them. The following statements reflect this fact:

Participant 1: *"There are some of the things that I feel like I didn't have a chance to learn before I got married, which I think if maybe I - we would have gone to a premarital counselling, a formal premarital counselling, they would have helped me or both of us in our marriage."*

Participant 10: *"I regret that (laughs). I wish I had invested in premarital counselling. Honestly."*

Participant 12: *"Basic provision of the service, you know, we didn't get that. So it would have been better if you got it".*

Participant 13: *"You know I wish they did premarital counselling for us so that I could see what questions they ask, what things do they address."*

Participant 1 was interested in seeking PMC outside of her church since it was not offered, but her husband (who was remarrying) refused. She explained: *"Although I was interested, so my husband was not interested. He had some issues or some personal things that he felt he doesn't want to share with other people."*

Five of the eight participants who did not participate in formal PMC indicated that they had participated in services or showers/meetings of *ukuyalwa* in their churches. The following is what the participants had to say:

Participant 3: *"Like at church there was a Sunday where we had a church service and after the service is whereby, they spoke – actually I can say the whole church spoke, males and females."*

Participant 12: *"I had three bridal showers. One was with pastors' wives. All of them above thirty years of marriage."*

Participant 13: *"I was also attended at church, there is a meeting I had with the fathers. It was with the church fathers held specifically for people who were going to get married."*

There was this other guy and me, there were two of us. So the fathers were called together to speak to us.

For Participant 11, *ukuyalwa* from the family and the church was combined, seeing that his father was his pastor. He explained: *"It was like a service, but like it is not, it was not only family, it was also like church members so that everyone will share their experience. Everyone will give advice. Also the family will give advice. Also, even people from the church members also the maybe those who married before us will give advice."*

Six out of the twelve participants also indicated undergoing *ukuyalwa* by their family or community members, as per the following quotes:

Participant 1: *"Even the mothers from the family or the community, so they come like a day before they accompany you to your in laws. So they say some things - there are things that they will just teach you... Just those things that they say to prepare you for that day or that moment"*.

Participant 3: *"There was a day before marriage where they come, you sit in the house, you don't do anything, they bring you food. It is prepared in such a way that anyone who wants to talk to you, even if it is family member or a neighbour or it is a friend. They can come to the house you're sitting in because you're placed in a house or room where you'll be alone"*.

Participant 9: *"My family sat me down and asked me questions um and they had to make sure on their side that I am in consent of the marriage firstly and then they had to make sure that they are backing me up like this is what I want. Umm so I had to assure them that I am willing to go through this process, so they explain to me how hard it is gonna get and if I am ready mentally for that."*

The data collected shows that the participants who did receive formal PMC had sessions with their pastor. One participant had their PMC conducted by a couple designated as counsellors by the church. The comments that reflect participation in formal PMC are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 4: *"The pastor did what we call premarital counselling. It is a number of sessions. I think it is about ten sessions in total. Each day we come we discuss the different aspects."*

Participant 5: *"We actually did have the opportunity of going through premarital counselling before we got married. It is one of our church policies that before you get married, you must go through premarital counselling."*

Participant 7: *“So formally it was five or six meetings that we had where we were having – we were both together.”*

Participant 9: *“I’m from Joburg and I married in KZN so obviously my pastor would virtually connect with us. I think he did that twice before our marriage and he did it the week before our marriage because I was at home that time. He did face to face when my husband was also that side. So, umm from his side of the church his pastor was our premarital counsellor. So yeah, we definitely had weekly sessions. Umm. With the pastor at first alone and then later on, we’re joined by the pastor’s wife. So, I think we had like two months of those sessions.”*

Participant 10 participated in group counselling. She explained: *“We had this corporate marital class. We had like - because there were lots of couples who were going to get married. So my pastor just, you know, a one blanket or thingy fits all approach.”* This finding is consistent with data from the study conducted by Jones and Stahmann, which found that the predominant format of PMC by clergy is individual couple counselling compared to group formats (Jones & Stahmann 1994:186).

From the quotes mentioned above, it is clear that the majority of participants did not have any experience with formal PMC. It is also evident that *ukuyalwa* is a common means of preparing couples for marriage in African churches and families.

5.2.1.2. Role of premarital counselling

It is apparent from the data that PMC was positively perceived across the board. Both participants who had experienced PMC and those who had not held a positive perception of the role played by PMC. Creating awareness was the central role perceived to be played by PMC, followed by ensuring readiness for marriage and gaining a better understanding of one’s partner. Some of the comments that reflect the importance of PMC in creating awareness are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 3: *“So that is why I would say in my opinion that pre counselling is important in that way, it makes a person aware, it sharpens them so that by the time they enter there, they know...”*

Participant 9: *“I feel like people get into marriage because of hyped and heightened emotions of love and fluctuation. So, the premarital counselling sort of like settles things down. So, it gives you a view of what you’re getting yourself into, because by the time you’re being asked, or by the time you preparing for marriage, it is all a fairy tale, it is all a dream until you actually get there.”*

Participant 13: *"I think when you're married is where you are able to see how important it is to be prepared for marriage because of the things that you face. At least if before you get married in premarital counselling there are people who'll tell you that when you get married this is what you should expect in marriage. So that when you get married you at least have a picture of what you're faced with."*

PMC was also considered important in ensuring that one was prepared for marriage upon entry, as per the following quotes:

Participant 3: *"So it is able to properly prepare you that you know that when you get there you are ready and you are sure that this is what you want...if you see that you are a person that want to do things their own way, then you'll see that 'I rather not get married'".*

Participant 9: *"So it premarital counselling sort of gives you, like, a peek through the window. Not really a window, like a peek through the keyhole. Not even like, yeah. So, it gets you ready of what you're going to experience and most importantly the attitude you need to have it is also very important."*

Participants also considered PMC key in helping one know their partner better, as per the following quotes:

Participant 1: *"So if you go for premarital counselling, I think there are a lot of things that you can learn from the process itself, because I think they ask you some questions where each and everyone of you has to be open about those things that they will ask you. And then as the other person is opening up, maybe with you together, you may not have that time, or maybe you may not be able to reveal some of the issues. Maybe your past issues to each other, but when you go for counselling, you are able to understand the person better because maybe the questions they ask there they help you to understand your partner before you get married".*

Participant 4: *"It is getting exposure on how your other partner, rather your partner is going to - is looking at things. Sometimes we just look at life in our own world and not consider the other person, so it is getting a broader umm perspective on the other person. This is how they think, this is how they expect things".*

Participant 5: *"And also generally getting to know my partner better. I mean, it was in those sessions where certain questions were asked by our counsellors that we would not necessarily have asked each other. And in some moments you're like you 'I don't know you think like this'. It is like, yeah, 'I didn't know you think like this either?'"*

Participant 10: *“Premarital counselling is supposed to help to know who's this person I'm getting married to”.*

Based on the data presented above, married individuals have a positive perception of the role PMC plays in a couple's relationship. This is consistent with the findings of a study that found that married individuals have a positive perception of PMC (Christians, 2022:102). The significance that married individuals place on PMC correlates with the literature reviewed. Couples undergoing PMC expect to learn about themselves, their relationship and each other (Stahmann, 2000:111), considering spending time together and learning about each other to be the most valuable aspect of PMC (Murray, 2006:70). Assessing readiness for marriage is also listed among the goals of PMC.

5.2.2. Theme 2: Content

To further understand the nature and content of PMC offered in South African churches, participants were asked to give an overview of the content covered during the PMC they experienced. Through the constant comparison of the codes identified from the data, the codes were merged based on similarity. Analysis of these codes revealed four significant sub-themes related to the theme of perceptions and experiences of PMC. These sub-themes held constant across all participants, namely:

- Format
- The couple's relationship
- Other relationships
- Administration

These sub-themes are analysed in detail below.

5.2.2.1. Format

The data collected shows that the content of the PMC couples receive is mainly presented in the form of advice and some teachings from the Bible. Some of the comments that reflect the content of the PMC being advice-giving are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 3: *“So they were just saying in this journey that you're about to begin, you're starting a journey that's like this and this and this. So which things are expected that you do when starting this journey. You see just those advices from the mothers, the pastor, the first lady, all of them as a church”.*

Participant 5: *“So we're doing premarital counselling when we're talking about finances no issues of how are you going to handle your finances came up and I pretty much told the*

counsellor about, you know, my situation and how much I've been helping out at home. And they gave me, us advice that before we get married, we should have conversations with our parents to manage their expectations, like ask them 'now that I'm getting married, what do you still expect me to do or how to support you?'

Participant 13: *"And then umm just after that, on just a week before the wedding, the church mothers umm they came and then they gave me like umm iyalo (advices). So, they sat me down and they gave me tips, advises".*

Participants also reflected on how the content of the PMC they underwent was centred around teachings from the Bible, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

Participant 4: *"I remember he gave us two Scriptures to check on and was saying that the one family was having a mind to build and the other family was destroying. I don't remember the Scripture...I remember the demonstration."*

Participant 9: *"I think he was counselling us based on the Bible and being like a spiritual leader, so it was not like a structured counselling like you'd have with the psychologist or counsellor, but it was mostly God's intention on marriage... So, he was basically he was based on the Bible like literally everything he said and everything he did, even when it comes to the like to the intimacy part, he was talking about the Bible throughout the way."*

Participant 10: *"We had three or four sessions where he just focused on marriage, you know. Teaching us on marriage from biblical concepts".*

This finding confirms the findings from the interviews with clergy, which identified the Bible as the primary tool used by clergy during PMC.

5.2.2.2. Couple's relationship

It is apparent from the data that most of the information shared with participants during their marriage preparation – both formal PMC and *ukuyalwa* - concerns matters related to the couple's relationship. Issues of spirituality, sex, communication, conflict, lifestyle adjustments and marital roles are amongst the most frequently discussed topics in this category. Some of the comments that reflect the emphasis on the couple's relationship are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 4: *"One dealt with finances, trying to explain that in finances you must understand that we are different people, and we deal with finances differently. But now you must consider that it is no longer you alone who's making decisions, you must consider the other person as well."*

Participant 5: *"So premarital counselling helped us to get through even the difficult conversations. Because sometimes if we didn't get to a consensus during the session, we would get homework. So now all of a sudden, we are forced to learn to have difficult conversations on our own. Cause, yeah, we have a session next week and we must have feedback when we come back next week. So it also help, I think, set the tone and helped us in our journey to effective communication and the skill of having difficult conversations"* and also *"We spoke about the role of the husband and the role of the wife and we, got the opportunity to express what we believe those are for ourselves, but also obviously teaching from a biblical perspective, which that was also quite useful."*

Participant 7: *"I remember my pastor telling us who the major issue why we marry is because for sex, so they also dwell much on that, that is the main purpose. Main purpose is not for wife to wash for the husband or to take care for the husband or the husband to take care for the wife, but the major issue it is sex, so they give us guidance, and they directed us."*

Participant 9: *"So, and then on the other side, the church, the ladies were we're giving me advice on prayer because everyone had their own topic. They had different topics of advice, so I'll obviously I'm not gonna go through everything, but what was similar to every one of them was that prayer is literally the only thing that will guide me through".*

What these quotes demonstrate is that the focal point of PMC is aimed at strengthening the couple's relationship. It eases the transition from single to married, increases couple intimacy and enhances communication, problem-solving and decision-making skills (Stahmann, 2000:105).

5.2.2.3. Other relationships

The data collected shows that the content addressed during the marriage preparation that participants underwent also addressed external relationships, which influence the couple's relationship. These include children, family, in-laws and friends. Participants were guided to discuss family planning, parenting and stepchildren. The following statements reflect the guidance participants received concerning children:

Participant 4: *"Our kind of premarital counselling was quite broad. We dealt with a lot of things - how to deal with children, how to discipline them"* and also

"From church parts it is umm, the family part - dealing with stepchildren because I already had children, or I already had stepchildren going into the marriage. So, they were saying, they were just giving pointers as to how you should treat them. You should understand and you should look at the challenges that you're going to face being a stepmom and how

that should not be the big thing that is at your face. Instead, love them the way you'd love your own children".

Participant 5: *"We spoke about children because we already had children. I mean my husband already had children and we also spoke about if we still want to have more children in our marriage."*

Participant 10: *"Family planning, we need to agree on the number of kids we want, when to have them".*

The guidance given around the subject of family and in-laws centred around relating with family members and having boundaries, as reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 3: *"And then at home, the things they said were almost the same. At home - you know at home they say 'you must behave well at your in-laws. You must represent us well there at the other family. If you do something bad there, you are our reflection...if you do something bad, even if we didn't teach you, they will say you learnt it from home...if you have a problem, tell us'... They said if you arrive in a family you must bring positive change, not that change that the family must now argue because you have arrived, all those things."*

Participant 4: *"So some of these things you know them, but some of them you - we won't know them to the extent that they relate to marriage because you've never been married before, you've never been introduced to another family before. So it quite helps that someone is just gonna be there to let you know that when it comes to families, go this far, don't go this far."*

Participant 5: *"We spoke about how to deal with and relate with our family members, our siblings, our in laws. Now that you are getting married, you know what's acceptable to you? What's not acceptable to you? Agree on those things."*

Participant 7: *"Then they dwell much on our relationship with our families. Like they stress that we must exchange parents. Her parents should become my parents; my parents become her parents. If I'm to do something, I must not take it to my parents, she must do that and it also myself I must - if she want to send something to her parents, I must do that myself... That in fact they were stressing the issue of oneness in marriage that we must treat our families the same and equally. And also when it comes to siblings. They were also stressing the issue that the siblings usually they do destroy marriages. That we need to be careful in dealing with them, with siblings. You must love them equally".*

Only a few participants mentioned content on friends. These participants were warned about the negative impact friends could have on their marital relationship, as per the following quotes:

Participant 2: *"Something else that my mother said that I can recall, that now that I'm getting married, I must make my wife my friend. I'm no longer having friends, those that I had, now your best friend now should be the person that you are marrying. Because that will build my relationship with the person you're marrying. I think I can recall vividly that the only friend you will have now is the person you are marrying... because she meant that should we have multiple friends now...then it will be a problem, she warned me there".*

Participant 7: *"I remember it is also the friends. The friend. Yeah, they cautioned us about our friends".*

5.2.2.4. Administrative aspects

The data collected shows that the administrative elements of marriage also form part of the content covered during PMC. These include financial management and household duties. Some of the comments that reflect the content on finance are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 4: *"One dealt with finances, trying to explain that in finances you must understand that we are different people, and we deal with finances differently. But now you must consider that it is no longer you alone who's making decisions, you must consider the other person as well."*

Participant 5: *"So we're doing premarital counselling when we're talking about finances no issues of how are you going to handle your finances came up and I pretty much told the counsellor about, you know, my situation and how much I've been helping out at home. And they gave me, us advice that before we get married, we should have conversations with our parents to manage their expectations, like ask them 'now that I'm getting married, what do you still expect me to do or how to support you?'"*

Participant 7: *"Like they were guiding us as I was working, she was not working. Like they were also checking another thing that they were also checking...how far do I assist my future wife financially?"*

Only two female participants remembered being addressed concerning household duties. Their comments are reflected below:

Participant 10: *"The cooking as well, that cooking is very important, that's the way to, uh, how do they put? The way to a man's heart is via his stomach. Something like that (laughs). Yes, the importance of food."*

Participant 12: *“Domestic issues, so cleanliness, the cooking... Oh, and aesthetics and beauty, that was also definitely part of it...taking care of myself, how I look. My kids, my husband, his shirts and pants...so aesthetics is, apparently that's all me forever and always.”*

One female participant expressed how this subject was lacking in her PMC. She explained: *“And food? How? Whose food are we going to adopt? Are we doing my cooking style or your cooking style...in principle, we say when you get married, it is not you and him putting your families together, it is you and him coming together and starting your own family but what does that mean in practical everyday activities like cooking. Like chores? I mean, we didn't talk about chores in the premarital counselling. Like who's gonna do the cooking? Who's gonna do the cleaning?”*

Another stark omission in this category is the legal aspects of marriage. Only Participant 4 indicated that marriage contracts were discussed during PMC.

5.2.3. Theme 3: Approaches

In their responses, married individuals reflected on the different approaches to PMC that were employed to prepare them for marriage. Through the constant comparison of the codes identified from the data, the codes were merged based on similarity. Analysis of these codes revealed two significant sub-themes related to the theme of approaches to PMC. These sub-themes held constant across all participants, namely:

- Church marriage preparation practices
- Family/community marriage preparation practices

These sub-themes are analysed in detail below.

5.2.3.1. Church marriage preparation practices

As already reflected in the first theme, married individuals undergo PMC from both their churches and their families. In the church, couples either participated in couple counselling, group counselling or *ukuya/wa* by the church mothers and fathers. The couple counselling sessions were either conducted by clergy or a designated couple. The sessions lasted between three and ten sessions over a period of two and six months. The sessions ended before the wedding. The pastor's wife was part of the sessions in some cases.

In some cases, questionnaires and exercises were used in the sessions. As reflected above, the content of the sessions was centred around Biblical concepts of marriage and advice. Some comments that reflect the couple counselling sessions are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 5: *"We were assigned a couple. So how premarital counselling happens at our church is, the couple - we go for a session where we, individually without discussion, each one of us fills in a questionnaire. Umm so the questionnaire will ask about sexual background, relationship history, whether you have children out of wedlock. Umm. Finances, whether you and your boyfriend have talked about those things and if you feel you've reached an agreement or is it as a sore point. So the aim of the questionnaire is to assess the couple to see which areas for them is like serious areas of need. So then they will assign counsellors based on the need".*

Participant 9: *"With the pastor at first alone and then later on, we're joined by the pastor's wife. So, I think we had like two months of those sessions. Yeah, two months. Two full months of those sessions."*

For the one participant who participated in group counselling, the counselling was provided by the pastor as reflected in this quote:

Participant 10: *"It was ongoing, my pastor really tried. It was like ongoing; I think maybe we had three or four sessions where he just focused on marriage, you know? Teaching us on marriage from biblical concepts."*

Ukuyalwa either took place in a service with both church mothers or fathers, or in a meeting/shower with the groom meeting with the church fathers and the bride with church mothers. Since different people were speaking from experience when giving advice, the views shared during these services or meetings could be contradictory. The comments that reflect the advice-giving services/meetings are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 8: *"It was Sunday, they just spoke. The pastor said everyone must say a word. So, they were speaking, a person would just stand up and speak both women and men."*

Participant 9: *"A week before the wedding, the church mothers umm they came and then they gave me like umm iyalo (advice). So, they sat me down and they gave me tips, advises."*

Participant 11: *"It was like a service, but like it is not, it was not only family, it was also like church members so that everyone will share their experience. Everyone will give advice. Also the family will give advice. Also, even people from the church members also the maybe those who married before us will give advice and also the challenges that you'll expect."*

Participant 13: *"There is a meeting I had with the fathers. It was with the church fathers held specifically for people who were going to get married. There was this other guy and me, there were two of us. So, the fathers were called together to speak to us..."*

For Participant 6, *ukuyalwa* was only done for his bride. He explained: *"I remember there was a time where they took my wife for her to sit with the mothers. But it was a one day thing. It is just a one day thing and uh yeah, when I asked her what they talked about, ayi the things they spoke about (laughs). I wanted to know, a special meeting - actually I envied her because on our father's side men, you know, they didn't even call something like that so there was nothing. Yeah, there was nothing at all from my side."*

In the churches where no form of PMC was offered, these are the reasons the participants ascribed to it:

Participant 2: *"At that point, in the church I was in – although I personally encourage that such a program should be there, but the church, it was a church where they were on fire. Being on fire that here is the Holy Ghost, here is God. When we're on fire like that, things – if I look there, many brethren are struggling with problems on the side because in that church there was no such program where people should be taken for counselling."*

Participant 6: *"I think our marriage process was very informal and the reason why - it was very much informal and the reason is because umm when I got married it, in our church where I was, I think – I can't remember anyone who got married before that (laughs). Yeah, so I'm trying to think who got married before me so that I can see. But I am thinking this because I'm thinking there was no structure. There was no way of, you know, working around marriage. So it was like a matter of it is happening now, it is here and we just find our way as to how we do things... No system, no process. You know, even with us - you know when you have seen it before, you kind of like have an idea that 'oh this is the process of the church when you get married, this is one to three. You go through this; you go through that. There was nothing like that."*

5.2.3.2. Family/community marriage preparation practices

Participants reflected on the marriage preparation practices conducted by their families or communities. There was informal preparation in the form of conversations with family members and more formal preparation in the form of cultural rites. The informal discussions with family revolved around ensuring readiness for marriage and responding to challenges in marriage. Some comments that reflect the informal conversations are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 2: *"Previously I wasn't in fellowship, the only person that I had a conversation that time, with my first marriage, it is only my mother...I think the words I took from my mother, I used again for my second marriage... She said that 'you must prepare yourself, prepare money and the way you behave because now you are about to bring someone into your life'".*

Participant 5: *"What I did find effective, though, was the conversations with my parents. I remember one particular conversation with my dad, which I also think this was mainly his greatest worry with my getting married. So my dad has this thing when you get married, he's like 'you sure you're getting married?' 'Yes', and he asks you three times (laughs)... 'OK, cool. I've never chosen a partner for any of my children, and I'm not about to start now'. So, what we spoke about on that particular day was the fact that I was going to become a stepmother because my husband's got two kids, each one with their own mother. So, he was like, 'do you understand what this means?' And I was like, 'yeah, I'm OK with it. I'm cool with it'. And then he's like, 'do you understand that sometimes you're gonna feel like you are excluded because you're gonna have to take a step back and be in the background if the parents of the child are called at school, you can't be the third wheel. Sometimes you must just chill and let your husband go with your with his ex to attend to matters concerning the child that they have together'. And I was like, I mean, obviously when you went to get married, you agree to everything. 'Yeah. No, I'm fine with that. No problem...I know I'm not gonna have issues with my husband spending time with his baby mama. And some important things came out of that conversation. And even now, with some of the challenges one faces as a stepparent, I still refer back to that conversation and say 'eish yeah, my dad did say'".*

Participant 6: *"So from my family's side I would say that I've been prepared by the fact that lived under a family that believed in marriage, and it was not, yeah, it was not a one day thing or a three months thing. It was like a daily life, you know, now and again, my dad, my mom would speak about marriage, would speak about a man, a father."*

Participant 12: *"My mom was quite instrumental in shaping and forming my ideas of marriage and in the prep process because she was very overt and active in the conversations, the topics, even in imparting skills particularly for marriage issues. She was vocal about the fact that you need to learn and understand this should you get married. So I think that would be the main prep...My grandmother (laughs). My grandmother had a very traumatic marriage and so I think her prep was bringing me into that space that just in case, you know. Just in case, it looks this way. So it is those informal conversations here and there, but at home mostly my mom."*

Participant 13: *"At home since my parents weren't there so a person I had time with who was busy telling me was my elder brother. And even so, he was just preparing me and telling me about relationships."*

The predominant cultural practice that prepared participants for marriage was *ukuyalwa*, either from their families, their in-laws or the community. *Ukuyalwa* was seen to take place either on the day *ilobolo* was completed, or on the day before or after the wedding. The advice given focused on assuring consent and readiness for marriage. The comments that reflect *ukuyalwa* by family or community members are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"Even the mothers from the family or the community, so they come like a day before they accompany you to your in laws. So, they say some things - there are things that they will just teach you"* and also

"Yeah, from my mother, my mother (chuckles). I remember her telling me that 'I trust you, my daughter. I know that I've taught you so many things, so I'm not afraid or I'm not worried of what will - how you will handle yourself in your marriage. Because I've been teaching you how to be a wife or how to - as a 'makoti' in your family, in your in-laws, how to deal with your in-laws."

Participant 3: *"Then on the side of the family...there was a day before marriage where they come, you sit in the house, you don't do anything, they bring you food. It is prepared in such a way that anyone who wants to talk to you, even if it is family member or a neighbour or it is a friend."*

Participant 5: *"And yeah, actually I remember it was the day after the marriage ceremony. Umm it was still at my home. Uh, but my husband's family were there and we both sat down I think, and my aunts and everyone else was there and they were saying whatever they wanted. And the same thing happened as well when they welcomed me at my husband's home. When I arrived, they gave me a new outfit and I ate and had to sit down again and the aunties from that side also did their thing. But my husband wasn't there. So when it was at our family, they were addressing the both of us, but at my husband's home it was specifically directed at me."*

Participant 9: *"I think on the lobola day for me, my family sat me down and asked me questions um and they had to make sure on their side that I am in consent of the marriage firstly and then they had to make sure that they are backing me up like this is what I want. Umm so I had to assure them that umm I am willing to go through this process so they explain to me how hard it is gonna get and if I am ready mentally for that. So that really helped, because then it made, you know, it made me wake up from the fairy tale dream".*

This involvement of the family in helping couples prepare for marriage is reflective of the responsibility African families have in participating in the establishment and success of marriages within their clan since marriage is understood to be for the purpose of preserving the family and clan (Ndlovu, 2021:80).

5.2.4. Theme 4: Impact

To evaluate how the different PMC approaches address the needs of African Christian couples, participants were asked how effective the PMC. Through the constant comparison of the codes identified from the data, the codes were merged based on similarity. Analysis of these codes revealed two significant sub-themes related to the theme of the impact of PMC. These sub-themes held constant across all participants, namely:

- Positive perceptions of impact
- Negative perceptions of impact

These sub-themes are analysed in detail below.

5.2.4.1. Positive perceptions of impact

It is apparent from the data that married individuals held a positive perception of the impact of some approaches to PMC. Participants spoke about how they found the teachings to be useful and how the skills gained through the counselling benefited their relationship. This is consistent with other research findings that reveal that couples have a generally positive perception of the marriage preparation program as being helpful (Klausli & Gross, 2021:186). The comments that reflect the perceived positive impact of PMC are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 4: *"They really helped a lot in the way I look at things; the way I handle things; the way my partner has handled things; I think they did help a lot. Had we not gone for marital counselling, premarital counselling, or preparation, I kind of feel like we would have had a few hiccups there and there. But now that we've gone through it, you find situations whereby you would say, you know, it is because of premarital counselling that I've understood this and dealt with it this way. So, it really did help a lot when it comes to that".*

Participant 5: *"So premarital counselling helped us to get through even the difficult conversations. Because sometimes if we didn't get to a consensus during the session, we would get homework. So now all of a sudden, we are forced to learn to have difficult conversations on our own. Cause, yeah, we have a session next week and we must have feedback when we come back next week. So it also helped, I think, set the tone and helped us in our journey to effective communication and the skill of having difficult conversations."*

Participant 9: *“So, umm I benefited, what can I say, because I think I saw the benefits when I got married, because most of the things were said I kinda got, I feel like I got an upper hand. You know when you have like a cheat sheet in an exam.”*

Participant 10: *“So for me, the church it really helped just to, what's the word? Just to bring the importance because to be honest, nowadays, I won't say marriage is in - you know, there are these talks that you know, it is outdated, you can just easily come in and out. But you know, they bring that fear of God, fear of the institution, the respect, you know, that is something that's to - not to take lightly to - so it helped in that sense, it really helped. It really helped.”*

The quotes mentioned above affirm the usefulness of PMC as supported by literature (Adzovie & Debone 2021, Udofia et. al 2021, Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu 2019, Duncan et. al 2010, Stanley et. al 2006, Carrol & Doherty 2003). However, the participants' perception of the impact of PMC was not exclusively positive, as the next section will reflect.

5.2.4.2. Negative perceptions of Impact

Some participants held negative perceptions of the PMC they received. They found the teachings to either be toxic, irrelevant or one-dimensional. The comments that reflect the negative perceptions of PMC are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 10: *“The mothers, I remember when it was like, ‘you don't discuss your marital issues with anyone, you keep it to yourself’ which I think is toxic” and also “Yeah, so the sex part as well it is not really - the emphasis is all about ‘ohh, you have to do it. The men enjoy it. You have to please the men also’. It is like the women are also not - that also message is like this is for the man. That is wrong. So we are taught, we, for us, we are here to give. And I found that when I interact with ladies in this church, there is that perception. But for them, there is no enjoyment. They have no part in this, it is just for the man, and that is destructive. That is destructive because especially people with the history of trauma, it will be like, I'm just being used”.*

Participant 11: *“You find that maybe sometimes it is not applicable to you maybe the advice they give you. Or maybe like someone like for me in nature I'm not that abusive person. So maybe if they talk about that sometimes you find that some of the things are not applicable. It is just like an umbrella.”*

Participant 13: *“The one with the fathers I don't think that I gained that much from it” and also “As I said before, the meetings with the fathers were not useful”.*

In some cases, the impact of the PMC is perceived to be minimal as participants had no memory of some of the things that were taught. Participants attributed this failure to remember to the information being irrelevant or elusive. One participant attributed it to the PMC taking place too close to the wedding day. The comments that reflect the inability to remember the content of PMC are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 4: *"I started with premarital counselling two months before the wedding. By that time, the wedding is stressing you like big time. So some of the things you don't even hear what they are saying because you are stressed. You are thinking of 'I'm preparing for the wedding'...Because really if I tell you the truth, especially with the premarital counselling, some of the things they just went in and went out like that because I was already focused 100% on the wedding."*

Participant 5: *"I wouldn't count you know the whole drama that we do a day before or the day after the wedding. We also had that where we sat down and everyone was talking a whole lot of stuff, which I don't even remember right now, frankly, because I don't really consider that to be the preparation for marriage, but yeah, culturally it is something that happens... So, like, honestly speaking, those happened but I'm telling you, I cannot tell you what they were saying... So we had that, it was not effective."*

Participant 12: *"The very few things that I remember and that's only because of what I perceive to be lack of impact at that time - I think maybe out of 100 I may have retained 15 to 20% of it. And funny enough, it wasn't from anybody in the church what I did retain. So it wasn't from the initiatives. I enjoyed the fellowship and I appreciated the initiative, but in terms of actual impact, not so much. It was a little detached".*

Referring to *ukuyalwa* done in the church, Participant 8 opined: *"No this one must be discontinued because they end up saying a lot of things that's why you end up not grasping anything."*

5.2.5. Theme 5: Marriage

In their responses concerning the importance of marriage preparation, participants reflected their understanding of marriage. Their understanding of marriage is vital to reach the research objective of understanding the theological understanding of marriage within the pluralistic South African context. Through the constant comparison of the codes identified from the data, the codes were merged based on similarity. Analysis of these codes revealed one significant sub-theme related to the theme of the understanding of marriage. This sub-theme held constant across all participants, namely:

- A life-long commitment

The sub-theme is analysed in detail below.

5.2.5.1. A life-long commitment

The data collected shows that participants understood marriage to be a life-long commitment, emphasising how Christian teaching discourages divorce. The comments that reflect the permanency of marriage are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *“Marriage is about commitment. It doesn't end with that ‘I love you’ because those ‘I love you’ as time goes, you find them that now they are few, but now you decide that now I'm committed to this.”*

Participant 6: *“The Bible expects us, you know, to not divorce. You know, when I get married, I'll die with this person. And you are thinking this is such a great commitment that is like a lifetime commitment that changes everything.”*

Participant 10: *“We're talking about a lifetime hey. This is a lifetime commitment, and it requires thorough, thorough preparation.”*

Participant 11: *“We know, as Christian we discourage divorce so I think it is better if someone can be prepared and then decide if I'm going or not. So, that they know the value of commitment.”*

The married participants' understanding of marriage is aligned with the clergy's understanding of marriage as seen in the previous chapter. Although less defined, their understanding of marriage is reflective of a Reformed perspective where divorce is inconsistent with the original institution of marriage as reflected in the creative order.

5.2.6. Theme 6: Recommendations

To assist in identifying the strategies that can be developed to enhance the theory and practice of pastoral PMC for African Christians, participants were asked how they would recommend that PMC be improved. Through the constant comparison of the codes identified from the data, the codes were merged based on similarity. Analysis of these codes revealed three significant sub-themes related to the theme of recommendations for improving PMC. These sub-themes held constant across all participants, namely:

- Content
- Counsellors
- Process

These sub-themes are analysed in detail below.

5.2.6.1 Content

In their responses, participants suggested improvements that could be made to the content of PMC. Participants complained about the content being generalised and expressed a need for content to be personalised and contextualised. Some of the comments that reflect the contextualization of content are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 3: *"If maybe the pre counselling could be relevant to the person getting married. Maybe a person should be asked that since you are getting married, the male, what kind of family do you come from?... and the woman also say her side. So that you can advise them about something that has the possibility of happening in their case, exactly in their case."*

Participant 5: *"Because I think as we are doing it now, it absolutely has no African context to it. We just talking about - I don't know want to call them Western concepts, but mostly you know the content of our, even our counselling. It doesn't, I don't feel like it is got that context that 'OK, as an African'... So yeah, I think the cultural stuff we have neglected so bad as Pentecostals and charismatics and it is an area that we can definitely improve on."*

Participant 10: *"And just try to individualise the programme even if it happens like not in my case. I think also maybe if our pastor had had a one-on-one session with us, I think it would have also gone a long way because he'd be able to ask questions. It would be not just be a general thing".*

Participant 12: *"I think premarital counselling sessions it is good when you have a programme, it is great when you have a programme. But I think it is better when you respond to the deficiencies that the couples may have. So to tailor make it - there are topics that are general topics, yeah, but we can't run away from the fact that certain couples tend to have certain issues with some things and not others, and more often than not, you'll be able to pick those up as you interact with them... Instead of saying here in premarital counselling we going to speak about this, and this, and this. So addressing concerns that we have because we have them. Addressing the dynamics that we had because we had them. So, yeah, the tailor making part would have been great."*

Participants also recommended that the content of PMC should be more practical. The participants had this to say:

Participant 5: *“So I think we need practical, I think we need to practicalize it more. It feels like sometimes everything is on a high level, but I mean, marriage is two people who come from different backgrounds living together, sharing the same space... There is room to make counselling more specific and more practical, especially because as Christians, we say people must not live together before they get married.”*

Participant 10: *“I’m not sure if it is assumption that we already know these things, but you know, just to make it more practical, to make it more practical.”*

Participants 12: *“Normalise being frank about the challenges that are in marriage”* and also *“Let’s talk about things just as they are.”*

These findings are similar to those of Christians (2022), who found that married individuals opined that counselling offered by clergy needs more structure and a practical approach in order to address subjects that might be uncomfortable (Christians, 2022:64).

These findings also correspond with the findings from the clergy interviews, who also suggested that the content of PMC be more contextual and relevant to African Christians and that it be more practical instead of clothed in spiritual jargon.

Some participants also complained about the content being one-dimensional. The content of pastoral PMC was either one-dimensional because of a focus on spirituality or because it was only from the perspective of one gender. The following excerpts demonstrate this:

Participant 9: *“I feel like I should have taken both umm, outside church and both inside church. So, I don’t think it is totally a total waste of time, definitely not, but I feel like he was, as I said, he was basically church based where there a certain things like finances, there are certain things that needed to be addressed that weren’t addressed in the premarital counselling, but spiritually, I’ve definitely felt like I was ready”* and also *“It was like the Bible, Church, God, the Holy Spirit and we didn’t have another side where we talk about intimacy outside church, we talk about intimacy in another view, we talk about finances.”*

Participant 10: *“Yeah, so the sex part as well it is not really - the emphasis is all about ohh, you have to do it. The men enjoy it. You have to please the men also. It is like the women are also not - that also message is like this is for the man. That is wrong.”*

Participant 10 points to the dangerous androcentric view of sex, which is not uncommon in African and Christian PMC (Chisale, 2016:61).

Some participants expressed the content they wanted PMC to incorporate. These included the common reasons why couples divorce and personality traits. Some of the comments that reflect the content that should have been included are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 9: *"We didn't have another side where we talk about intimacy outside church, we talk about intimacy in another view, we talk about finances. We talk about the reasons that, the number one reason that led people to divorce. So not that I will - we want to import divorce ideas, but to look at the reality that in South Africa, these are the main reasons that lead people to divorce. So, I'm telling you this in order for you to be careful of them."*

Participant 10: *"I believe the element that was missing, it was just for the programme to be tailor made, someone who would want to know more about our personalities and then unpack them. You know, these are the strengths, these are the weaknesses, these are the likely to be clashes. How do these personalities communicate? Because it is really different, you know, it is really different. So I feel if we had had that, it would have prevented a lot of issues that happened, you know. The communication styles, you know, they are personal. I believe that's what, um, marital counsellors, they really do. They're thorough on that thing. You even do tests. What is your personality trait, this one, then in terms of dynamics, how does it interact? That's goes a long way I believe."*

5.2.6.2 Counsellors

Participants also made recommendations for persons involved in counselling couples during PMC. Pastors were perceived as not being trained to conduct counselling. Participants recommended that clergy receive training for conducting PMC and that churches outsource PMC services.

Participants recommended that clergy undergo counselling training and that they constantly upgrade their skills and knowledge in counselling. This would assist in avoiding being irrelevant and one-dimensional. Some of the comments that reflect the need for training are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 1: *"I think it is important for marriage counsellors to have gone through some training, not just 'because I'm a pastor then I'm going to counsel those people'. It is very important for the counsellors themselves to equip themselves each and every day. You cannot dwell on the qualification that you did five or ten years ago, 15 years ago, so you should keep on equipping yourself with the new information."*

Participant 6: *"I think in my opinion, I think pastors are not trained, pastors don't have, you know, the capacity enough to do it. Most of the time when we do it, we are doing it out of our heads, out of our experiences and which is it is very dangerous to do it from our experiences because you know, the couples you are counselling these are different people".*

Participant 9: *"I feel like if he was more educated or more certified, he would know what to touch, on things to touch on. So, it wouldn't just be one-sided, spiritually sided... So yeah, I definitely think they should have been more qualified or more educated."*

Participant 10: *"Nowadays there is so many programmes you know. I believe as important as they are - our pastors and we really look up to them, I think for them to take this seriously and to go for the trainings that they are offered, it would be valuable. It would be valuable. Because that psychology component, we cannot separate it from the spiritual. So it is important for our pastors to be competent in these issues."*

This finding is similar to the findings of Christians (2022) whose study found that South African married individuals who underwent PMC in the church perceived clergy to be lacking training (Christians, 2022:62). This finding is also consistent with the findings from clergy interviews since clergy also recommended that they undergo training to equip them better to prepare couples for marriage.

Participants felt that they should have both pastoral and circular PMC due to how limited pastoral PMC was. Participants, therefore, also recommended that churches be open to outsourcing counselling services. The following quotes demonstrate this:

Participant 6: *"Even if it means that part of the system of our church we know that we are serviced by this person when it comes to this area".*

Participant 9: *"I feel like I should have taken both umm, outside church and both inside church. So, I don't think it is totally a total waste of time, definitely not, but I feel like he was, as I said, he was basically church based where there a certain things like finances, there are certain things that needed to be addressed that weren't addressed in the premarital counselling, but spiritually, I've definitely felt like I was ready. So, he yeah, he was like arming me spiritually for the commitment, but other than that I think I should have edified my - our counselling with someone else who was trained. Because at that time I didn't think there was a need because I totally believed and I was 100% umm dependent on the church. I was like 'no, the pastor is all I need, I don't want any second options, I don't wanna confuse myself' so, but I'm realizing now that OK actually we should have*

found another counsellor who was going to touch on things that the pastor was not touching on”.

Participant 10: *“You know, also with our pastors, sometimes we cannot really be free with them. Ask them questions, you know? But when it is someone from outside, I think we’d be free. We would be free because we really want to know. But you know, our pastors like come on now, you know? You know, sometimes we’re scared of our pastors not in a way - so I think outsourcing people who have the expertise would really go a long way.”*

Participant 12 thought it best for pastors to refer couples for PMC, considering the state of the marriages of most pastors. She explained: *“Maybe the best thing right now for pastors to do is to refer couples to premarital counselling that they are not doing. Because being effective in the premarital counselling space demands that you have a functional marriage. And functional marriages mean that you are not passive in your own marriage and that you have done real work on yourselves, dealt with issues, negotiated them successfully and that resulting in the satisfaction, contentment of your spouse and the life of your home. The life of the marriage. And being in pastoral spaces I haven’t seen a whole lot of that and so I’m wondering if people who have issues that we can consider to be fundamental issues, critical issues, issues that they are refusing to get help on, refusing to even admit... So, with people like that who have clinical issues, what sort of assistance can they offer people who are innocently going into this thing and who want to drink of that? You know, what sort of a heritage are they getting, you know? Uhm I feel like the elusiveness that you find and the euphemism that you find in leadership spaces, for me, that’s often indicative of high likelihood of private unresolved issues and gaps in their personal marriages.”*

Besides professionals, participants also recommended the involvement of a couple’s mentors in PMC. Participants expressed that couple mentors would be beneficial, especially if they were in the same age group as the couple being mentored; they would be more relevant. The comments that reflect the involvement of a couple’s mentors in the following excerpts:

Participant 5: *“I think people who married five years there is wisdom there and besides that they can connect with umm your newly about to become weds, because remember I was saying you sit there and they’re talking and you’re like ‘ai this ouma and this oupa clearly how relationships were twenty-five years ago when they got married and how relationships are now, what they’re talking about doesn’t apply to us’ but imagine if you were talking in with someone who is still sort of in your generation and they’ve been married five years and they tell you those things. I think sometimes the uptake and the*

relatability would be greater. So, counsellors do not always have to be people who have been married for thirty years”.

Participant 8: *“Then it is also important for married couples who are your age for them to address you... So I prefer that it be the pastor and then that couple, even if they are not from the church, but that couple that will come...a couple that is in your age range...just to sit down with them and talk. The woman talks to the woman, and the man talks with the man”.*

Participant 9: *“I think they would be, it would be nice to have a couple that you sort of have as they will be there for you in terms of like guiding you and I mean sometimes the pastor and maybe some church leaders who would have a lot of responsibilities, you would end up not getting your full attention and you end up not getting everything that you need, but I mean if there is a couple that would be assigned to you and then you know, you would have that, you would have that um that reference that OK Mrs so and so has all the time, I can text them whatever time of the day and ask them certain questions, I do not have to wait for the appointment. I think that would be one of the benefits or one of the great things”.*

Participant 10: *“And also couples, some churches, you find out that these couples, what is the word, yes, through experience they have, yeah, they have experience, and they are open, they are willing to share. So, if the man of God or the woman of God, you know, it should not be also afraid to use these people within the church. If you find then that they are there, they are willing, and you find that most of the time, young people, they flock to these couples, and they are a well of knowledge. So, pastors should also not be shy to - that is also under outsourcing.”*

5.2.6.3 Process

Participants made recommendations as to how the PMC process could be improved to make it more effective. These include early preparation, involving premarital screening and having one-on-one sessions. Participants suggested that marriage preparation should start earlier. The church should occasionally teach about marriage without having to wait for someone to be getting married. Marriage preparation should begin during youth. The comments that reflect early preparation are reflected in the following excerpts:

Participant 2: *“We must start while the boys are still young. And girls. Start while they are still young to teach them. To teach them about conduct, and to prepare for married life. We take them from a young age because I think that most of the time, people are taken*

when they are old, then it is not in their system. Something you learn when you are old, there become problems."

Participant 6: *"Some of these boys, some of these girls, come from families which are dysfunctional. They have no idea of marriage, no clue, no picture. They do not understand this thing, you know? So, I think it must start from certain programs that are supporting that premarital counselling from our day-to-day church services and programs...Then, when we come to premarital counselling, we now have to deal with fundamental things that will really help the couple".*

Participant 11: *"I think where we lack as Christians, we wait for you until you say you want to get married, and then we will start counselling you. Like if you observe people from rural areas, traditional people, they teach you while you are still young... Yeah, because I think we do it in the last minute and it is too late. Whereas there should be those topics, not necessarily because someone is getting married... That we have those topics maybe once a month or maybe once in a quarter, but they be – and ask questions not necessarily that we wait for there to be someone who's getting married because maybe the excitement and stress, you might end up not hearing some things".*

Participant 12: *"Normalise the marital setting and the marital challenges long before the premarital counselling because now you want to compress all of this information in a six-month programme, if they even attend that six-month programme. And expect that those skills will be harnessed and expressed relevantly and come up when they need to come up in marriage, it is not really practical. It is not practical, so I don't know how much you can ingest six months before you get married for it to make sense to you".*

As previously stated, when marriage preparation begins when one is set to get married, it is no longer as effective. The information shared is too compressed, and the stress of the impending wedding is also a hindrance. There is empirical evidence that PMC is most beneficial when obtained early in the relationship and several months before the wedding (Stahmann, 2000:112). This finding is consistent with the findings from the clergy interviews, where clergy also recommended that churches begin PMC early as part of youth ministry programs.

Some participants reflected that PMC in the church needs to have a special focus on preparing young men. Participant 13, who had one meeting with the church fathers in comparison to the three bridal showers that his wife had explained it this way: *"I think it is true this thing that women they are better prepared than us. I think that's true. I think your question shows it now that actually...no one actually took me step by step through all these things, so I think it is some of the things the church needs to have a big intervention in. Like to prepare young men."*

Participant 2 emphasised the need to prepare young men due to the violence men perpetuate towards their wives. He explained: *"We can't as the church, with the current situation happening in the country – uh our programs are not changed to face the national dialogue... When we see the country like this it means we have a challenge at churches. Meaning that we are not preparing young men enough in the church so that when these young men enter society, they be the right people. So the failure we see in society, is also a challenge we have to accept as the church. And then how do we prepare young men so that they can face the world. So that all the failures we see today, men behaving the way they are behaving - what have we done? Are we 100% sure that as the church that contributes to society, we have prepared our boys? I'm not sure if we are certain as the church. I'm not sure... I can say we haven't done enough. I'm within the church as I say so. We haven't done enough to prepare these young men. Always we are filled with programs, but I'm not seeing programs for young men."*

Participants also recommended that health screening be incorporated as part of the PMC process. The following excerpts demonstrate this:

Participant 4: *"The other thing I kind of feel like in church they didn't kind of look at when it comes to premarital counselling, its these tests, sometimes there is these tests like these medical tests like your HIV and your whatever. I think that thing is important... and I mean if you are with your partner, it is gonna be difficult for you to say let's do that test, but if it is recommended by the church that it be done and it be brought, then it assists."*

Participant 5: *"I don't think it came out during counselling to say, 'have you checked your HIV and AIDS status?' We decided, I think even before, way before we started to go for counselling, to go and do that. So, I think it would be a nice thing to ask the couples and maybe even recommend, that they actually do it before they get married."*

Participant 11: *"I think in today's time you know there are diseases, such things so I think it is better that when that process is begun...it must be made standard that here we do maybe blood tests, like HIV test and such".*

Participants who only experienced couple sessions expressed the need to have one-on-one sessions as part of PMC. The following comments reflect this:

Participant 4: *"My father is a pastor, but not for the church that I went to. So usually when he does these things, he also has one-on-ones with each person. So, I kind of feel like that is what lacked with our personal premarital counselling with the pastor because some of the things obviously you will not be comfortable to talk about with your partner being present. So, the one-on-one is very important that it is there."*

Participant 10: *"I think also maybe if our pastor had had a one-on-one session with us, I think it would have also gone a long way because he'd be able to ask questions. It would be not just be a general thing. So one-on-one, I'm sure most churches do one-on-one, it was just our church with these corporates because of the circumstances at the time".*

Participant 5 who had these one-on-one sessions found them to be very helpful. She explained: *"So I think more than the counselling itself, why I would say it exceeded my expectation even though I didn't know what to expect, is the questionnaire and having that one-on-one same gender sessions, I think that was gold."*

5.3. Summary and conclusion

This chapter presented the empirical results from interviews with married individuals on their experience with PMC. The data revealed that most of the married participants did not receive formal PMC. For most of these participants, formal PMC was not part of their church marriage procedure. Although most of these participants participated in services or showers/meetings of *ukuyalwa* in their churches, they wished that their pastors had offered them PMC. Some participants also underwent *ukuyalwa* by their family or community. The participants who did receive formal PMC either had sessions with their pastor or another couple or participated in group counselling conducted by their pastor, with the pastor's wife forming part of the sessions in some cases. The sessions lasted between three and ten sessions over a period of two and six months, with sessions ending before the wedding. In some cases, questionnaires and exercises were used in the sessions.

Both participants who had undergone PMC and those who had not held a positive perception of PMC. They considered PMC necessary for creating awareness, ensuring readiness for marriage and gaining a better understanding of one's partner.

The content of the PMC and *ukuyalwa* married individuals receives is primarily presented in the form of advice and Bible teachings. Most of this advice and teaching concerns matters related to the couple's relationship, such as spirituality, sex, communication, conflict, lifestyle adjustments and marital roles. Relationships interlinked with the marriage relationship are also discussed. Participants were given guidance on dealing with children, family, in-laws and friends. Under the subject of children, participants were guided to discuss family planning, parenting and stepchildren. The guidance given around the subject of family and in-laws centred around relating with family members and the importance of having boundaries. The few participants who were given advice concerning friends were warned about the negative impact friends could have on their marital relationship. Married individuals were also addressed concerning financial

management. A few participants were advised about household duties, and only one participant was given guidance on marriage contracts.

Ukuyalwa, that the participants underwent, either took place in a church service with both church mothers or fathers or a meeting/shower with the groom meeting with the church fathers and the bride with church mothers. In one instance, the meeting was only held with the groom. Since different people speak during *ukuyalwa*, the views shared would sometimes be contradictory. Participants also underwent *ukuyalwa* either from their families, their in-laws or members of the community. This took place either on the day *ilobolo* was completed, or on the day before or after the wedding. The advice given here focused on assuring consent and readiness for marriage. Participants also recognised the informal marriage preparation they experienced in the form of conversations with family members, which revolved around ensuring readiness for marriage and providing guidance on responding to challenges in marriage.

Participants indicated that they were positively impacted by some of the marriage preparation practices they participated in. They found the teachings to be useful and benefited from the skills they gained through PMC. Some participants, however, held negative perceptions of the PMC they received, finding the teachings to either be toxic, irrelevant or one-dimensional. In some cases, the impact of the PMC is seen to be minimal since participants had no memory of some of the things that were taught. Participants attributed this failure to remember to the information being irrelevant or elusive. One participant attributed it to the PMC taking place too close to the wedding day.

Participants understood marriage to be a lifelong commitment and emphasised how Christian teaching discourages divorce.

In their recommendations for improving PMC in the church, married individuals suggested that the content covered in PMC be personalised and contextualised to meet the needs of individual couples. Participants also recommended that the content be more practical. Participants complained about the content being one-dimensional, either because of a focus on spirituality or because it was only from a male perspective. Frequently cited reasons for divorces as well as insight on personality traits and their interaction, are subjects that participants recommend should be incorporated into PMC. Married participants also recommended that clergy receive training for conducting PMC and to upgrade their skills and knowledge in counselling constantly. Some even suggested that churches outsource PMC services because of how limited pastoral PMC is. For one participant, the need to outsource was based on the dysfunction in pastoral marriages, which affects effectiveness in preparing couples for marriage. Participants also recommended the involvement of couple mentors in PMC, particularly experienced, younger couples whose

guidance would be more relevant. Participants recommended that marriage preparation begin earlier by forming part of youth ministry programs, with a special focus on young men. Participants also recommended that health screening be incorporated as part of the PMC process since health disclosure was nowhere mentioned when they were prepared for marriage. Participants also highlighted the need for one-on-one sessions in PMC to allow for transparency.

These findings provide an understanding of the current PMC practices in black South African churches from the perspective of married individuals. In the next chapter, the interview findings of both clergy and married individuals are discussed in depth in relation to the literature reviewed.

CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

6.1. Introduction

The primary aim of this study was to explore the experiences of African Christians concerning PMC and to develop a model that could enhance pastoral PMC in South Africa. This was achieved through employing a qualitative approach, methodology and design as reflected in Chapter 1. The findings were derived by analysing the data thematically and were described in Chapters 4 and 5. In this chapter, I interpret and describe the significance of the research findings in light of the literature reviewed. In it I also explain new insights about the research problem, having taken the findings into consideration. This chapter, therefore, discusses the research findings to derive a possible model that could be employed to enhance pastoral PMC for the improvement of marriage stability in South Africa.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I presented the following themes which emerged from the data collected: (1) perceptions and experiences (2) content (3) approaches (4) impact (5) understanding of marriage and (6) recommendations. From exploring these themes, the following findings became apparent (in line with the research objectives):

Research objective one: to assess the nature and content of premarital counselling among African Christians in South Africa.

The findings revealed that a majority of the clergy are directly involved in preparing couples for marriage and that PMC is mandatory in most of their churches. However, the study also found that a majority of the married individuals did not receive formal PMC from their pastors. Most of the married individuals were prepared for marriage through *ukuyalwa* by their mothers and fathers in the church. The content of the PMC is aimed at providing information rather than teaching skills and is communicated through sharing advice based on personal experiences and teachings from the Bible. The content covered concerns matters related to the couple's relationship, such as spirituality, sex, communication, conflict, lifestyle adjustments and marital roles. Relationships interlinked with the marriage relationship are also covered. Guidance was given on dealing with children, family, in-laws and friends. Financial management was also covered, with only a few instances of discussions concerning household duties and marriage contracts. The clergy contextualised the content to be relevant to the type of couple being counselled. Both clergy and married individuals were found to hold a positive perception of PMC, perceiving it as helpful in creating awareness, ensuring readiness for marriage and gaining a better understanding of one's partner.

Research objective two: to understand the approach currently utilised in preparing African Christians in South Africa for marriage.

The findings revealed that PMC in black South African churches either took a structured approach, an unstructured approach or adopted the format of *ukuyalwa*. Only a few clergy utilised a standardised program with clearly identifiable techniques and tools. The majority of clergy utilise an unstructured approach where the counselling process is based on their own discretion, and the primary tool used is the Bible. The findings also revealed that the predominant format in which pastoral PMC takes place amongst African Christians is couple counselling in comparison to group counselling. The pastor, together with their spouse, will conduct sessions with the couple. Supplementary to couple sessions services of *ukuyalwa* are held where the bride and groom are advised by church mothers and fathers. As a cultural rite, *ukuyalwa* also takes place in the context of the family or community.

Research objective three: to evaluate how the current premarital counselling approach addresses African Christian's marriage needs and realities

The findings revealed that though some married individuals found the marriage preparation they underwent to be beneficial to their relationship, some found the teachings to be toxic, irrelevant or one-dimensional. This finding highlights the tension between traditional values and contemporary values that surfaces during PMC. The minimal impact of the current PMC approach was also seen in how some married individuals could not recall the content of their marriage preparation. The findings also revealed that based on the feedback they received and the sustained marriages of those they prepared for marriage, clergy found their approach to PMC to be effective. Some clergy, however, acknowledged that their role and age can hinder transparency during sessions, affecting the effectiveness of the PMC process.

Research objective four: to explore the theological understanding of marriage within the pluralistic South African context that can be discerned to inform effective pastoral premarital counselling for African Christians.

The findings revealed that both clergy and married individuals uphold a Reformed perspective of marriage. Clergy understand marriage as a monogamous and heterosexual union designed by God at creation. Marriage is perceived to be a journey centred around the couple becoming one and is understood to be a permanent union aimed at procreation. The findings also revealed that married individuals also understand marriage to be a lifelong commitment. The participants of this study consisted of African Christians from Pentecostal/Charismatic and Evangelical traditions.

Research objective five: to identify the strategies that can be developed to enhance the theory and practice of pastoral premarital counselling for African Christians.

The findings revealed that both married individuals and clergy suggested that the content covered during PMC should be personalised and contextualised to be relevant to contemporary African Christians. To improve PMC, they also indicated that the content should be practical and interactive instead of heavily spiritual and instructional. Married individuals also suggested that the content should be devoid of androcentric views, and that health screening should be incorporated in the PMC process. The findings also revealed that both married individuals and clergy were in favour of proximate marriage preparation (taking place in the church within youth ministry) instead of solely immediate preparation (after the engagement). Clergy also suggested that post-wedding sessions form part of the marriage preparation process. The results revealed that both married individuals and clergy recommended that clergy undergo counselling training or outsource counselling services. Clergy participants emphasised the importance of a structured program that guides the clergy on what to say and do during sessions. At the same time, married individuals favoured the inclusion of couple mentors in the marriage preparation process.

I will now discuss the findings of this study under the themes which emerged as the research findings were analysed.

6.2. The provision of premarital counselling: clergy vs married individuals' accounts

It emerged that clergy perceived PMC to be essential and beneficial to the couple's relationship, especially by creating awareness with regard to marriage. Married individuals also regarded PMC crucial in creating awareness, ensuring readiness for marriage and gaining a better understanding of one's partner. This positive perception of the role PMC is consistent with the findings of a study that found that married individuals have a positive perception of PMC (Christians, 2022:102). Although both clergy and married individuals perceived PMC as important for marriage stability, there is a glaring inconsistency when comparing the experiences of clergy to those of married individuals concerning the provision of PMC in black South African churches.

The majority of clergy indicated that they were directly involved in conducting PMC and that it was mandatory in their congregations. This is expected considering that the majority of PMC is offered through churches as a prerequisite before being married by the church (Moeti et al., 2024:1, Williams, 2011:315). However, the majority of married individuals interviewed in this study were not provided PMC by their pastors. Most of these married individuals who did not undergo pastoral PMC indicated that the practice was not part of their church marriage procedure. This inconsistency pertaining to the provision of the counselling service points to how pastoral PMC is not a widespread practice across black South African churches, despite it being deemed

important. While it is mandatory in some churches, it is not part of the marriage procedure in others. Participant 6 explains how they were the first to get married in their church and no marriage procedure had been set in place: *"I think our marriage process was very informal and the reason why - it was very much informal and the reason is because umm when I got married it, in our church where I was, I think – I can't remember anyone who got married before that (laughs). Yeah, so I'm trying to think who got married before me so that I can see. But I am thinking this because I'm thinking there was no structure. There was no way of, you know, working around marriage. So it was like a matter of it is happening now, it is here, and we just find our way as to how we do things"* (Participant 6, Married Individual, Gauteng). This points to how the establishment of a marriage procedure can be reactive instead of proactive in some churches.

The development of a marriage procedure can be neglected until there is a need. It is interesting, though, to observe that even without a clear marriage procedure and the lack of pastoral PMC, this participant's wife did undergo *ukuyalwa* by the church mothers. *"I remember there was a time where they took my wife for her to sit with the mothers. But it was a one day thing. It is just a one day thing and uh yeah, when I asked her what they talked about, ayi the things they spoke about (laughs). I wanted to know, a special meeting - actually I envied her because on our father's side men, you know, they didn't even call something like that so there was nothing. Yeah, there was nothing at all from my side"* (Participant 6, Married Individual, Gauteng). Based on these interviews, African churches are intuitively drawn towards a cultural approach to marriage preparation. Even without a proper system to administer marriage proceedings in the church, the church upholds the African communal duty to prepare a bride for marriage. This is seen in how most of the married individuals who were not provided pastoral PMC did undergo some form of *ukuyalwa* by elders in the church.

Another participant explained how PMC was neglected in his church due to an overemphasis on pneumatic spirituality. *"At that point, in the church I was in...it was a church where they were on fire. Being on fire in that 'here is the Holy Ghost, here is God'. When we're on fire like that, things – if I look there, many brethren are struggling with problems on the side because in that church there was no such program where people should be taken for counselling"* (Participant 2, Married Individual, Gauteng). Pentecostal churches like the one this participant is referring to are known to emphasise the workings of the Holy Spirit both on phenomenological and on theological grounds (Gooren, 2004:206). South African Neo-Pentecostal churches in particular emphasise ecstatic possession by the Spirit and idolise the miraculous, healing and deliverance (Kgatle, 2017:2). This emphasis on the baptism and gifts of the Holy Spirit, together with the focus on the other-worldly, often leads to the neglect of the administrative duties of pastoral ministry. Because of the importance they place on PMC, some of the married individuals expressed regret over not

undergoing pastoral PMC. *“There are some of the things that I feel like I didn't have a chance to learn before I got married, which I think if maybe I - we would have gone to a premarital counselling, a formal premarital counselling, they would have helped me or both of us in our marriage”* (Participant 1, Married Individual, Gauteng).

Based on these findings, it is evident that though deemed important by both clergy and married individuals, pastoral PMC is not universally provided in black South African churches. Although exposed to *ukuyalwa*, African Christians place a high value on PMC by clergy and lament the lack of its provision. This makes it essential to expedite the provision of pastoral PMC among African Christians in South Africa. Not only because African Christians value it, but also because it is an empirically proven method for strengthening and stabilising marriages. Additionally, PMC in the church is significant as part of Christian discipleship (Collins, 2007:532). It presents an opportunity to teach and train Christians to honour Christ in how they conduct themselves in marriage, especially since their earthly marriage is meant to mirror the marriage between Christ and His bride, the Church. In this way, Christian marriage is a witness and reflection of the gospel to the world. PMC is also beneficial not only for individual couples but for the church community at large, seeing that healthy marriages are foundational for the health of a church. This is why PMC is an integral part of pastoral care and counselling. This makes it essential to encourage the widespread provision of PMC by clergy in black South African churches.

6.3. Clergy's approaches to premarital counselling.

The study's findings show that the predominant format of PMC conducted by clergy in African churches is couple counselling in comparison to group counselling. This is consistent with findings from a research study conducted in the United States (Jones & Stahmann, 1994:186). The individual couple format has advantages over the group counselling format. Firstly, it allows the clergy to focus attention and energy on one couple instead of having to deal with group dynamics (Stahmann, 2000:112). Secondly, it gives freedom to the clergy to personalise the content of the counselling to meet the couple's specific needs and context (Stahmann, 2000:112). Lastly, the individual couple format allows the couple to focus on their issues without being sidetracked by the issues of others. The findings of this study agree with others on the disadvantage of group counselling. The only participant to participate in group counselling conducted by her pastor expressed a desire for individual counselling, which would have allowed the counselling to be individualised. *“I think also maybe if our pastor had had a one-on-one session with us, I think it would have also gone a long way because he would be able to ask questions. It would not just be a general thing”* (Participant 10, Married Individual, Kwa-Zulu Natal). The findings revealed that most married clerics conducted PMC sessions together with their spouse. This is done in

consideration of the different gender dynamics in the counselling process. It is attempting to make the one party of the couple, whose gender is different from that of the clergy conducting the PMC more comfortable. *"My husband's gonna be there - just to ease the male"* (Participant 1, Clergy, Gauteng). Literature has shown that PMC offered by a team is rated the most helpful (Stahmann, 2000:112). The inclusion of the clergy's spouse not only fosters openness and honesty of both parties during the sessions but also allows for individual counselling at some point during the counselling process. Some sessions will be gendered individual sessions to encourage greater transparency, particularly concerning sensitive subjects like sex, as explained here: *"I give my wife to sit down with the girl that wants to get married. I give them time to do that. To ask quite a number of things, even getting to, you see, they even get into the bed side...I'm also doing the same"* (Participant 4, Clergy, Mpumalanga).

Based on the findings, it is apparent that pastoral PMC in black South African churches is information-based rather than skills-based. The content is aimed at providing information and is communicated through sharing advice based on personal experiences and teachings from the Bible. The information-based counselling approach employed by clergy involves much lecturing since pastoral PMC is not only aimed at relationship enhancement but is also aimed at teaching a theology on marriage. Although information-based approaches are deemed less effective in comparison to skills-based approaches, which are empirically proven to be more helpful in influencing marital outcomes (Wilmoth, 2015:106), the exposition of Bible passages during PMC may be uniquely beneficial. This is on the basis of spirituality being proven to predict relationship well-being (Klausli & Gross, 2021:180). Establishing a sound theology on marriage and thus its sanctity can be a motivation for couples to nurture their relationship even more (Klausli & Gross, 2021:186; Mahoney et al., 1999:323; Nurlu, 2020:243). According to the Covenant Attachment Theory, which this study employs, a shared attachment with God empowers the couple relationship (Maxwell et al., 2020:121). The teaching about the biblical values of love, marriage and family, therefore, not only helps a couple grow in their relationship with Christ, but also in their relationship with each other. However, the teaching of relationship skills in PMC is irreplaceable. The preventative effect of PMC is not only in empowering couples with information but also in providing the necessary skills for the sustenance of a marital relationship. This includes communication skills, conflict management skills, problem-solving skills and decision-making skills. It is therefore crucial for PMC to incorporate exercises to teach relationship skills.

The findings revealed that African clergy use none of the widely used premarital programs and inventories in their PMC. This could be because the majority of the programs are developed overseas and are not easily accessible to African churches. The few clergy who adopted a structured approach to PMC did utilise a program. For Participant 1, it was a model that was

passed down to her by the pastor preceding her. *"In terms of where they specifically they get it from, I don't know (laughs). But I just know that they are also trained in it and they basically passed it down and trained us in it"* (Participant 1, Clergy, Gauteng). Participant 10 took me through the 'Before I say I do' questionnaire with thirteen questions, which he poses to the couple at the beginning of the PMC process. A structured approach is known to adopt a standardised program which stipulates the number of sessions and outlines the content for each session. A structured approach involves identifiable techniques in which the clergy are trained, as well as tools such as questionnaires and tests. A structured approach to PMC is also characterised by a set duration of how long the counselling process should last and its proximity to the wedding. For example:

It would be between maybe three months and six months where we would have six sessions with a couple... In the session, there must always be a teaching, a feedback or communication and a review... We try our best not to do anything less than three months because then none of the sessions are actually processing... You give them activities to do, you give them time to come back to you with that. So you find that if it is too compressed - they also have too much of the wedding in their minds to actually take in what we are doing... We have six sessions with a couple from the date of the uncles. So after the uncles have visited then we also have the whole thing of letting the church know" (Participant 1, Clergy, Gauteng).

This excerpt expresses the critical interaction between pastoral PMC and the African marriage system. In some churches, the outset of the PMC process is determined by the beginning of the *ilobolo* negotiations. Participant 8 considers the beginning of *ilobolo* negotiations as a sign of seriousness, explaining that *"until I see that commitment I'm not sure whether these people are serious or not serious about each other"* (Participant 8, Clergy, Gauteng).

Other churches, however, begin with PMC even before the involvement of families, going as far as providing guidance on how the couple can initiate the *ilobolo* process.

We do it before. Immediately they tell the pastor... 'OK, call that lady, or call that person. What do you want to do?' That's where we start now. 'Have you done this 123?' 'Did you go for lobola and so on?' Maybe he said no. 'Now when do you want to do it?' Then we just want to find out exactly. 'You know how it is done?' Because really, we must also have that. Then we just inform them (Participant 4, Clergy, Mpumalanga).

Participant 5 corresponded when saying: *"We really want to start by discussing, helping you before you go to the family so that you go there with certain expectation. Uh because from our background we might even help these two people, when you approach the family there, how do you approach them?"* (Participant 5, Clergy, Mpumalanga). It is evident that African clergy observe

the African understanding of marriage as a family affair and either give room for congregants to initiate the marriage process with their families before commencing PMC or use PMC to give guidance on how to begin the marriage process with their families.

The majority of clergy in this study utilised an unstructured approach to PMC. An unstructured approach is characterised by a lack of standardised program where the number of sessions and duration of the counselling are not predetermined. One participant explained that he used the couple's details to determine the duration of the counselling: *"We do not have formal programs that we follow in that regard, but I prefer personally that if they come to me I listen to their story first. Then when I listen to their story, their story will actually guide me as to how many sessions we are going to need with this couple"* (Participant 3, Clergy, Mpumalanga). As a result, the counselling process is not standardised but is *"different with each couple"* (Participant 11, Clergy, Gauteng).

Where the approach is unstructured, the content of the sessions is usually based on the clergy's discretion. The basic tool utilised is the Bible and the clergy's own experiences. This lack of a structured program often results in disparities in the quality and effectiveness of PMC (Moeti et al. 2024:4). One participant used a structured approach based on his chaplaincy training explained that *"If it was not for SAPS I don't know how I was going to deal with it...because many pastors I come across, they do premarital counselling in a different way concentrating only on the Word"* (Participant 6, Clergy, Mpumalanga). This draws a link between an unstructured approach to PMC and training in counselling skills and methodologies.

Summers and Cunningham (1989) put forth that the clergy's reliance on their personal views and experiences during PMC points to the poor preparation of clergy as premarital counsellors (Summers & Cunningham 1989:327). Moeti et al (2024) verified this through their investigation on clergy practising in Botswana (Moeti et al. 2024:3). Although the majority of the clergy in this study were theologically trained, they were not necessarily formally trained to conduct counselling. Seminary training is insufficient in preparing clergy to be efficient premarital counsellors (Moeti et al., 2024:5). Literature has also pointed out that clergy provide PMC without any formal training in PMC (Jones & Stahmann 1994:181, Wango 2010:22). Some clergy participants in this study indicated that the theological training they received was insufficient in preparing them to conduct PMC.

At Bible school it was only second year where we learnt about marriage, relationships or something like that...trying to remember the – recall the content, I think it was not specific for empowering a pastor or a leader. 'This is the process, or this is how you go about

counselling a couple, preparing them for marriage.’ Even within school of ministry I know - which was the 4th year...we didn’t have one that was specific for counselling (Participant 10, Clergy, Mpumalanga).

This participant explained that it was not only *“the background I have in terms of seminary, but also psychology”* that proved helpful in equipping him to conduct PMC. It is evident that there is a need for African clergy to be professionally trained in counselling skills and techniques to be better-rounded and more effective in their approach (cf. Christians, 2022:63). Wango (2010) opines that *“the pastoral counsellor should hold qualifications beyond the professional theological practice and possess advanced technical skills in psychology, philosophy, counselling and psychotherapy”* (Wango, 2010:25). The inclusion of the cleric’s spouse in the PMC process means they too need professional training in counselling skills to ensure the effectiveness of the PMC.

6.4. The helpfulness of pastoral premarital counselling

All the married individuals who underwent PMC from their pastors found it helpful. They found that the teachings and skills gained through the counselling benefited their relationship by influencing perceptions and behaviours. This finding is supported by Klausli and Gross (2021), who found that couples generally have a positive perception of marriage preparation programs as helpful (Klausli & Gross, 2021:186). Participants indicated that the sessions *“really helped a lot in the way I look at things; the way I handle things”* (Participant 4, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). PMC particularly helped the participants gain communication skills. One participant explained how the homework they would get when they did not reach a consensus during a session meant they were *“forced to learn to have difficult conversations on our own”* (Participant 5, Married Individual, Western Cape). PMC also prepared couples for the challenges of marriage. Another participant registered the helpfulness of the counselling once they were married because they felt better prepared. They felt as though they had *“a cheat sheet in an exam”* (Participant 9, Married Individual, Kwa-Zulu Natal). Participant 7 explained how PMC helped make it easier to reach out to their pastor for counselling when facing marital problems. *“Whenever we have challenges we are able, even now fifteen years in marriage, to still go and say ‘hey there is this things...and they give us further counselling in that way”* (Participant 7, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). Literature has pointed to how PMC helps couples familiarise with counselling, making couples who undergo PMC more likely to seek help at earlier stages of marital distress (Carlson et al., 2020:54; Williams, 2011:319). This makes it easier to resolve problems and avoid divorce since many couples will only seek counselling when they are highly distressed – if they will even seek help at all (Williams, 2011:323).

When reflecting on the helpfulness of the PMC they offered, clergy participants referred to the positive feedback they received from couples. *"Their feedback has always been 'I did not know this. I am so happy we came here. I did not think I needed to think about that.' Or 'we did not realise that is a conversation we had to have'"* (Participant 1, Clergy, Gauteng). PMC helps create awareness and stimulate essential conversations amongst couples. PMC is also helpful to couples by providing knowledge, as reflected by Participant 8 when she says, *"You hope people are honest when they say, you know what I have found it umm beneficial. I - there are things that I have learned that I can apply in my marriage."* (Participant 8, Clergy, Gauteng). Clergy also used the low occurrence of divorce in their churches as an indication of the usefulness of the PMC they offer.

Participants also identified the elements hindering the effectiveness of PMC offered by the clergy. The proximity of the counselling process to the wedding was one element. Participant 4 shared that they *"started with premarital counselling two months before the wedding. By that time, the wedding is stressing you like big time. So some of the things you do not even hear what they are saying because you are stressed"* (Participant 4, Married Individual, Mpumalanga).

Clergy participants have witnessed couples make mistakes they were warned about in PMC because *"they cannot hear anything we are saying...at that time they were just thinking about the wedding day"* (Participant 5, Clergy, Mpumalanga). Literature has pointed out that PMC is most beneficial when obtained several months before the wedding (Stahmann, 2000:112). It is recommended that PMC take place at least six months before the wedding if it is to be effective (Mwiti & Dueck 2006:163). The effectiveness of PMC is also affected by the commitment of the couple being counselled. *"The effectiveness thereof really hinges on the individual's accountability"* (Participant 10, Clergy, Mpumalanga). Participant 11 also expressed the same when he said, *"I don't think it is really the effectiveness of what we do, it has to do with those whom we are talking to, whether they are really willing"* (Participant 11, Clergy, Gauteng). Lack of commitment to the counselling process is usually seen in the couple *"not paying attention in the sessions"* (Participant 1, Clergy, Gauteng). This finding is supported by literature, which states that the perceived helpfulness of PMC is positively related to voluntary participation (Duncan et al., 2010:625). Those who benefit most from PMC are those who voluntarily seek it out rather than those who are forced into it (Minzenmayer, 2018:17; Stahmann, 2000:111). This is consistent with the findings since the clergy who complained about couple commitment were clergy who made PMC mandatory before conducting a wedding.

Another factor hindering the helpfulness of pastoral PMC was the role of the pastor, which could sometimes create a barrier hindering transparency. Participants explained that *“there is a particular covering over you that may overwhelm people. So try and make people feel at ease so that they are able to talk about things that they would normally not be able to talk about”* (Participant 8, Clergy, Gauteng). The effectiveness of the counselling can also be impacted by the age gap between the pastor providing the counselling and the couple being counselled. PMC risks not being *“as impactful or relevant”* (Participant 7, Clergy, Mpumalanga) when there is a big age gap between the pastor and the couple.

PMC offered by clergy is evidently helpful, but efforts need to be made to address the different elements that can hinder its effectiveness.

6.5. Ukuyalwa in South African churches

As previously stated, most of the married individuals who participated in this study were prepared for marriage through *ukuyalwa* by church mothers and fathers. *Ukuyalwa* (to be given instruction or advice) is a traditional marriage preparation rite integral to the marriage process in many African communities. During indigenous African PMC, elders address the wife on her responsibilities as well as how she is expected to behave (cf. Kapolo, 2001:131). Traditional PMC is also used to instil traditional principles and practices (Moeti et al., 2017:249). Although John Kambalame in Kapolo (2001) points out that such counselling was initially directed to both the groom and the bride (Kapolo, 2001:131), it is now standard practice for counsel to be solely directed towards the bride (cf. Chisale, 2016:62; Makwanise & Masuku, 2016:11; Montle, 2020:163).

In the context of the church, *ukuyalwa* involves bridal showers or services where the church mothers will advise the bride. In some cases, the fathers will also meet with the groom. In other instances, the elders in the church will host a meeting for the couple. In some churches, *ukuyalwa* is the sole means of marriage preparation, while in other churches it supplements pastoral PMC. Some clergy believe that *ukuyalwa* *“has its own place”* (Participant 9, Clergy, Mpumalanga) and therefore cannot be replaced by pastoral PMC. The group setting and gendered perspective are advantageous in ensuring the preparation is both extensive and relatable. Likewise, *ukuyalwa* cannot replace pastoral PMC.

Talking from her own experience of *ukuyalwa*, a clergy participant argued that *ukuyalwa* alone is not sufficient for marriage preparation. *“So at church “bayakuyala” you know, as well, you know. The mothers will have a session with you. And I’m telling you, if it was only these sessions we would really have loopholes because someone might say that’s enough...but actually without*

premarital counselling, it could have been such a hurdle for us" (Participant 1, Clergy, Gauteng). Understanding the importance of PMC even in a context where *ukuyalwa* takes place in the church, some pastors insist on also performing PMC for couples. This is *"because remember, when they are called by the church mothers and fathers, sometimes it is more like a teaching, more like a sermon"* (Participant 3, Clergy, Mpumalanga). This points to the lack of interaction in *ukuyalwa* where the couple is lectured in comparison to pastoral PMC. Traditionally, brides are not expected to ask questions during traditional PMC (Moeti et al., 2017:248) as interfering or questioning what is taught is understood to be disrespectful (Moeti et al., 2017:252).

Married individuals held different views concerning the advice they received and its helpfulness. Some participants found *ukuyalwa* in the church to be helpful. In addition to the PMC conducted by her pastor, Participant 4 also had a shower hosted by the church ladies. *"They said quite a mouthful. I think church did assist me a lot in that"* (Participant 4, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). Participant 3, together with her husband, had a service where all the adults in the church advised them. *"I'll say I've benefitted because I've seen it and when I saw it, it helped me to remember that they did say that such happens. So when I came across them I was calm"* (Participant 3, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). Participant 11 said the service that was held for him, where both his family and church members advised him, was a *"useful thing"* (Participant 11, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). It is evident from this finding that modern-day African Christians still value communal practices which are lived out not only in their families but also in their faith communities.

Some married individuals were, however, critical of the usefulness of *ukuyalwa* in the church. Participant 13 was part of a meeting hosted by the church fathers for grooms-to-be. When asked about the benefits of the meeting, he said: *"I do not think that I gained that much from it...the meetings with the fathers were not useful"* (Participant 13, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). He instead found the one-on-one conversations he had with other men, particularly his mentor and pastor, more useful. The reason for this was not necessarily the setting but the content. Although he commended the teachings on leadership in the home and masculinity in the context of modern society, he wished that there was a focus on creating awareness concerning *"common things that couples are often faced with"* (Participant 13, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). He strongly wished he had been taught *"how to handle conflicts"* (Participant 13, Married Individual, Mpumalanga).

Participant 12 also points to how the setting is not the issue affecting impact, but the content and how it is presented. She had three separate showers hosted by different women's groups in the church. *"I enjoyed the fellowship and I appreciated the initiative, but in terms of actual impact, not so much. It was a little detached...a lot of it was a little abstract"* (Participant 12, Married Individual,

Mpumalanga). Having grown up in the church, she knew what to expect and so gained nothing new from the sessions because she already knew how “*elusive*” believers tend to be. “*I did not expect that it would go deeper than it did*” (Participant 12, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). She wished there were more transparent and honest conversations instead of a “*safe*” dialogue. “*What would have been meaningful was ‘this is what I experienced and because I experienced this, this worked or this didn’t work’*” (Participant 12, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). The effectiveness of *ukuyalwa* in the church is not so much impacted by the group setting as it is by the content that is presented. The advice provided during *ukuyalwa* would be more impactful if it were to be more practical and transparent.

Although Participant 11 was amongst those who found *ukuyalwa* helpful, he took issue with the generalisation of the content, rendering some advice inapplicable to him. The advice given was not contextualised, and so “*you find that maybe sometimes it is not applicable to you*” (Participant 11, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). Clergy participants also questioned the effectiveness of *ukuyalwa*, seeing that the content is based mainly on personal experiences, which may not always be applicable since “*each marriage is unique*” (Participant 7, Clergy, Mpumalanga). Another participant highlighted how some advice was irrelevant because “*elders speak old things*” (Participant 8, Married Individual). This points to how the age difference between the elders giving advice and the couple receiving it can render some advice irrelevant as a result of changed attitudes toward marriage. Another participant recalls how “*The mothers, I remember when it was like, ‘you do not discuss your marital issues with anyone. You keep it to yourself’, which I think is toxic*” (Participant 10, Married Individual, Kwa-Zulu Natal). The advice of the mothers here is in line with the traditional African view that considers it an embarrassment to the family to expose one’s marriage problems to outsiders, as marital issues are only to be discussed within the family (Ndlovu, 2021:149). The participant does not subscribe to this view as younger generations perceive silence as a breeding ground for abuse and are open to seeking help for their marital problems outside of the family (Ndlovu, 2021:150). To ensure the effectiveness of *ukuyalwa*, it is therefore essential for the advice shared to be contextual and relevant to the couple being counselled.

Another issue with *ukuyalwa* in the church is the lack of structure. Participant 11 stressed that “*there was no agenda*”. Anyone and everyone was open to share whatever they saw fit. As a result, differing views cannot be avoided. “*Some have different views*”, and that “*nobody was corrected when they were wrong because everyone - all the men who were there were married so everyone came with their opinion*” (Participant 13, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). To ensure efficacy, *ukuyalwa* in the church should be structured and controlled.

Participants were also critical of the element of gender inequality, not only in instances where only the wife underwent *ukuyalwa*, but also in the different ways in which the different genders are prepared. Men are underprepared for marriage in comparison to women. *“It is true this thing that women they are better prepared than us”* (Participant 13, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). His wife had three bridal showers in comparison to the one meeting he shared with another groom. This points to the gender inequality in African Christian marriage preparation, where more focus is placed on preparing the bride. This gender inequality is most likely because of how the wife is seen to carry more responsibility in the marriage. From both a traditional Christian and African viewpoint, the household is organised in a patriarchal hierarchy which subordinates the wife to the husband. The woman’s subservience translates into the woman having more duties and responsibilities towards her husband and in-laws. The wife’s primary role revolves around sexually satisfying her husband, bearing children for the family, and cooking and cleaning for her family (Phalatsi-Shilubana, 2024:74; Sathiparsad et al., 2008:6). More time is therefore spent grooming the wife. Contemporary couples, however, favour the egalitarian model of marriage over the patriarchal model. As a result, they expect both parties to be equally prepared for marriage. Participant 12 best explains the dilemma that is created by the imbalance in *ukuyalwa* when she says:

You find women who are very, they are marinated in teaching, they are ready to assume that role for the betterment of the masculine. And then you find that the masculine hasn’t had that preparation, and that, that’s not fair on them, you know, that they get into this space, they have no idea what is expected of them other than to receive certain things, you know (Participant 12, Married Individual, Mpumalanga).

Additionally, some participants link this lack of preparation with the high GBV rates in South Africa, lamenting that *“when we see the country like this, it means we have a challenge at churches. Meaning that we are not preparing young men enough in the church”* (Participant 2, Married Individual, Gauteng). Literature affirms that GBV is fuelled by marriage preparation teachings that are permeated with patriarchal norms and values (Maisiri, 2015:19, Chisale, 2016:55). Participants were also critical of the patriarchal or androcentric views of some of the advice. Participant 10 mentioned how teachings about sex were from an androcentric perspective. *“Yeah, so the sex part as well it is not really - the emphasis is all about ohh, you have to do it. The men enjoy it. You have to please the men also. It is like the women are also not - that also message is like this is for the man. That is wrong”* (Participant 10, Married Individual, Kwa-Zulu Natal). It has been observed that sex is communicated in patriarchal and androcentric terms in both African and Christian contexts (Chisale, 2016:61). In patriarchal households, one of the wife’s primary roles is to sexually satisfy her husband (Phalatsi-Shilubana, 2024:74). Sex is therefore perceived

as a duty women perform to satisfy men, and a healthy sexual relationship is defined by the man reaching orgasm. Because modern African Christian women are educated and enjoy greater sexual freedom, they challenge this perception. Consistent with valuing an egalitarian model of marriage, they place a high value on emotional intimacy and mutual satisfaction. An androcentric perception of sex is also harmful because it creates opportunities to normalize marital sexual abuse because the husband's entitlement to his wife's body conditions the wife to be compliant with abusive behaviour.

There is therefore a need to ensure a balanced practice of ukuyalwa in the church, ensuring that both husband and wife are not only equally and adequately prepared for marriage, but that advice given is devoid of harmful gendered conceptualisations of marriage.

6.6. Understanding of marriage

Often referred to as the "rainbow nation", South Africa is a pluralistic society which encompasses a variety of ethnicities, languages, and religions. According to the latest census, the population of the Republic of South Africa was 62 million in 2022 (Stats SA, 2023:2). Black Africans make up the majority of the population at 81,4%, followed by coloureds (8,2%), whites (7,3%) and Indians/Asians (2,7%) (Stats SA, 2023:7). The majority (85,3%) of the population reported Christianity as their chosen religious affiliation/belief (Stats SA, 2023:24). Other religious beliefs in South Africa include Traditional African religion (7,8%), Islam (1,6%), and Hinduism (1,1%) (Stats SA 2023:24). There is a wide range of Christian denominations in South Africa with varying marriage doctrines and practices. Christian denominations in South Africa include mainstream Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and African Independent churches. The participants of this study did not, however, represent the wide range of Christian traditions present in South Africa. The study was conducted with only Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians, as the study was conducted with Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians from only four provinces, as those were the only candidates who responded positively to the recruitment efforts of this study.

Both clergy and married individuals in this study were found to uphold a Reformed perspective of marriage. A Reformed perspective maintains that the creation order recorded in the first three chapters of Gen. describes the origin and prototype of marriage (Vorster, 2008:466). Marriage according to the creation order is characterised by the following characteristics: mutuality and complementarity, monogamy, and oneness. Firstly, Christian marriage is rooted in God creating humanity in his image as male and female (Köstenberger & Jones, 2010:22), the foundation of equality between husband and wife. Although they are created equally, man and wife, however,

have a functional differentiation where they have different obligations (Voster 2008:469). In relation to God's mandate for humankind to multiply and subdue the earth, the woman is a suitable partner both in procreation and the earth's domestication (Köstenberger & Jones, 2010:25). Secondly, Christian marriage is exclusively heterosexual and monogamous, seen in how God only made one 'suitable helper' for Adam, and in how she was female (Köstenberger & Jones, 2010:25; Ngundu, 2011:45). A Reformed perspective explains the biblical accounts of polygamy as descriptive rather than prescriptive. A Reformed perspective makes a distinction between descriptive and prescriptive parts of the Bible, where descriptive parts only narrate a certain historical custom or event and prescriptive parts establish ethical norms and principles for human behaviour (Vorster, 2008:465). Lastly, Christian marriage is a sexual union where the two become 'one flesh'. 'One flesh' is beyond physical terrain, also meaning that two married people share each other's lives in a complete and dedicated manner – a "communion of life" (Mwiti & Dueck, 2006:176; Vorster, 2008:467). This oneness demands a detachment from one's family to form an attachment to one's covenant partner (Khathide, 2011:115). Oneness also speaks to the permanency of the marriage covenant (Brubaker, 2010:33). From Jesus' comments on Gen. 2:24, it is clear that the oneness in marriage makes it a life-binding covenant. Divorce is therefore understood as inconsistent with the marriage prototype reflected in the creative order (Ngundu, 2011:45).

Clergy participants in this study understood marriage to be an "*institution that God has designed from creation*" (Participant 5, Clergy, Mpumalanga). The creation order is understood as prescriptive of what marriage should be, and so the understanding of marriage should "*align*" (Participant 11, Clergy, Gauteng) with the marriage described in Gen. 2. Participants, therefore, understood marriage to be monogamous and heterosexual. "*A marriage to me is a union of two people, umm a male and a female*" (Participant 8, Clergy, Gauteng). Marriage is also understood as "*the process of becoming one*" (Participant 10, Clergy, Mpumalanga) where the oneness makes the union permanent. "*God says once you come together you are one, then we know that he's not approving divorce*" (Participant 3, Clergy, Mpumalanga). This understanding of marriage as a "*lifetime commitment*" (Participant 6, Married Individual, Gauteng & Participant 10, Married Individual, Kwa-Zulu Natal) was the main understanding of marriage expressed by the married individuals. "*The Bible expects us, you know, to not divorce*" (Participant 6, Married Individual, Gauteng). Some participants explained how marriage was meant to "*build a family*" (Participant 1, Clergy, Gauteng & Participant 3, Clergy, Mpumalanga). This finding is again reflective of the creation order, which alludes to procreation as one of the main functions of marriage (Ndlovu, 2021:58).

Neither of the participants incorporated a legal or cultural conceptualisation of marriage in their understanding of marriage. The understanding of marriage was strictly from a Christian perspective. Since a cleric's understanding of marriage informs how they prepare couples for marriage, this limits the content of the PMC offered by clergy. Only two of the eleven clerics interviewed indicated the inclusion of the legal aspects of marriage as part of their PMC content. Participant 7 notes that the church so advocates for the priestly blessing of the marriage it neglects the legalities of marriage. *"We concentrate, yes, you are going to be blessed and that's that. And then you find three months down the line these people have not even gone to sign"* (Participant 7, Clergy, Mpumalanga). By 'signing', the participant is referring to registering the marriage with the Department of Home Affairs. Marriages can go unregistered in South Africa, as not all pastors who officiate marriages are legally qualified to solemnise marriages in South Africa. According to the Marriage Act (No. 25 of 1961) "the minister and any officer in the public service authorised by him may designate any minister of religion-or any person holding a responsible position in any religious denomination or organisation to be, so long as he is such a minister or occupies such position, a marriage officer for solemnising marriages according to Christian, Jewish or Mohammedan rites or the rites of any Indian religion" (Department of Home Affairs, 2022:11). Where a pastor officiating is not a designated marriage officers, the couple would have to have their marriage registered by having their marriage solemnized by a marriage officer at a Department of Home Affairs office or a pastor designated as a marriage officer. The failure to inform couples about the legal requirements for registering a marriage during PMC may result in the marriages of African Christians not being legally recognised as a civil marriage, but customary instead.

Only one of the thirteen married individuals interviewed indicated that marriage contracts were discussed during PMC. PMC needs to educate couples on the consequences of matrimonial property regimes. Clergy, however, may not place importance on the subject due to the preference for marriage in community of property, which is the default marital regime in South Africa. Christians often view marriage out of community as compromising the 'oneness' that is foundational in marriage, since it allows for couples to share everything except their assets. Christians also view marriage out of community as giving allowance for couples to escape instead of persevering and sharing in their partner's suffering when unfortunate eventualities occur. Comments made by Participant 3 reflect this: *"I put my food down on the issue of marrying out of community of property...if you will be married according to the Christian faith, it is in community of property, that is according to the will of God. When the Bible says you are one, it is in community of property, you see...I'm a firm believer that this is what I must say, this is what I'm going to teach you. If you want to do something different, in a different way, you're welcome to do it your own way but these are my teachings"* (Participant 3, Clergy, Mpumalanga).

Although the participants did not articulate a cultural conceptualisation of marriage in their understanding of marriage, cultural aspects of marriage were accommodated during the marriage preparation process. As previously stated, clergy acknowledge marriage as a family affair and give room or even guidance concerning cultural customs such as *ilobolo*. African churches also appreciate a cultural approach to marriage preparation by incorporating *ukuyalwa* in their marriage preparation processes.

6.7. Towards a model of premarital counselling in African churches

The recommendations suggested by the participants in this study can help develop strategies to enhance PMC for African Christians in South Africa. Participants emphasised the improvement that needs to be made to the content and process of marriage preparation in the church. They also recommended improvements that needed to be made by the clergy involved in PMC.

Clergy participants recommended that pastors adopt a structured approach to PMC where the clergy will be guided on what to say and do during sessions. *"I think a structured program, like nothing beats that. A structured program where you know what you are doing"* (Participant 1, Clergy, Gauteng). It is also suggested that a church's marriage process be clearly defined and *"not to leave it to chance"* (Participant 10, Clergy, Mpumalanga).

Both married individuals and clergy suggested that the content covered during PMC should be personalised and contextualised to be relevant to contemporary African Christians. Participants indicated that the content should be personalised to the context of each couple, as Participant 12 explains:

It is good when you have a programme...but I think it is better when you respond to the deficiencies that the couples may have. So to tailor make it - there are topics that are general topics, yeah, but we can't run away from the fact that certain couples tend to have certain issues with some things and not others, and more often than not, you'll be able to pick those up as you interact with them...So addressing concerns that we have because we have them" (Participant 12, Married individual, Mpumalanga).

This finding points to how, as much as pastoral PMC should be structured, it should not be fixed on a program with predetermined content but should also address concerns that the couple has and other deficiencies the clergy identifies. Premarital inventories or PAQs help achieve this since they elicit information that makes it possible for the facilitator to focus on specific issues that are relevant for the couple (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010:255).

Another participant advocated for the content of PMC to be contextualised to be relevant to the African context. *"As we are doing it now, it absolutely has no African context to it. We just talking*

about - I don't know want to call them - Western concepts, but mostly you know the content of our, even our counselling. It doesn't, I don't feel like it is got that context that 'OK, as an African'... So yeah, I think the cultural stuff we have neglected so bad as Pentecostals and Charismatics and it is an area that we can definitely improve on" (Participant 5, Married Individual, Western Cape). Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians tend to prioritise their faith over their culture because they subscribe to a dialectic approach to the relationship between Christianity and African culture (Ndlovu, 2021:153). A result of the Christian missionary enterprise which polarized Christianity and African culture, this approach views Christianity and culture as opposed to each other with the polarity between the two only solvable through culture yielding to the demands of the Bible (Ezeogu, 1998:28). It is however evident that a cultural conceptualisation of marriage is vital for African Christians to be adequately prepared for marriage. Magezi (2007) notes the importance of pastoral counselling to take people's contexts seriously for it to be effective (Magezi, 2007:658). To be effective, PMC, as an integral part of pastoral counselling, must reflect the African understanding of life. Issues such as family involvement, living arrangements and traditional African beliefs are therefore crucial subjects to discuss during PMC sessions. Participants were also concerned with the content of PMC being relevant to the modern era in which couples exist. They stressed the need for clergy to be informed so that they can update the content of their PMC to remain relevant to contemporary African Christian couples. *"With us, uh, things remain the same forever and ever. And they are not relevant to the changing world. And we are not saying the world should influence, uh, what God has designed, but we must be relevant"* (Participant 11, Clergy, Gauteng). For the content of PMC in the church to remain relevant, it must acknowledge modern egalitarian values, which greatly influence marital relationships in contemporary society.

To improve PMC, participants also suggested that the content should be more practical. There is a need to *"normalise being frank about the challenges that are in marriage"* (Participant 12, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). As previously stated, the primary tool used in pastoral PMC is the Bible. This results in the counselling content being from a "one-sided, biblical perspective" (Christians 2022:63). The language can easily be 'sacred' and void of practicality as the following participants explain: *"It was like the Bible, Church, God, the Holy Spirit and we did not have another side where we talk about intimacy outside church, we talk about intimacy in another view, we talk about finances"* (Participant 9, Married Individual, Kwa-Zulu Natal). Practicality is vital *"because as Christians, we say people must not live together before they get married"* (Participant 5, Married individual). Clergy admitted that *"we tend to shy away from the reality of things and really certain things want us not to be too spiritual about them"* (Participant 11, Clergy, Gauteng). This points to how pastoral PMC can be hindered by an over-emphasis on spiritual elements. All the guidance offered by clergy has faith inclinations (Wango, 2010:26) and can be viewed as

unrealistic by some (Christians 2022:63). It is for this reason that married individuals in another study opined that counselling offered by clergy in South Africa needs a more practical approach to address subjects that might be uncomfortable as well as issues that might arise in the marital relationship (Christians 2022:64). To ensure practicality, some participants expressed the content they wanted PMC to incorporate to be more effective. They suggested discussing common reasons why couples divorce and the incorporation of personality tests. Participants also emphasised the importance of including premarital screening in the PMC process. Talking about the importance of the incorporation of HIV testing and its exclusion from their own PMC, one participant explained: *"I mean if you are with your partner, it is gonna be difficult for you to say let's do that test, but if it is recommended by the church that it be done and it be brought, then it assists"* (Participant 4, Married individual, Mpumalanga). There is a concern, however, that requiring couples' premarital screening results stigmatises people living with HIV and can lead to people obtaining fake results (Nnaji et al., 2014:14). It is therefore advisable that churches be educated on the rights of couples when formulating regulations about premarital screening.

The findings revealed that both married individuals and clergy emphasised a focus on proximate marriage preparation instead of a sole focus on immediate preparation. Participants suggested that marriage preparation should start earlier through regular teachings about marriage instead of once a couple is ready to get married. When the church waits until a couple says they want to get married to start preparing them for marriage, *"it is too late"* (Participant 11, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). This is because *"it is not practical"* to *"want to compress all of this information in a six-month programme"* (Participant 12, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). Besides the information being too compressed, the stress of the impending wedding can also be a hindrance, as explained here: *"because maybe the excitement and stress, you might end up not hearing some things"* (Participant 11, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). This makes it all the more important to *"start talking to them about those things whilst they are still young"* (Participant 3, Clergy, Mpumalanga). From this finding, it is evident that marriage preparation in the church should form part of the youth ministry program.

Clergy also emphasised the importance of postnuptial sessions to ensure the effectiveness of the marriage preparation process. *"So sometimes you find that some people feel cause you gave them the tools, you don't expect them to come to you again and say 'I've got the same issue that we spoke about before we got married'. So I think that's the area where we need to maybe improve, the communication or the follow up"* (Participant 1, Clergy, Gauteng). Stahmann (2000) supports the postnuptial follow-up session as an essential part of PMC (Stahmann, 2000:112). This is because the six-to-twelve-month period after the wedding presents a window of

opportunity for couples to learn and practice marital coping skills when they really need them (Giblin, 1994:148).

The results revealed that both married individuals and clergy recommended that clergy undergo counselling training. Married individuals also suggested the involvement of other parties in the PMC process. As previously stated, most of the clergy who participated in this study were theologically trained. Although their training did cover pastoral counselling, the participants felt it was not enough preparation to conduct PMC. Training was therefore identified as necessary to empower clergy to prepare couples for marriage better. *"My recommendation is that maybe there should be a program that pastors are trained in premarital counselling...so my recommendation is a course, a training and even if you call somebody to come and train you at church or a few of the pastors for that one day, it will go a long way than just winging it"* (Participant 1, Clergy, Gauteng). To avoid the PMC being irrelevant and one-dimensional, married individuals recommended that clergy undergo counselling training. *"Nowadays there is so much programmes you know...I think for them to take this seriously and to go for the trainings that they are offered, it would be valuable. It would be valuable. Because that psychology component, we cannot separate it from the spiritual. So it is important for our pastors to be competent in these issues"* (Participant 12, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). One participant emphasised the importance of clergy updating their counselling skills and not just *"dwell on the qualification that you did five or ten years ago, fifteen years ago, so you should keep on equipping yourself with the new information"* (Participant 1, Married Individual, Gauteng).

Some participants were open to the idea of the church outsourcing counselling services, not only because of the clergy's lack of training, but also because of how the pastor's role sometimes affects transparency during PMC. *"You know, also with our pastors, sometimes we cannot really be free with them. Ask them questions, you know? But when it is someone from outside, I think we'd be free...sometimes we're scared of our pastors not in a way - so I think outsourcing people who have the expertise would really go a long way"* (Participant 10, Married Individual, Kwa-Zulu Natal).

Participant 12 preferred that clergy refer couples for PMC based on the dysfunctional marriages of most pastors, as she explains: *"Maybe the best thing right now for pastors to do is to refer couples to premarital counselling that they are not doing. Because being effective in the premarital counselling space demands that you have a functional marriage...and being in pastoral spaces I haven't seen a whole lot of that"* (Participant 12, Married Individual, Mpumalanga). This points to how clergy not only need to focus on personal development through training but also need to focus on the enrichment of their marriages. Some participants recommended the involvement of

couple mentors in PMC. These participants expressed that couple mentors would be more contextual especially if they were in the same age group as them as explained here:

I think people who married five years there is wisdom there and besides that they can connect with umm your newly - about to become weds - because remember, I was saying, you sit there and they're talking and you're like 'ai this ouma and this oupa clearly how relationships were twenty-five years ago when they got married and how relationships are now, what they're talking about doesn't apply to us' but imagine if you were talking in with someone who is still sort of in your generation and they've been married five years and they tell you those things (Participant 5, Married Individual, Western Cape).

These findings point to how married individuals do not view PMC strictly as a pastoral duty. Not only because of the awareness of trained professionals who conduct PMC, but also because of practices such as *ukuyalwa*, which involve the community at large in preparing couples for marriage.

6.8. Contextualising Covenant Attachment Theory

This section discusses the theoretical framework and how some key findings relate to it. For this study, the covenant attachment theory was utilised as a lens. This theory was viewed as most suited, as it assists in establishing a strong foundation for a marital relationship for religious couples by integrating a psychological theory with a theological concept. The covenant attachment theory is a constructivist grounded theory integrating attachment theory with the theological concept of covenant (Maxwell et al., 2020:111). Whereas the attachment theory has been used in examining an individual's relationship with God, the covenant attachment theory helps understand the relational system of a romantic couple and God. Attachment theory involves the safety, security and intimacy of an individual's two primary relationships: parent/child and romantic partners (Maxwell et al., 2020:111). It stipulates that the attachment behaviours adults display in romantic relationships are based on attachment styles developed during childhood in their first attachment relationship with their parent. The covenant attachment theory contributes scriptural covenant models, such as the covenant between Christ and the Church, that are useful in modelling healthy marital relationships. A few of the research findings can be identified and addressed with respect to the theory.

The findings revealed that clergy focus on family background during PMC as an effort to create awareness around how one's background and upbringing influence the marital relationship. Clergy participants stated that "*your family uh background might have a – not always a negative, but obviously it will have an impact in your marriage*" (Participant 7, Clergy, Mpumalanga). Another participant explained the content covered during PMC to include "*their background. Where the*

lady comes from, where the guy comes from and the kind of a family set up because some of the contributing factors can be positive or negative is because of the family set up" (Participant 6, Clergy, Mpumalanga). The impact of the couple's background and upbringing on the marriage links to attachment styles and their formation in childhood, influencing how an individual relates to others. According to the covenant attachment theory, following the parent who is a primary caregiver in childhood, the spouse becomes the primary attachment figure. How one relates to their spouse will therefore reflect the type of attachment developed in the parent/child relationship. Where insecure attachment styles have evolved, the theory suggests that a secure attachment to God can correct such insecure attachment styles (Nurlu, 2020:240). Positive experiences of God can create an internal working model (IWM) of God as a secure attachment figure, affecting one's ability to be a safe attachment figure for their spouse (Maxwell et al., 2020:119). From their secure attachment to God, an individual can therefore develop secure attachment styles and become a safe attachment figure for their spouse, regardless of their upbringing. The goals of PMC include increasing couple stability, intimacy and attachment (Stahmann, 2000:106). Using the covenant attachment model, clergy can achieve this goal by strengthening couples' positive perception of God, thus helping them establish God as a safe attachment figure, and themselves becoming safe attachment figures for each other. Relational spirituality, which suggests that one's relationship with God influences interpersonal relationships (Davis et al., 2009:267), is represented by the divine triangle in the covenant attachment model. The divine triangle reflects how each individual's movement toward God demonstrates a movement toward each other. The goal of the covenant attachment model is therefore to move couples up the triangle, closer to God, and closer to each other.

Although only two clergy participants directly referred to marriage as a covenant in their definition of marriage, all participants uphold a Reformed perspective of marriage, which is rooted in marriage as a covenant relationship. As discussed in Chapter 2, a Reformed perspective maintains that the origin and prototype of marriage is described in the first three chapters of Gen. (Vorster 2008:466). Hence, participants opined that *"marriage is an institution that has been designed by God from creation"* (Participant 5, Clergy, Mpumalanga). The oneness that is a key characteristic of marriage according to the creation order points to the intimacy and permanency of marriage, which affirms marriage as a covenant. Clergy clearly understand that *"marriage is not a contract, it is permanent"* (Participant 11, Clergy, Gauteng). Married individuals who participated in the study also understood marriage to be a *"lifetime commitment"* (Participant 6, Married Individual, Gauteng & Participant 10, Married Individual, Kwa-Zulu Natal). According to Maxwell et al. (2020), who developed the covenant attachment theory, covenant language adds a sense of sacredness in the attachment process (Maxwell et al., 2020:120). The sanctity of marriage lies in it being an agreement between two individuals before and under God (Vorster,

2016:4). The sanctity of marriage not only allows couples to develop meaning and purpose to their relationship but also encourages couples to value each other more and to invest more in their relationship (Maxwell et al., 2020:119). It motivates the couples to strive to display behaviours portrayed in God's covenant relationship with his people. Describing marriage using covenant language during PMC can therefore contribute toward achieving the goal of increasing couple stability and commitment to the relationship.

6.9. Conclusion and summary

In this chapter, the findings from Chapters 4 and 5 were reviewed and discussed against the arguments presented in Chapters 2 and 3. The discussion confirmed that the positive perception held of PMC, being perceived as helpful in creating awareness, ensuring readiness for marriage and gaining a better understanding of one's partner. The discussion also corroborated that PMC is a pastoral duty, as it is considered a prerequisite before a couple can be married. The discussion demonstrated that although deemed necessary by both clergy and married individuals, pastoral PMC is not widely provided in black South African churches since most married individuals interviewed in this study were not offered PMC by their pastors. Pastoral PMC was either neglected because the church did not have a straightforward marriage procedure or because of an overemphasis on pneumatic spirituality. Most married individuals did, however, undergo *ukuyalwa* in their churches. Even so, African Christians place a high value on pastoral PMC and lament the lack of its provision. Thus, the discussion signals the need to expedite the provision of pastoral PMC in black South African churches.

The discussion confirmed that couple counselling is the predominant format of PMC conducted by clergy. Most married clerics conducted PMC sessions together with their spouse to not only foster openness and honesty but also to make room for individual counselling during the counselling process. The discussion demonstrated that the majority of black South African clergy utilised an unstructured approach to PMC, which is information-based rather than skills-based. Clergy employ an information-based approach that involves much lecturing because pastoral PMC is not only aimed at relationship enhancement but is also aimed at teaching a theology on marriage. Information-based approaches are, however, deemed less effective in comparison to skills-based approaches.

Additionally, the lack of a structured program results in disparities in the quality and effectiveness of PMC (Moeti et al., 2024:4). Thus, the discussion indicates the need for clergy to adopt a structured approach to PMC, which incorporates exercises to teach relationship skills such as communication skills, conflict management skills, problem-solving skills and decision-making skills. The discussion drew a link between an unstructured approach to PMC and training in

counselling skills, confirming that the clergy's reliance on their personal views and experiences in PMC points to the lack of training in PMC. Although most of the clergy in this study were theologically trained, they were not formally trained to conduct counselling. Hence, the discussion points to a need for African clergy to be professionally trained in counselling skills and techniques.

The discussion revealed that the few clergy who adopted a structured approach to PMC did not use any of the widely used premarital programs and inventories but utilised their personal programs. Together with a standardised program, a structured approach is characterised by a set duration of how long the counselling process should last and its proximity to the wedding. It also involves identifiable techniques in which the clergy are trained, as well as tools such as questionnaires and tests.

Judging by the positive feedback from couples as well as the sustained marriages of the couples they provided PMC to, clergy considered their approach to PMC effective.

The discussion confirmed that married individuals generally consider PMC to be helpful. The teachings and skills gained through the counselling benefited their relationship by influencing perceptions and behaviours. The discussion also affirmed that PMC helps couples familiarise themselves with counselling, making it easier for them to seek help at earlier stages of marital distress. Although PMC is helpful, participants identified factors that hinder its effectiveness. These include the couple's commitment, the influence of the pastor's role and the proximity of the counselling process to the wedding. The discussion supported that the perceived helpfulness of PMC is positively related to voluntary participation, since the clergy who made PMC mandatory before conducting a wedding were the ones who complained about the couple's lack of commitment hindering the PMC process. The weight of the pastor's role and their age can be a barrier hindering transparency, thus negatively affecting the counselling process. The discussion also affirmed that PMC is most beneficial when obtained several months before the wedding.

In the absence of pastoral PMC, *ukuyalwa* is the sole means of marriage preparation in some churches. In other churches, it supplements pastoral PMC. The discussion established that although clergy considered *ukuyalwa* alone to be insufficient in preparing couples for marriage, they considered *ukuyalwa* to be irreplaceable and advantageous in its group setting and gendered perspective. On the other hand, married individuals held different views concerning the helpfulness of *ukuyalwa* in the church. From those who found it helpful, the discussion established that modern-day African Christians value traditional communal practices. Some married individuals were, however, critical of the usefulness of *ukuyalwa* on account of the advice shared, which was perceived as lacking, elusive, toxic, sexist and irrelevant. Participants found fault with the lack of structure in how *ukuyalwa* was conducted and the gender disparity, where it was only

focused on the bride. The discussion demonstrated that contemporary African Christians favour an egalitarian model of marriage over a patriarchal model. There is an evident tension between traditional values that surface in the advice from elders and the contemporary values that married individuals subscribe to. Thus, the discussion points to a need to address gender disparity in the practice of *ukuyalwa* and contextualise it to ensure its usefulness for contemporary Africans.

The discussion further established that both clergy and married individuals uphold a Reformed perspective of marriage, which maintains that the creation order describes the origin and prototype of marriage. Participants understood marriage as a divine institution meant to be monogamous and heterosexual. Marriage is a lifetime commitment centred around becoming one and childbearing. Neither of the participants incorporated a legal or cultural conceptualisation of marriage in their understanding of marriage. The understanding of marriage strictly from a Christian perspective can limit the content of the PMC. This is illustrated in how the legal aspects of marriage are neglected in pastoral PMC. The African understanding of marriage as a family affair is however observed as clergy either gave room for congregants to initiate the marriage process with their families before commencing PMC or used PMC to give guidance on how to begin the marriage process with their families.

Next, the discussion determined that PMC in black South African churches would be more effective if it were to adopt a structured approach with guidance for the clergy concerning what to say and do during sessions. The content should be personalised for each couple and contextualised to be relevant to contemporary African Christians. Premarital inventories or premarital assessment questionnaires are helpful in achieving this. The content should also be more practical instead of being heavily spiritual. The discussion determined that the inclusion of personality tests and frequently cited reasons for divorce would help meet the needs of African Christian couples preparing for marriage. Married individuals considered it essential to incorporate premarital screening in the PMC process. Clergy are, however, advised to guard against stigmatisation in doing so. The discussion revealed that both married individuals and clergy emphasised a focus on proximate marriage preparation instead of a sole focus on immediate preparation. Hence, the suggestion that marriage preparation start earlier through youth ministry programs and regular teachings about marriage, instead of once a couple is ready to marry. The discussion supported the importance of the postnuptial follow-up session as a part of PMC. The debate also determined that clergy should undergo training to prepare couples for marriage. Due to the influence of the pastor's role hindering honesty and transparency in the PMC process, it was also recommended that churches outsource PMC services. The dysfunction of pastoral marriages was another reason cited in support of the church's outsourcing PMC services. The inclusion of young couple mentors was also recommended to ensure that couples receive

relevant advice. The discussion, therefore, reveals how PMC is not viewed strictly as a pastoral duty.

The discussion closed off by contextualising the covenant attachment theory. The addressing of a couple's background and upbringing during PMC was linked to the attachment styles developed in childhood and their influence on the marital relationship. Further, the covenant language used by participants in their descriptions of marriage was linked to how it adds a sense of sacredness in the attachment process. Thus, the significance of using covenant language in PMC is to increase couple stability and commitment to the relationship.

This chapter responds to the descriptive-empirical and interpretive task of practical theology by not only describing what is going on with regard to the PMC experiences of African Christians in South Africa but also explaining why it is going on. The next chapter will respond to the question of the normative task, 'what ought to be going on', by analysing selected Bible passages that relate to PMC.

CHAPTER 7 A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF PREMARITAL COUNSELLING

7.1. Introduction

The exegesis of Scripture holds a central place in deciding what is normative for Christian practice. Hence, this chapter presents a biblical analysis of PMC. Firstly, I will establish the biblical framework used to exegete biblical passages. Secondly, I perform a historical overview of marriage preparation in biblical literature. Thirdly, I analyse selected passages from the OT and NT that relate to PMC. Lastly, I provide an overview of biblical principles relevant to PMC. As previously mentioned, the focus of this study is immediate marriage preparation, which the clergy conducts once a couple is engaged. Bible passages relevant to remote and proximate marriage preparation, such as sexual purity before marriage, partner selection, etc., are therefore excluded from this analysis.

7.2. Biblical framework of interpretation

The view of the Bible as divinely inspired calls for a hermeneutical method that is faithful to the meaning of Scripture; a method of Bible-interpretation that will be devoted to “reading the words in terms of their grammatical, namely historical sense” (Sailhamer in Sexton, 2011:165). The selected passages in this chapter are interpreted using the grammatical-historical approach, which is a text-oriented exegesis method. The goal of exegesis is to understand “the text’s impact on the original recipients and then its application to us” (Longman, 1990:139). The interpretation of a text is therefore aimed at understanding the text within its context as well as its application to today’s context. Understanding the text within its context requires distancing where the reader distances themselves from his/herself and their worldview when reading a text (MacAvoy, 2016:16). This is based on the understanding that the text uses “the language, literary forms and conventions, metaphors, and genres” which are familiar with the culture of the original audience (Longman 1990:139). Contemporary readers must therefore distance themselves from modern norms and instead consult ancient literary sources in order to arrive at a correct interpretation of the text. Distancing ourselves this way allows us to recover the author’s intention in the text, which is the goal of the grammatical-historical method (Longman, 1990:141). The only evidence we have of what the author intended is the text itself (Sexton, 2011:167). Grammatical-historical exegesis is an attempt to figure out what the human writer, under divine guidance, was saying (Sexton, 2011:167). Determining the authorial intention is achieved through examining the socio-historical context and language of the text. Reconstructing a text’s historical background is key in clarifying the author’s intention, so it becomes essential to utilise information that can elucidate

the original text's historical background (Sexton, 2011:173). The original language of the original text is critical in interpretation. Sentences are made up of specific linguistic laws and principles which the reader must identify (Sexton, 2011:172). The understanding of Greek and Hebrew grammatical features is central to grammatical and lexical exegesis. In the task of interpreting Scripture according to the grammatical-historical approach, words should be studied in line with their context and normal usage (Sexton, 2011:172). Another critical element of a text-oriented approach is genre analysis. "This is because authors evoke reading strategies in their audience by utilising certain generic forms" (Longman, 1990:141). Interpreting the bible from a grammatical-historical approach, therefore, means identifying the genre of the passage or book.

In its insistence on understanding a text in its "ever-expanding context", the grammatical-historical method also draws readers to consider the OT from the perspective of the NT (Longman, 1990:147). The revelation of Scripture is, however, not confined to the biblical context but is progressive. Through Scripture, God spoke and continues to speak to human situations. After understanding what a passage means in its context, the reader must therefore discern what the text means in the current context. The reader must constantly ask: "What is God saying now?" "What is the text calling on me to do?" (Longman 1990:147). Proper interpretation and application of the text requires the guidance of the Holy Spirit because the reader does not determine the meaning of Scripture; instead, they discern it by the enablement of the Spirit (Sexton, 2011:169).

To this end, the grammatical-historical method adapts well with the research topic. The biblical text should inform the preparation of Christian couples for marriage.

7.3. Biblical overview of marriage preparation in the Bible and Bible times

Marriages encountered in the OT and NT are products of the social system in which the biblical texts originated from (Van Eck, 2020:2). Like most cultures in the ANE, Israelite families were patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal (Block, 2003:40). Marriage in Ancient Israel was endogamous and arranged as seen in the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 24) as well as the marriage of Samsom (Judg. 14). A wife was chosen from within the man's clan or tribe. This choice was, in most cases, made by his parents (Stewart, 1975:27). Nowhere does the OT mandate arranged marriage, but it was common practice. The arrangement of marriage suggests that marriage was beyond a union between two people but was a family affair (Block, 2003:56). Marriages were also arranged because of the age of the bride and groom, which meant they had no money or assets (DaDon, 2018:138). When a child reached marriageable age (usually around the onset of puberty), the father of the groom would contact the parents of the potential wife to negotiate the terms of the marriage, particularly the size and nature of the *mohar* (bride price) (Block, 2003:57). The word *mohar* is only mentioned thrice in the OT with the marriage of Dinah

(Gen. 34:12), David's marriage to Michal (1 Sam. 18:25) and in describing the response to the rape of a virgin (Exod. 22:16-17). *Mohar* is the compensation gift that the bridegroom or his family gifts to the family of the bride. It is no way the purchasing of the bride but rather a compensation system that strengthens family relations (Block, 2003:57; Vatamanu, 2014:336). The bride price served to provide for the support of the wife should the marriage end by divorce or death (Walton 2001:623). It also confirms the marriage as the betrothal signified the transfer of the bride from her father's custody to her husband's custody (Fuchs, 1987:12). As soon as *mohar* is given, the betrothal process begins, and the woman becomes the groom's legal wife (cf. Deut. 22:24). It is only after a period of betrothal that the two would then be formally married. The customary betrothal period is twelve months (Chapman, 2003:186; Foley, 2003:38), where the bride and groom prepare for marriage. During the interval between betrothal and wedding the groom would build a house that he will occupy with his wife – hence his exemption from military duty (Deut. 20:7). Under the tutelage of her mother and grandmother, the bride on the other hand would hone her domestic and child-rearing skills (Block, 2003:58). This was however not the beginning of marriage preparation.

In ancient Israel, the home was the primary agency of education (Block, 2003:76). Both parents played a pivotal role in a child's education as reflected in Prov. 1:8, which states, "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching". The upbringing of children in Israel was gendered. Children learned how to become male or female by watching their parents and other elders repeatedly perform female and male roles (Garroway, 2016:138). This is why, even though the early years of a child's life were spent with the mother, as boys began to grow, they separated from their mothers and began to emulate their fathers and other men in their lives (Garroway, 2016:141). The female's duties and responsibilities were related to the home's internal affairs, while the male's tasks and responsibilities were tied to affairs outside of the home (DaDon, 2018:131; Visser, 2018:76). In the agriculturally based life of the Israelite community, women were tied to the homestead, taking on domestic chores and caring for infants and children while the men were with the flocks or in the fields (Garroway, 2016:140). Sons, therefore, spent time with their fathers learning the skills required for male adulthood while daughters spent time with their mothers, who trained them for their future role as wife and mother (Block, 2003:76; Jacobsen, 2014:86). Prov. 31:10-31 was perhaps a catechism mothers taught their daughters in preparing them for adulthood (Block, 2003:73). The emphasis on preparing the girl child for marriage was not only because women played an essential role in managing the household (cf. Prov. 31:10-31), but also because marriage was patrilocal (cf. Gen. 24:66). A daughter needed to be especially prepared to leave her family home to live with her husband's family. The new family dynamics that came with marrying called for special guidance (Block, 2003:76).

It is evident that marriage preparation in ancient Israel was remote (during the upbringing of children) and not only immediate (months preceding the wedding feast). This may explain the lack of OT passages that directly describe marriage preparation preceding the wedding feast, since it was part of the upbringing and education of children. There is also a lack of NT passages describing marriage preparation. The narrative about Mary and Joseph's betrothal (Matt. 1:18-20) only points to the preservation of Hebrew marriage customs in NT times. Except for the household codes Paul writes in Eph. and Colossians, NT authors who addressed marriage were not necessarily teaching a theology on marriage but instead responding to or addressing concerns. Jesus's comments on marriage in Mark 10:2-9 and Matt. 19:3-9 are in response to the Pharisees questioning him concerning divorce.

As previously stated, when Paul writes to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 7), it is in response to a set of issues around marriage that the Corinthians had sought direction on. Peter's comments on marriage (1 Pet. 3:1-7), on the other hand, are primarily written in the context of believers suffering at the hands of unbelievers - in this case, believing wives living with unbelieving husbands. Even so, most of these writings on marriage in the NT do not shed light on marriage preparation customs in the early Church, nor do they address premarital Christians, but those already married. It is only in his response to the Corinthians that Paul briefly addresses the unmarried (1 Cor. 7). Even so, he is primarily encouraging them to stay unmarried instead of counselling them as preparation for marriage.

Because the early Church did not conceive a new form of marriage but instead conventionalised local marriage rites (Rordorf, 1969:209), it can be argued that the marriage preparation practices of the Church resembled those of the first-century Greco-Roman world. First-century Christians followed the traditional marriage rites of the province they lived in, only avoiding behaviours like drinking, dancing, overeating, and customs involving sacrifices to pagan gods during their marriage ceremonies (Ngundu, 2011:39). Ancient Rome and Greece were androcentric patriarchies (Pedersen, 2022:3; Treggiari, 2003:134; Visser, 2018:73). Marriage was arranged, with the prospective groom negotiating with the girl's father (Baugh, 2003:109; Glazebrook & Olson, 2013:70). Marriage did not require state ratification or religious validation – it was a private matter (Glazebrook & Olson, 2013:76; Ngundu, 2011:38). The marriageable age for girls was around the time or soon after the first menstrual cycle. This is around thirteen or fourteen for girls in ancient Greece and even earlier in ancient Rome (Treggiari 2003:149, Pedersen 2022:29). Boys were however given more leeway in their youth and married much later, at around twenty-five (Pedersen, 2022:33; Treggiari 2003:149). Girls were married young because motherhood was considered the most significant role a woman could have. So they were married as soon as they reached puberty to maximise childbearing (Treggiari, 2003:144). The girl's upbringing,

therefore, revolved around her mother educating her to fulfil the future role of wife and mother (Pedersen, 2022:33). The lack of NT passages on marriage preparation could be attributed to the fact that marriage (and preparation thereof) was considered a private family matter requiring no religious validation.

We have seen how there was no specific exclusive period of marriage preparation in the OT times that can be deemed as PMC. Still, the entire life was organically weaved and integrated with training and exposure that is akin to apprenticeship, where children, particularly the girl child, would observe, participate in life, ask questions, and learn skills to holistically live life as a human being personally, at family level and community level. Similarly, in the NT times, marriage was influenced by what was prevailing. At the same time, circumstantial letters in the NT provided snippets of marriage issues that necessitated comments and reflected aspects of marriage basics. These observations are critical for Christians with regard to child rearing.

7.3.1. Towards premarital counselling

Below is a discussion of the major principles relevant to PMC that emerge from this overview.

7.3.1.1. Marriage as contextual

Marriage preparation in Bible times emphasises that marriage is an institution embedded in the social context it exists within (Methuen, 2014:160). Marriage is subject to the laws, rules, customs and beliefs of the context. Marriage exists universally within different societies and cultures. Just as the marriages encountered in the Bible are products of a social system, marriages today are also products of various social systems. To ensure effectiveness, the PMC couples receive must therefore reflect the marital norms and expectations of the culture they exist within. This makes it essential for PMC providers to have a thorough understanding of the societal and cultural background of each couple they counsel.

7.3.1.2. The home as the primary agency of marriage preparation

Marriage preparation in OT times was more remote (during the upbringing of children) than immediate (during the betrothal). Remote marriage preparation begins in the home, where children are brought up being trained to understand and honour important values in interpersonal and social relationships. In remote marriage preparation, parents have the primary responsibility for preparing their children for marriage and family life (Pyżlak, 2018:231). Children are prepared for marriage through modelling together with instruction. One's perception of marital roles is influenced by what they saw their parents do around the house growing up.

In the same way, children learn how to become functional adults by watching their parents. Children learn about marital roles by watching their parents repeatedly perform husband and wife duties. It is therefore important for parents to model marital roles well, as it informs their children's thoughts and beliefs concerning marital roles and responsibilities.

7.4. An analysis of OT texts on concepts related to premarital counselling

Since the Bible does not have explicit passages teaching on premarital guidance, concepts relating to marriage preparation will be extrapolated from relevant bible narratives and teachings about marriage. I will consider OT passages which richly describe actions or dialogue taking place before the enforcement of a marriage. Such passages can be easily linked to marriage preparation. Three such passages will be considered in these sections: Gen. 24, Gen. 29, and Psalm 45.

7.4.1. Rebekah's consent to leaving as a concept agreeing to marriage conditions and readiness for marriage: Analysis of Gen. 24

7.4.1.1 Context of Gen. 24

God had promised to make Abram into a great nation (Gen. 12:2), hence his name-change to Abraham, 'father of many' (Gen. 17:5). His son Isaac is identified as the one the promise will be realised through (Gen. 21:12). It is for the fulfilment of the promise that Abraham arranges for Isaac to be married (Goldingay, 2020:172). The narrative of Isaac's marriage is towards the end of the biblical story about Abraham, making the next generation of the covenant the focus of this chapter. Because Isaac's marriage follows the death of his mother, Sarah, his wife will take Sarah's place as matriarch of the family (Goldingay, 2020:172). In this chapter, Abraham commissions his senior servant to find a wife for his son from amongst his kin. The servant experiences God's extraordinary providence on his quest and finds Rebekah to be Isaac's wife. Rebekah is the daughter of Bethuel, son of Abraham's brother, Nahor (Gen. 24:15). Isaac is forty years old when he marries Rebekah (Gen. 35:20).

7.4.1.2 Textual analysis

Gen. 24 is the longest narrative in the book of Genesis. The story of Isaac's marriage is told with much repetition and backtracking, emphasising the divine sanctioning of the entire process (Fuchs, 1987:9; Goldingay, 2020:175; Walton, 2001:566). It is the only detailed account of the arrangement of a marriage in Scripture. The story forms part of the threefold repetition of what was later coined the 'betrothal type-scenes', which are parallel accounts of how Isaac, Jacob and Moses acquired wives (Fuchs, 1987:7; Goldingay, 2020:175).

The chapter begins with mentioning Abraham's advancement in years (v. 1). This is no suggestion that Abraham is near death, as some assume, but as Blenkinsopp in Goldingay (2020) points out, providing a wife for Isaac was Abraham's "last significant act before his death" (Goldingay, 2020:176). This is confirmed by the fact that Abraham has already been described as well advanced in years before (Gen. 18:11), and having died at 175 years in the following chapter (Gen. 25:7) means he would have been approaching 140 years at the beginning of this chapter. By commissioning the head of his staff to find a wife for his son, Abraham shows great trust in his unnamed servant (Goldingay 2020:176). Abraham invites his servant to take an oath by putting his hand under Abraham's thigh (v. 2). The only other time an oath was sworn in this way is when Jacob makes Joseph swear not to bury him in Egypt (Gen. 47:29). This symbolic gesture implies to touch the genitals or to rest the hand near the genitals (Cotter, 2003:51; Goldingay, 2020:177). Its meaning is unclear but may relate to procreation since it involves the source of procreative activity (Cotter, 2003:51; Goldingay, 2020:177). In this context, it would make sense since the oath concerned Abraham's offspring (Walton, 2001:563).

The principle of endogamy is implied in Abraham's description of the wife the servant is to find for Isaac. The wife ought not to be from Canaan but from Abraham's relatives in his country of origin (vv. 3–4). In his response to Abraham, the servant identifies a potential problem: the bride might not want to leave Mesopotamia to come to Canaan (v. 5). To that, Abraham insists that Isaac not be removed from Canaan, referring to the covenant God made with him (vv. 6-7). Marrying within the kinship group in this context is not concerned with religious contamination, as with intermarriage in the rest of the Bible, but is somewhat concerned with ethnic separation. "Intermarriage with the people of the land would risk assimilation into those people and thus jeopardise the covenant promises of the land to Abraham's descendants" (Walton, 2001:562). Abraham, acknowledging that the woman might not be willing to come to Canaan (v. 8), points to how the girl had to consent to the conditions of the marriage as later seen in verse 58. Although the marriage was arranged and negotiated between male family members, the woman still had to consent to the marriage. The woman's consent later became a requirement for marriage in the Torah Law (DaDon, 2018:136). The arrangement of a marriage called for betrothal gifts to strengthen family relations (Goldingay, 2020:179). The servant, therefore, travelled with samples of good things from Abraham's wealth (v. 10), to demonstrate his master's prosperity when gifting the family. Although the servant's journey is made to sound brief in the chapter (v. 10), the distance from Canaan to Northwest Mesopotamia made it a month-long journey (Cotter, 2003:52; Goldingay, 2020:179). He stops at the well toward evening because of his camel's need for water, but also because it was a place and time where many women would be (vv. 11 and 13). There he prays, addressing the Lord as Abraham's God, thereby reminding the Lord of his commitment

to Abraham (Cotter, 2003:52; Goldingay, 2020:180). In his prayer, the servant uses an oracular mechanism to help identify Isaac's wife (Walton, 2001:563). Because it was customary for people to provide the hospitality of offering a drink (Walton, 2001:563), the servant poses to God an extreme alternative: the girl volunteering to water his camels after offering him a drink will be the one the Lord has chosen. Walton (2001) further explains the significance of the watering of the camels:

"A camel that has gone a few days without water can drink as much as twenty-five gallons. Ancient jars used for drawing water usually held no more than three gallons. In other words, this offer involves perhaps from eighty to a hundred drawings from the well. Such an unbelievable proposal would indicate that God is working to override human nature in specified ways." (Walton, 2001:564)

His prayer is soon answered when Rebekah, a beautiful virgin, arrives at the well (vv. 15-16). When the camels finish drinking the water she drew, the servant gifts her with a gold nose ring weighing about 5.5g and two gold bracelets weighing about 110g (v. 22). These gifts were extremely costly (Walton, 2001:564) and commanded attentions as seen in Laban's reaction (v. 30). It can be assumed that the lavish gifts were a show of recognition of Rebekah's hospitality (Goldingay, 2020:181; Walton 2001:564). It is also possible that the gifts served another function, that of motivation. The gold jewellery is evidence of Abraham's wealth and serves as motivation for the inquiries the servant makes concerning Rebekah's identity and the availability of lodging at her father's house (Goldingay, 2020:181; Walton, 2001:564). It can also be assumed that the gifts served as a motivation for the eventual proposal (Walton, 2001:564). In the dialogue that ensues, the servant comes to know that Rebekah is Abraham's grandniece and secures a place at her father's house for the night (vv. 23-25). Realising that he had been led to his master's relatives, the servant praises God (vv. 26-27).

Rebekah then runs home to relate the incident (v. 28). Whereas verse 23 refers to her "father's house", verse 28 states that she ran to tell her "mother's household". This is surprising considering that during this period a family unit was referred to as *beit ab*, "father's house" as reflected in Gen. 12:1 for example (Block, 2003:38; Jacobsen, 2014:35). Some scholars claim that "mother's household" in this context indicates that Bethuel had several wives with each wife having her own house where she lived with her children (Jacobsen, 2014:36). Jacobsen (2014) further explains another possibility:

"According to another explanation, the "mother's household" should be viewed as an alternative expression to the "family's household", which is a social unit, and not a specific function in Nahor's family. According to this explanation, the appearance of the expression

in the context of biblical sources indicates the mother's involvement in a daughter's marriage arrangement. Naomi's request of her daughters-in-law (Ruth 1:8-9) and the longing of the young woman from Song of Songs 3:4, 8:2), employ the expression; Rebekah, too, is said to run to her mother's household, since that was where marriage was arranged" (Jacobsen, 2014:36).

According to this explanation, Rebekah understood the significance of the strange event that had unfolded. It is seen in her excitement in running home, even though she had just performed a challenging task.

The narration in verses 29-31 is not related in chronological order but for dramatic effect (Goldingay, 2020:182). Laban first sees the jewellery on Rebekah and listens to her report. He then prepares a place for the servant and then only runs out to the well. Upon arrival at the house, the servant is shown hospitality but delays indulging in the meal to present his case (vv. 32-33). The servant introduces himself and explains the events that led up to the moment (vv. 34-48). By itemising his master's blessing (v. 35), he infers that the gifts he has presented to Rebekah are only the tip of the iceberg (Goldingay, 2020:182). He acknowledges God as responsible for leading him to Rebekah and ends giving his account of events by posing a question to the family: "Now if you will show kindness and faithfulness to my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so I may know which way to turn" (v. 49). Recognising God's involvement, Rebekah's brother and father readily agree to the marriage proposal (v. 50-51). The participation of brothers in their sister's marriage negotiation while the father is still alive is not unusual (cf. Gen. 34:7-17). After praising God for their response, the servant presents betrothal gifts to Rebekah, her brother and her mother.

The next morning, the servant requests to return to his master immediately. The family demurs, requesting that Rebekah remain with them "ten days or so" (v. 55). When the servant insists, the family calls Rebekah to ask her if she acquiesces to the speedy departure (v. 58). Walton (2001) explains why Rebekah's consent is requested now when she was not consulted when the marriage was being arranged:

"It was unusual in the ancient world for the woman to have any part in major decisions. Rebekah is not consulted with regard to the marriage (vv. 50-51), but when the servant asks to leave right away, the men look to Rebekah for consent. Marriage contracts of this general period show a great concern for maintaining the woman's security within her husband's family. The presence of her own family was one of the guarantees that she would be cared for and treated properly. The ten days that Rebekah's family requests (v. 55) would give them a little more opportunity to make sure that everything is as it appears

to be. She is probably consulted because of the substantial risk involved in leaving family protection under such unusual circumstances” (Walton, 2001:566).

As previously stated, the betrothal period was traditionally twelve months and was used to prepare the bride for marriage (Block, 2003:58). Considering that her mother is one of those requesting for Rebekah to remain with them, it is possible that Rebekah’s mother did so further to train her for her wifely and motherly duties since the interval between betrothal and the wedding feast was used by mothers to hone the bride’s home-management skills (Block, 2003:58). By calling Rebekah to consent to the betrothal period being bypassed, she could have been determining if she was ready to go into marriage without further preparation. Rebekah agrees, simply responding with “I will go” (v. 58). All three speech acts attributed to Rebekah in this chapter are positive responses to the servant’s questions and requests. “As speech acts they entail consent, obedience, a readiness to comply with a male speaker’s wishes” (Fuchs, 1987:9). Rebekah’s positive responses demonstrate her readiness for marriage. Her family then sends her off with her maid and a blessing (vv. 59-60). The blessing pronounced over her concerns’ offspring, pointing to the understanding that the marriage was aimed at procreation.

After skipping over the month-long journey again, the next scene is told from Isaac’s perspective (vv. 62-62). We are drawn to look through his eyes as the convoy approaches. It is unlikely that he is aware that he is about to meet his bride. Rebekah sees Isaac in the distance and enquires of the servant, “Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?” (v. 65). The servant responds with “He is my master” without differentiating between Abraham (whom he has been referring to as master in the entire chapter) and Isaac. By covering herself with her veil, it is clear that Rebekah understands who the servant meant. After the servant gives an account of his actions to Isaac (v. 66), the story jumps forward to a happy ending (v. 67) without any dialogue between Isaac and Rebekah. By taking Rebekah into his mother’s tent, Isaac is demonstrating that Rebekah is now the matriarch of the family (Goldingay 2020:185; Walton 2001:566).

7.4.1.3 Towards premarital counselling

I will now discuss the major principles relevant to PMC that emerge from this narrative.

7.4.1.3.1. Marriage as a family affair

The narrative is set in the ANE, where marriage was arranged for the preservation of the family lineage. This suggests that marriage was beyond a union between two people but was a family affair (Block, 2003:56). The narrative details the involvement of not only Rebekah’s father as the patriarch, but that of her brother and mother as well in the arrangement of her marriage. Her family

also pronounces a blessing over her as she leaves to join her new family. This points to the need to acknowledge the family's place in the formation of a marriage. Similar to marriage in Ancient Israel, marriage in traditional African society was an agreement between families for the preservation of the clan and its culture (Ansell, 2001:701, Mwiti & Dueck, 2006:171). It was therefore the responsibility of the head of the family to arrange marriage partners for family members or at least sanction their choice (Ekane, 2013:3). The erosion of traditional African value systems has, however, resulted in younger Africans adopting nuclear family patterns and choosing their marriage partners themselves. The role of the family in the establishment of a marriage, however, remains crucial as seen both in the literature reviewed and the findings of this study. It is therefore important for the PMC process not to ignore the role of the family in establishing a new marriage, but to accommodate the family rites as far as possible. The marriage should be established with the family's approval (blessing).

7.4.1.3.2. Agreement to the conditions of the marriage

Although set in a context where the bride's consent was not necessarily factored into the arrangement of the marriage, the narrative gives room to consult the prospective bride concerning her consent to the conditions of the marriage. As a condition for Isaac's marriage, Abraham instructed that the bride was to relocate to Canaan. Abraham acknowledged the possibility of a bride being unwilling to relocate, and as seen later, Rebekah is asked if she is willing to go. This points to the importance of establishing agreement on the conditions of a marriage before its finalisation. PMC ought, therefore, to allow the prospective spouses to discuss and agree on the conditions of the marriage. As the narrative points out, this includes conditions such as living arrangements. The literature reviewed has shown the shift in living arrangements for marriages in Africa. Modernisation and urbanisation, with the economic pressure that accompanies it, have resulted in young Africans adopting nuclear family patterns in the place of the traditional patrilocal family setting (Ekane, 2013:1; Sooryamoorthy & Makhoba, 2016:313). A newlywed couple's residence is no longer located at or centred around the residence of the husband's family, but couples establish their own homes in urban areas. Although for shorter periods now, brides are still expected to serve an induction period after marriage, where they live with their in-laws, serving their new families (*ukukotiza*). Such living arrangements and their implications are necessary to discuss and agree upon prior marriage for PMC to achieve its goal of easing the transition from single to married life.

7.4.1.3.3. Readiness for marriage

By being allowed to consent to leave with the servant to her new home, Rebekah was also declaring her readiness for marriage. Her agreement to go implied that she felt sufficiently trained,

though her upbringing under her mother's care made her confident to take on the role of managing a household. This points to how PMC creates an opportunity to evaluate the lessons and skills for marriage acquired during childhood and early adulthood. The literature has shown that marriage preparation is not an event that commences when couples get engaged but is a gradual and continuous process beginning in childhood and continuing into youth (Pyżlak, 2018:230). Remote preparation begins in the home, followed by proximate preparation, which takes place in social communities like a church. Immediate preparation takes place after engagement, during which the clergy evaluates the degree of the couple's formation and knowledge acquired during the earlier phases of preparation. Immediate preparation is therefore used to fill the gaps in the couple's basic formation and confirm the couple's readiness for marriage (Pyżlak, 2018:234). It is therefore important for PMC to ensure that the prospective spouses are ready for marriage by assessing their knowledge and attitudes and providing information and teaching skills that promote readiness for marriage. It ought to assist the couple in examining and confirming their decision to marry. Like the question posed to Rebekah, the PMC process must aid couples in determining whether they 'will go' into the permanent, sacred and exclusive covenant of marriage.

7.4.2. Jacob's love for Rachel as a concept expressing love as a motive for marriage: Analysis of Gen. 29

7.4.2.1. Context of Gen. 29

After twenty years of marriage, Rebekah gave birth to Isaac's twin sons (Gen. 25:26). God had revealed to her while still pregnant that the older of the boys would serve the younger (Gen. 25:23). Under his mother's guidance, Jacob had secured the blessing meant for his older brother (Gen. 27:5-29). Jacob is now the one through whom God will fulfil his promise to Abraham (Gen. 28:3-5). Esau holds a grudge against his brother and vows to kill him (Gen. 27:41). Rebekah uses her bitterness towards Esau's marriage to Hittite women to allow Jacob to flee his brother's wrath. By complaining about the Hittite women, Rebekah leads Isaac to send Jacob to his uncle in Haran to take a wife for himself there (Gen. 27:42-28:2). Because the aim was to protect Jacob from Esau, Isaac does not send someone else to get a wife for Jacob as his father did for Isaac himself (Goldingay, 2020:580). In Haran, Jacob finds his extended family and acquires Leah and Rachel as his wives. This story also forms part of the 'betrothal type-scenes'. The story of Isaac's family is dominated by the narrative of Jacob's move to Haran, his stay there, and his eventual return to Canaan.

7.4.2.2 Textual analysis

The account of Jacob's journey to find a wife is similar to that of Abraham's servant to find a wife for Isaac. Although Jacob did not pray like Abraham's servant, he made a profession of trust in God (Gen. 28:20-22). The connotation of coming to the "land of the eastern peoples" (v. 1) is that Jacob is in a distant and foreign territory, suggesting that finding his extended family might be highly improbable (Goldingay, 2020:619). His emotional response of weeping when he finds Rachel (v. 11) reflects that finding his extended family took God's help and guidance (Sailhamer, 2008: 319). As with Abraham's servant, Jacob lands at a well (v. 2). Here he finds shepherds with their sheep and enquires about where they come from and if they know Laban (vv. 4-6). The shepherds identify Rachel as Laban's daughter as she approaches the well (v. 6). Because the well's mouth was covered with a large stone (v. 2), Jacob tries to convince the shepherds to water the sheep as Rachel approaches, but they respond by saying they had to wait until all the flocks were gathered before they could water the sheep (vv. 7-8). Because wells did not have protective walls, a stone prevented animals from stumbling into the well, guarded against contamination, and also served as a means of regulating its use (Walton, 2001:622). It is possible that removing the large stone from the well took the strength of several people (Cotter, 2003:259; Goldingay, 2020:621; Sailhamer, 2008:319). Jacob ignores the local custom and single-handedly removes the large stone from the well and waters his uncle's sheep (v. 10). He then introduces himself (vv. 11-12). When Jacob first meets Rachel, there is no suggestion that he is attracted to her. Him kissing her is only an intrafamilial gesture with no sexual connotation seeing that Laban will also embrace and kiss him when they meet (v. 13). Once at Laban's home, Jacob tells him the story that led to him being there, but unlike Abraham's servant, the story is not repeated.

After a month, Laban initiates a negotiation with him (vv. 14-15). The implication is that Jacob has been working over the month and Laban now suggests that Jacob determine the wages for his work (v. 15). Although family members do not receive wages for their labour, it is appropriate for Laban to make this suggestion because Jacob most probably made clear why he came to Haran (Goldingay, 2020:625). Because Jacob loves Rachel who is described as lovely in form and beautiful (v. 17), he responds by stating that he will work seven years in return for her (v. 18). Jacob is willing to pay a high bride price for her since a shepherd's annual wage was ten shekels and "in texts from Nuzi the typical bride price was thirty to forty shekels" (Walton, 2001:623). The arrangement is concluded without Rachel's involvement. The seven years seemed like a few days to Jacob on account of his love for her (v. 20). Upon completion of the seven years, Jacob requests that he be given his wife to consummate the marriage (v. 21). This points to the seven years being a betrothal period (Goldingay, 2020:627). Laban organises the first of the only two wedding feasts in the OT (cf. Judg. 14). When evening comes, Laban gives Leah instead of

Rachel to Jacob (v. 23). Judging by Gen. 24:65, Leah's face would be covered with a veil when she was handed over to Jacob. Being evening, it was dark, and Jacob was probably drunk from the day's festivities (Walton, 2001:623). It is no wonder that he only realises in the morning that it was not Rachel he slept with. The fact that he only realises in the morning also points to the fact that he had no physical contact with Rachel for the duration of the betrothal. When Jacob confronts Laban about his deceit, Laban states that it is not customary to marry the younger daughter before the older daughter and instructs Jacob to finish Leah's bridal week so that he will be given Rachel in return for another seven years of service (vv. 25-27). Laban's response reminds Jacob that he is a visitor in a place with different customs (Cotter, 2003:263). All commentators understand Laban's deception as a comeuppance for Jacob. Goldingay (2020) comments on the irony of Jacob ignoring the principle of birth order:

"With further irony, Laban is working with the principle that Jacob resisted in his own life and has ignored in connection with Leah and Rachel. Once again with irony, Gen. takes up terms from Gen. 25–27, the references to Esau and Jacob as the "firstborn" and the "younger." It is strangely appropriate that Jacob would seek to displace Leah by her little sister, he being the younger brother who two or three times set about displacing his big brother. But what he succeeded in doing in relation to Esau and Isaac, he has failed to do with Leah." (Goldingay, 2020:629)

Jacob completes the week with Leah and is given Rachel as his wife, loving her more than Leah (v. 30). God sees that Leah is unloved and intervenes by allowing her to bear children. At the same time, Rachel is left barren (v. 31). Through the name she gives her firstborn son, we learn that Leah desires to be loved by her husband and hopes to gain it through the son she has birthed (v. 32). Given the name she gives her second son, her husband still fails to love her (v. 33). The chapter concludes with Leah bearing four sons and ceasing to bear children.

7.4.2.3 Towards Premarital Counselling

The central principle relevant to PMC that emerges from this narrative is discussed below.

7.4.2.3.1. The place of affection

Unlike his father Isaac, whose marriage was arranged and where love followed once he married Rebekah (Gen. 24:67), Jacob searched for his own wife and chose her based on love. Although nothing is said of his attraction to her in their first encounter, his love for Rachel is explicitly expressed when the marriage is negotiated. Jacob voluntarily negotiates a high bride price and does not feel its pinch on account of his love for her. The Bible acknowledges love preceding

marriage, even in a time when marriage was arranged mainly. Affection and physical attraction in a premarital relationship are also clearly depicted in Song of Songs. This points to how the affection between the couple being prepared for marriage should not be discarded as infatuation, but should be used as an opportunity to teach about biblical love. It ought to be challenged against agape love as described in 1 Cor. 13. This is all the more significant considering that even though marriage is a family affair amongst Africans, contemporary Africans choose their marriage partners themselves based on understanding the marital relationship as one characterised by love, intimacy, commitment and romance (Ekane, 2013:4; Monsma, 2014:26). It is also important against the background of Leah's loveless marriage. Leah becomes the face of Prov. 30:22-23, which describes the instability and turmoil of an unloved woman who marries. Love is powerful and key to a couple maintaining their relationship against many obstacles (cf. Song. 8:6-7).

It is significant for premarital couples that although Jacob was clearly in love with Rachel, he did not touch her throughout the betrothal period. This points to how physical attraction is no excuse for remaining chaste before marriage. Jacob was in love but patient and self-controlled for seven years. Premarital couples ought to be challenged through his example to not engage in premarital sex but to uphold the biblical standard of sexual purity, as Paul expands on in 1 Cor. 6 and 7.

7.4.3. Premarital admonitions expressed through a wedding song: Analysis of Psalm 45

7.4.3.1 Context of Psalm 45

Psalm 45 is placed after the lament of the previous three psalms. This psalm is unusual in that it is a psalm that focuses on humans rather than God (Goldingay, 2007:48). It praises the Israelite king instead of God (Wilson, 2014:729). It is a wedding song most likely composed for a specific royal wedding, but its inclusion in the Psalter implies its use as a wedding song during the weddings of royal couples (Goldingay, 2007:48; VanGemeran, 2017:516). The king addressed in the psalm is unnamed therefore allowing the song to be used any royal wedding (Goldingay, 2007:49). The psalm opens (v. 1) and closes (v. 17) with statements by a speaker who may be the best man or a prophet who gives his compliments and counsel to the royal couple (Goldingay, 2007:48). Eight lines address the groom (vv. 2–9) while three address the bride (vv. 10–12). The rest of the lines (vv. 13–16) picture the arrival of the bride. Postell (2019) argues that “careful study of textual indicators within Psalm 45 and an appreciation of the wider story reveal a psalm that is no mere relic of royal weddings gone by, but a song about the Messiah to come” (Postell, 2019:147). This is mainly due to the divine descriptions of the king in this psalm, especially in verse 6, where the king is addressed as God and verse 17, where the king is praised forever.

7.4.3.2 Textual analysis

The subject of the opening line (v. 1) is the oral delivery of the poem. The poem is a representation of the speaker's words and his stance as he declares them (Goldingay, 2007:49). What follows is the speaker's address to the king. He first compliments the king on his appearance and use of words (v. 2). These attributes are the cause for God's blessing (v. 2). In verse 3 the king is challenged to exercise his power as commander in chief of Israel's armed forces (Goldingay, 2007:50). The exercise of power is however not simply aimed at gaining territory, but is at the service of "truth, humility and righteousness" (v. 4). The result of such exercise of power will be victory over enemies (v. 5). The direct address of "God" (*'elohim*) (v.6) is unexpected and forces one to reflect on the previous verses considering their militant language to in fact be referring to God's actions on the king's behalf (Wilson, 2014:734). It has, however, been suggested that *'elohim* in this context is an epithet describing the king's status as divinely authorised ruler (Wilson, 2014:734). Postell (2019), however, argues against the genitival interpretation of "God" resulting in the verse being understood to mean that the king sits on God's borrowed throne (Postell, 2019:150). Instead, he states that the larger context of the Psalter supports the divine identity of the king, "seen most notably in the call to the bride to bow down to her lord (v. 11) and the call to praise or give thanks to this king forever (v. 17), an action that is only fittingly offered to God in the book of Psalms" (Postell, 2019:151).

Verse 7 continues to address the king, explaining how the king's commitment to act on behalf of faithfulness makes God distinguish him and anoint him.

Scholars such as Schroeder (1996) and VanGemeren (2017) opine that verse eight shifts to focus on the wedding. Goldingay (2007), however, argues that because there has been no mention of a wedding thus far, it is unjustified to interpret verses 8-9 as distinctly relating to a wedding scene (Goldingay 2007:52). He argues that the king would waft these spices (myrrh, aloes, and cassia) for any great ceremonial occasion such as his coronation (Goldingay, 2007:52). This is considered a strong possibility since verse 8 mentioned the king's anointing. The descriptions and references to the robes, fragrant spices, opulent surroundings, festive music, the royal daughters and queen adorned in gold, however, reinforce the idea of a royal wedding banquet (VanGemeren, 2017:521; Wilson, 2014:734). Furthermore, Schroeder (1996) postulates that the parallels between verse 9 and verses in Song of Songs indicate that the fragrance of aloe on myrrh on the king's robes is meant to have an erotic effect (Schroeder, 1996:427). The direct address of the psalm shifts to the bride from v. 10. Schroeder (1996) and Goldingay (2007) argue that the direct language addressed to the bride cannot be attributed to the composer but is the voice of the queen mother. The argument is that the *shegal* (queen) who is at the king's right hand

in verse 9 is the queen mother, not the bride (Schroeder, 1996:428). The bride does not come into the scene in verse 9 because she is described as “within” (presumably her chamber) in verse 13 and is only “led to the king” in verse 14. We also find the king’s mother sitting at the king’s right hand in 1 Kgs. 2:19. This stance is also supported by the fact that the bride is addressed as “daughter” (v. 10).

The bride was foreign to Israel since royal weddings were aimed at cementing relationships between states (Goldingay, 2007:48). This explains why she is admonished to forget her loyalty to her family and her native people to assume her role as wife to the king (v. 10). Political marriages required the royal bride to abandon her own culture, her religion, and her loyalties (Goldingay, 2007:54). The admonition to forget her father’s house also signals a transfer of paternal authority from the father to the husband (Mensah et al., 2024:4). Subject to her husband’s authority, the woman must obey her husband as she did her father (cf. Num. 30:4,11). Because the king takes delight in her physical beauty, she is urged to honour him as her ‘lord’ (v. 11). She is an object of desire and subject of submission (Goldingay, 2017:54). Her prospective husband is not characterised by the usual expression for husband, *ish* (man) (cf. Gen. 3:6), but *adon* (lord, master). These admonitions presuppose a gender hierarchy between husband and wife which is consistent with ANE patriarchal society. She is offered encouragement by the fact that her new status as queen will command respect from visiting dignitaries who bring gifts (v. 12) (Wilson, 2014:736).

The following four lines speak about, rather than to, the royal bride. Attention then returns to addressing the king. The bride’s glorious appearance is described as she leaves her bridal chamber and enters the king’s palace with her virgin companions (vv. 13-15). The psalm concludes by referring to the king’s sons ruling the land (v. 16), and the psalmist promising to keep the king’s memory alive and the nations praising the king forever (v. 17).

7.4.3.3 Towards premarital counselling

The central principle relevant to PMC that emerges from this narrative is discussed below.

7.4.3.3.1. Caution against gender disparity

The context of the brief premarital admonitions directed to the bride in this psalm is important. The bride, most likely a princess, is of foreign descent, marrying an Israelite king. The marriage is most likely a political arrangement aimed at cementing a relationship between two nations. The admonitions only being directed towards the bride reflect a gender disparity between the bride and the groom. The bulk of the psalm addresses the king, but nowhere does it counsel him

concerning his marriage. The bride is addressed only regarding her need to forsake loyalty to her people and submit to her husband. The admonition reflects a stark contrast from Gen. 2:24, which places the man in the position of leaving his people. It is also a deviation from the true meaning of a wife's submission as outlined in section 3.3.1. In light of the established understanding of biblical gender roles in Chapter 3, this psalm can only function to guard against the teaching of patriarchal norms and values in PMC. It points to a need to uphold the equality between husband and wife in being created in the image of God, in how couples are prepared for marriage. PMC ought, therefore, to address both the prospective husband and wife. It also points to a need to address the husband's authority and the wife's submission accurately. It reminds pastoral premarital counsellors to teach gender roles in light of the redemptive work of the cross.

7.5 An analysis of NT texts on concepts related to premarital counselling

As pointed out previously, the NT also lacks explicit passages teaching on premarital guidance. For this section, I will consider NT passages which richly describe instructions or teachings given concerning the decision to marry, as such passages can be unequivocally linked to marriage preparation. Only one such passage exists in the NT: 1 Corinthians 7.

7.5.1 “To the unmarried I say” as a concept expressing premarital counsel: Analysis of 1 Corinthians 7.

7.5.1.1 Context of 1 Corinthians 7

Paul founded the church in Corinth during his initial one-and-a-half-year stay in Corinth and continued fathering it from afar (Hafemann, 2000:23). 1 Corinthians is a private pastoral letter that Paul writes from Ephesus, approximately three years after his founding visit. It follows a previous letter he had written to the church (5:9). 1 Corinthians is therefore a continuation of an ongoing conversation. The letter is prompted by oral reports from Chloe's household (1:11) and the letter the Corinthians sent (7:1). In the letter, Paul alternates between responses to the oral report and the letter. In Chapter 7, Paul responds to matters concerning marriage that the church wrote to him about. He responds concerning a maxim which appraises celibacy above marriage (v. 1). Paul is therefore not presenting systematic thoughts on marriage in this chapter but rather addressing specific difficulties in the Corinthian church (Garland, 2003:318). In this chapter, he deals with instructions about sexual relations, divorce and marriage. Table 1 below reflects the structure of 1 Cor. 7 as identified by Garland (2003).

Table 1: The structure of 1 Corinthians 7 (Garland 2003:48)

vv. 1-5	Sexual relations within marriage
vv. 6-9	Celibacy or marriage for the unmarried and widows
vv. 10-16	Instructions about divorce for those married to Christians and those married to unbelievers
vv. 17-24	'Remain as you are' as the guiding principle underlying the discussion
vv. 25-40	The advisability of marriage for the betrothed and widows

7.5.1.2 Textual analysis

For this study, the textual analysis will only focus on portions of the chapter which explicitly address the unmarried. The word *agamos* (unmarried) only appears in 1 Cor. 7 in the entire NT. Blomberg (1995) puts forward that because “unmarried” is a masculine plural, it refers to men whose wives have died (Blomberg, 1995:148). It could, however, also refer to those who are single, separated or divorced of both genders (Gardner, 2018:413; Garland, 2003:357). In his writing, Paul distinguishes widows (de-married) and virgins (never married) from this category, though he includes them in his counsel to those who are not married.

Paul thinks it is good for the unmarried to remain unmarried (v. 8) but only if they have the gift of celibacy. He describes celibacy as a gift bestowed by God (v. 7), meaning it is not something one can decide or strive to attain (Garland, 2003:355; Verbrugge, 2008:126). As a result of his personal preference for celibacy (vv. 7-8), it is easy to mistake Paul’s stance to be that marriage is a second-best choice. However, “the issue is not what is the highest “good” but what is good for each Christian as he or she understands his or her endowment and calling by God” (Garland 2003:347). By saying that those who are not controlling themselves should marry (v. 9), Paul is not reducing those who marry to a lower spiritual plateau, nor is he devaluing marriage as a remedy for unrestrained lust. Paul is merely acknowledging that celibacy does not benefit everyone, and romantic passion necessitates marriage (Garland, 2003:355). Instead of prescribing ways to suppress sexual urges, he offers marriage as an appropriate outlet (Gardner, 2018:413; Garland, 2003:354; Verbrugge, 2008:128). Those who struggle with sexual desires need not live in frustration or in sin (cf. v.2) but are free to marry. He goes on to emphasise that the unmarried who choose to marry are not sinning by doing so (vv. 28 and 36). Also, it is

important to acknowledge that Paul's view of marriage is from an eschatological perspective. He is relativising the significance of marriage "in the face of the nearness of the coming kingdom and the new estimation of the earthly life coupled with it" (Garland, 2003:319). His practical marriage advice is mixed with an eschatological awareness.

Paul's counsel about marriage and celibacy is undergirded by the theological reasoning he discusses in vv. 17-24. He uses two examples of social status, uncircumcision/circumcision (vv. 18-19) and slavery/freedom (vv. 21-23), to illustrate the divine principle that no condition or earthly status presents an impediment to living the Christian life (Garland, 2003:384). In this paragraph, Paul reiterates that the Corinthians remain as they are (vv. 17, 20, 24, 26). By saying so, he does not imply that change of status is prohibited – he encourages slaves to seize the opportunity of freedom (v. 21) – but is pointing to how a "change of status is unnecessary as it relates to God's call" (Garland, 2003:385). Paul discourages Christians in Corinth where sexual asceticism was prevalent, from altering their status for religious reasons (such as exchanging marriage for celibacy), thinking that it enhances their spirituality (Gardner, 2018:439). He discourages them from rushing to change their external circumstances simply because they have become Christians (Blomberg, 1995:162). In fact, making such alterations denies one's conversion being based solely on grace and gives unmerited importance to worldly status' (Garland, 2003:385). A Christian's ethnic, social, or legal status is of little importance in light of their calling in Christ.

From v. 25 Paul addresses "the virgins". The most obvious meaning of *ton parthenon* (the virgins) would be "female virgins", however, the gender of the genitive plural is a source of dispute amongst scholars. Paul uses the noun with the feminine definite article in the rest of this chapter (vv. 28, 34, 36, 37, 38). Although there is a possibility that the term refers broadly to the unmarried of both genders (Blomberg, 1995:168; Gardner, 2018:463), it is unusual to apply it to males since most biblical usages relate the term to women (Garland, 2003:405). As previously stated, Paul makes a distinction between an "unmarried woman" (*agamos*) (v. 3) and a "virgin". It is therefore likely that "the virgins" refers to a special class of unmarried women. Garland (2003) argues that the most plausible option is that "the virgins" refers to betrothed women (Garland, 2003:405). The instructions are, however, directed to the men because it was the males who took the lead in contracting marriage in this cultural context (Garland, 2003:405). Paul addresses those engaged to be married, answering whether they should proceed with the marriage or not. Paul is careful to distinguish his instructions from the Lord's commands (v. 25). By pointing to his trustworthiness through God's mercy (v. 25) and his endowment with God's Spirit (v. 40), Paul is inspiring the audience's confidence in his instruction. Paul reiterates that the betrothed remain as they are, this time in view of a present crises (v. 26). An imminent end determines his advice (cf. v. 31). Paul recommends that those who are engaged should not break a betrothal and for those who are

unmarried not seek a wife (v. 27). Although Paul asserts that those who go on to marry do not sin, he precautions those who marry that they will face affliction (v. 28). He does not describe the nature of this affliction, but it could refer to how those who are married “become more deeply entangled in a world order that is passing away” (Garland, 2003:413). His advice is aimed at sparing them trouble (v.28) and freeing them of concern (v.32). Paul explains how the demands and responsibilities that marriage imposes divide one’s devotion to the Lord (vv. 32–35). Marriage comes with the challenge of being preoccupied with pleasing a spouse, it conflicts with one’s need to please God (Gardner, 2018:475). The married person’s interests are divided between duty to God and affection to their spouse, and may result in them being drawn away from God. Paul balances these remarks by applying them to both male and female.

In verses 36-38 Paul concludes his argument by emphasising that the engaged who marry do not sin and that those who call off the marriage also do well. The need for such affirmation is created by the moral struggle deciding to marry could become in a setting where sexual asceticism was valued.

As the chapter concludes, Paul shifts his focus to widows, briefly instructing them about whether they should marry or not. Although the circumstances are different, the correlations between the advice Paul gives to the engaged and the widowed are clear. A widow is no longer bound to her husband once he dies and is free to marry (v. 39), but she is happier if she stays as she is (v.40). Paul says she is free to marry whomever she wants, but then adds *monon en kyrio* (only in the Lord) (v. 39). Paul has used this phrase in Rom. 16:11 to mean “Christians”. Paul, therefore, advises that the new marriage partner be a fellow Christian. Such an instruction can be attributed to Paul’s Jewish background, which practices endogamous marriage (Garland, 2003:432). OT Scriptures prohibit intermarriage between God’s people and other nations (Deut. 7:3, Josh. 23:12, Neh. 13:25). God prohibits intermarriage because it mingled God’s holy race (Ezra 9:2) and led Israel into idolatry (Deut. 7:4, Neh. 13:26-27). When Paul gave guidance on mixed marriage earlier in the chapter (vv. 12-16), he addressed Christians who were already married when they were converted. Here, however, he is dealing with a believer who is already converted when they remarry. In his other admonitions concerning getting married, Paul did not mention the issue of the faith. We are left to assume that new marriages were intra-religious, and that Paul only mentions it now because of the possibility that the widow could have had an unbelieving husband prior. She would not have been expected to separate from him if he consented to living with her after her newfound faith (v. 13), but now that she is to remarry, she is expected to enter only into marriage with a fellow believer.

I must explain the exclusion of 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1 in this discussion. The concept of being ‘unequally yoked’, rooted in the passage, is often used in prohibiting intermarriage from a NT perspective. The passage however presents an exegetical challenge in supporting such a position because in its immediate context, the passage is not concerned with marital partners, nor is it concerned with the relationship between Christians and non-Christians (Berchie, 2014:65; Hafemann, 2000:291, Berchie 2014:65). The problem facing the church in 2 Corinthians is not the relationship between Christians and non-Christians but rather the relationship between those who support Paul’s ministry and those who question it. 2 Corinthians is Paul’s fourth letter to the Corinthian church, written in response to the questioning of Paul’s apostleship by a rebellious minority. The letter is aimed at calling the rebellious to repentance and calling for the believers to separate themselves from the unbelievers among them. Paul uses the word *apistos* (unbelievers) to refer to those who are opposing his ministry (Guthrie, 2015:438; Hafemann, 2000:291, Guthrie 2015:438). Although elsewhere in his letters to the Corinthian church Paul uses ‘unbelievers’ to refer to those outside of the faith, here he uses it to refer to these false teachers who preach “another Jesus” and teach “a different gospel” (1 Corinthians 11:4). They embrace worldly values and promote moral corruption within the church (Guthrie, 2015:438). The text is therefore not referring to separation between Christians and non-Christians in social and civil contexts but is calling on the Corinthians of genuine faith to purify themselves by separating from those who are seeking to lead them astray (Hafemann 2000:303).

The concept of being *heterozugeó* (unequally yoked), which only appears here in the NT, has an identifiable link with the OT. In Deuteronomy 22:10, the Israelites are prohibited from ploughing with a calf and a donkey yoked together, whereas in Leviticus 19:19 they are forbidden from crossbreeding different animals. The calf was considered clean while a donkey was considered an unclean animal (Guthrie, 2015:436). The image functions to emphasise the exhortation to ‘purify ourselves from everything that contaminates’ (2 Corinthians 7:1) and does not necessarily refer to the incompatibility of marital partners. Thus, the exclusion of the exegesis of 2 Corinthians 6 in this study.

7.5.1.3 Towards premarital counselling

The major principles relevant to PMC that emerge from this letter:

7.5.1.3.1. Affirming marriage

Paul repeatedly affirms those who aspired to marry in his writing. In the context of the letter, this was necessitated by the sexual asceticism that discouraged marriage. In our context, factors such as contemporary attitudes towards marriage and divorce can cause a premarital couple to

question their decision to marry. Literature shows how cohabitation is an alternative to marriage and how divorce is socially accepted and prevalent in urban African society (Moore & Govender 2013:623; Stats SA 2025b:38; Vähäkangas, 2004:43). It is therefore essential for PMC to affirm the necessity and goodness/blessedness of marriage to those who choose to enter into it.

7.5.1.3.2. The use of personal experiences

In the chapter, Paul repeatedly distinguishes his instructions and recommendations from the Lord's commands. He also refers to his personal decisions and preferences. This points to how personal experience and the wisdom gained through it can be used as a source of knowledge during PMC. Christian PMC can therefore go beyond exploring biblical passages about marriage and engage real-life experiences. Literature reviewed and findings have shown that clergy often rely on their personal views and experiences as a source of knowledge during PMC sessions (Marks 2007:46, Mbunga 2010:67). What is important is that the counsel be guided by the Spirit (v. 40) and based on sound judgment (v. 25).

7.5.1.3.3. Common challenges in marriage

Paul precautions engaged couples about the affliction they will face once married. This points us to how marriage preparation ought to address the challenges couples stand to face in marriage or because of being married. The responsibilities and demands of marriage need to be adequately and realistically discussed. Although the trouble that comes with being married cannot be eliminated, couples stand a chance to respond better to it when prepared. Common challenges in marriage and skills to remedy them are, therefore, a key subject to cover during PMC. The transition from single to married should be eased by creating awareness concerning the various ways in which being married will impact the lives of individuals who have decided to marry. The findings of this study have revealed that PMC is effective in preparing couples to face the challenges that come with being married.

7.5.1.3.4. Making acquaintance

In talking about divided interests, Paul mentions how those who are married are concerned with pleasing each other together with pleasing the Lord. For the purpose of increasing satisfaction, premarital counselling ought to allow couples the opportunity to get to know each other better. Knowledge about each other's preferences, personalities, expectations, etc. helps couples meet each other's needs efficiently. The findings of this study have shown that premarital counselling is key in assisting couples to understand each other better.

7.5.1.3.5. Devotion to God

The brief exhortation Paul makes about intra-religious marriage points to the area of partner selection on the basis of faith. PMC ought to guide the discussion around the faith of each partner and the values it communicates about marital relationships. Paul also points out how the demands and responsibilities of marriage can divide one's devotion to the Lord. It is therefore important to guide couples on how not to neglect their relationship with God, learning to balance their devotion to God and their spouse. The covenant attachment theory used as the theoretical framework of this study centres around relational spirituality, which asserts that the closer couples move towards God, the closer they move towards each other. Their devotion to God is therefore of benefit to the marital relationship.

7.6. Overview of Biblical principles relevant to premarital counselling

Although the Bible lacks a direct reference to marriage preparation, the Bible contains many guidelines on marriage and family life, which are helpful when preparing couples for marriage. Literature, together with the findings of this study, has shown that pastoral PMC revolves around the exposition of Bible passages containing such biblical principles. It is for this reason that I conclude this chapter by sweeping through the Bible, discussing passages with principles relevant to PMC. As stated in the introduction of this chapter, only passages relevant to immediate marriage preparation conducted by clergy with engaged couples are included in this discussion.

7.6.1. Pentateuch

Some of the first five books of the Bible contain principles and laws highlighting the origin and prototype of marriage as well as chastity in marriage. Below is a brief analysis of principles relevant to marriage preparation located in the Pentateuch.

7.6.1.1. Gen. 2:18-24

As explained in section 3.5, the first three chapters of Gen. are the origin and prototype of marriage (Vorster, 2008:466). The Marriage Text is introduced by v. 18, declaring that it is not good for the man to be alone. God making this declaration and solving the problem points to marriage being God's idea, not man's. The declaration does not refer to man being lonely. Still, to man being alone (Goldingay, 2020:91). In the first account in Gen. 1 mankind's creation in the image of God entails creation as male and female (Gen. 1:27). It is not good for the man to be alone because in his isolation he does not mirror God (Shenk, 2018:31). The triune God of the Bible exists in community since He is comprised of the fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Grenz, 2000:179). As God's image, man must express the relationship dynamic of God. God

remedies the problem of man's isolation by making another image-bearer like him to be a helper that corresponds to him. The word 'ēzer (helper) refers to one who is powerful and strong to help one out of a mess like allied soldiers who assist in battle (e.g. Josh. 1:14 or 1 Chron. 12:1–22) and God himself (cf. Gen. 49:25; Exod. 18:4; 2 Chron. 32:8; Ps. 10:14; Ps. 33:20; Ps. 146:5; and Isa. 41:10–14). That the helper corresponds to him points to the woman being a counterpart (Goldingay, 2020:91). It has been argued in section 3.4.1 that as an image-bearer, the woman assists the man as a partner on the basis of co-operation and not subordination (Vorster 2008:469). Although the woman's role as helper points to her overall supportive role, in light of the blessing in Gen. 1:28, the help is specifically tied to the bearing of children (Köstenberger & Jones, 2010:25; Sailhamer, 2008:103).

In vv. 19-20, God brings the animals to the man for him to name them and in the process recognise that none of the animals are a help equivalent to him (Goldingay, 2020:92). He can only find companionship in one of his own kind. To certify the oneness between man and woman, God does not simply create another human being as he did in Gen. 2:7, He creates the woman from the man's rib (v. 21). When the woman is presented to him, he recognises her as his own flesh (v. 23). He declares her equivalent to him since she is made of the same substance (bone and flesh) as he (Sailhamer, 2008:103). Because God only made one 'suitable helper' for Adam, and she was female, marriage is understood to be exclusively heterosexual and monogamous (Köstenberger & Jones, 2010:25; Ngundu, 2011:45).

The declaration about marriage in Gen. 2:24 implicitly describes marriage as an institution consisting of leaving, cleaving and becoming one (Bacchiocchi, 2001:16). The man shall *āzab* (abandon) his parents (v. 24). This means he gives up one obligation to take up another (Goldingay, 2020: 93). This means the man's attachment to his parents is replaced by his attachment to his wife. In marriage, "the man transfers his primary familial loyalty from his parents to his wife" (Abasili, 2017:36). To "cleave" (*dabaq*) suggests the idea of being 'permanently glued or joined together' (Abasili, 2017:37; Bacchiocchi, 2001:18). In this verse the word is used metaphorically to accentuate the strong bond in marriage.

"Becoming one flesh" points to how marriage is a sexual union (cf. 1 Cor. 6:16). However, this is not all it means. Köstenberger in Vorster (2016) explains that 'one flesh' "entails the establishment of a new kinship relationship between two previously unrelated individuals by the most intimate of human bonds" (Vorster, 2016:4). The unity in marriage also points to the exclusivity and permanency of marriage and implies equality between the husband and wife.

7.6.1.2. Exodus 20:14, 17

The Decalogue (ten words) are distinct from the rest of God's law in that God audibly proclaimed it to Moses and later inscribed them on stone tablets himself (Kaiser, 2008:242). The seventh commandment forbids adultery (v.14). The verb "to commit adultery" (na'aph) can be used of either men or women (Kaiser, 2008:255). The OT distinguishes between adultery and fornication. This is seen in the difference between the penalty of seducing a virgin (bride-price) and the penalty for adultery (death) (cf. Exod. 22:16-17, Lev. 20:10, Deut. 22:22-29). This commandment emphasises fidelity in marriage. Adultery is understood as not just a sin against another's property but as a sin against God (cf. Gen. 39:9). Within the context of marriage, all the forbidden sexual behaviours (incest, bestiality, homosexuality) listed in Leviticus 18 are considered to be adultery. These prohibitions reinforce the concept that sexual expression is reserved for one's spouse.

The tenth commandment forbids coveting a neighbour's property, and amongst the things that should not be coveted is a neighbour's wife (v. 17). This commandment deals with a person's heart, showing the inner desire that leads to the act of adultery (Kaiser, 2008:255). Finding contentment in one's own life and wife, therefore, safeguards against adultery and other sins.

7.6.1.3. Towards premarital counselling

The Pentateuch provides the theological and ethical framework for marriage, which is vital for marriage preparation.

- Marriage is not a mere social construct but is ordained by God and is therefore sacred.
- Marriage is also sacred because it expresses the relational dynamic of the Triune God, allowing mankind to reflect God as his image fully.
- The role of a wife in marriage is an equal partner.
- Marriage is a heterosexual and monogamous relationship.
- Marriage is a strong bond where parental attachment is replaced by spousal attachment.
- Marriage is an intimate, exclusive and permanent bond which calls for unwavering commitment and faithfulness.

PMC drawing from the Pentateuch therefore prepares couples for a sacred, lifelong commitment marked by exclusivity, equality and a shared purpose as image bearers.

7.6.2. Historic books

Historic books include Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. These books primarily narrate the history of Israel. From some of these narratives, one can glean principles and observations about marriage and family. The historical books are not manuals for marriage but offer rich case studies and overarching themes that inform marriage preparation. Below is a brief analysis of principles and observations relevant to PMC located in the historic books.

7.6.2.1. Judges 3:5-6

Judg. 3:1-6 serves as a 'textual bridge', serving as a postscript to chapter 2 and as an introduction to the account of the first judge (Boda, 2012:104). The section begins with a listing of the nations the Lord left behind in the land with the intention of testing Israel and teaching warfare to the descendants who had no battle experience (vv.1-2). God had previously tested his people to discern their obedience to him (cf. Gen. 22:1, Exod. 16:4, Deut. 8:2). Israel utterly failed the test by intermarrying with the nations and serving their gods. In Deut. 7:1-4 God had forewarned and instructed Israel against intermarriage. He warned that it would lead to idolatry and incite the Lord's wrath. Hence, God hands them over to be subjected by the king of Aram Naharaim in v. 8.

The narratives of King Solomon's marriages in 1 Kings 11:1-4 and King Ahab's marriage to Jezebel in 1 Kings 16:31 further point to the dangers of marrying foreign wives. Ezra 9-10 documents the discovery of foreign wives amongst the exiled Israelites who had returned to Jerusalem. After praying and confessing, Ezra commands the guilty parties, amongst them Levites and priests, to sever ties with their foreign wives. In Neh. 13:23-27, Nehemiah violently rebukes Israelite men with foreign wives, using King Solomon as an example.

7.6.2.2. Ruth 1

The first chapter of the book of Ruth describes a family's movement away from Bethlehem and its movement back to Bethlehem. Although it begins and ends with the same family in the same city, both have undergone drastic changes in between. In v. 1 Bethlehem is suffering under a famine, but by the end of the chapter, Bethlehem is at the start of a barley harvest (v. 22). When the family sets out in v. 1, the family members are identified in relation to Elimelech ("his wife" and "his two sons" in v. 1), but when it returns, it is identified in relation to Naomi ("her daughter-in-law" in v. 22). The chapter is therefore about a family being transformed from being centred around a man and his sons to being centred around a woman and her daughter-in-law (Linafelt 1999:23).

Both of her daughters-in-law were prepared to return to Bethlehem with Naomi, but she instead urges them to return to their own mothers. She declares a blessing invoking the name of the Lord over them, referring to their exemplary dealings both with the dead and her (v. 8). Ruth and Orpah have shown Naomi and her family *hesed*, loyalty and solidarity expressed in actions going beyond expectations (Linafelt 1999:33). In her blessing, she wishes that God would show them as much *hesed* as they have shown towards her and her dead. This points to a healthy relationship dynamic that Naomi shared with her daughters-in-law. Possibly why the latter part of the blessing refers to a hope of each finding security with a new husband (v. 9). In contrast, the narrator refers to Ruth and Orpah as Naomi's "daughters-in-law" (vv. 6-8), Naomi addresses them as her "daughters" (vv.11-13), pointing to the bond she shares with them. When the women insist on going with her, perhaps because of the emotional attachment they have towards her, Naomi intensifies her address (vv. 11-13). In her address, she expresses that the only reason for them to remain with her is if there was hope of her having more sons to be their husbands, which she explains to be highly improbable. Orpah takes the reasonable course of action and follows Naomi's wishes while Ruth shows an extravagant gesture of solidarity. Ruth "clung" to Naomi (v. 14), a term used in the context of marriage in Gen. 2:24 (*dabaq*). It is possible that the author intentionally evokes marital language to express the intensification of the bond between Ruth and Naomi in light of the oath of commitment Ruth makes in vv. 16-17 (Linafelt, 1999:37).

Noami makes a final attempt to convince Ruth not to follow her by urging her to go back to "her people and her gods" like Orpah (v. 15). Ruth, however, pleads with Naomi not to urge her to return and rounds off with a self-denouncing oath (vv.16-17). The theme of solidarity and commitment between Ruth and Naomi begins here and develops in the rest of the book. The book of Ruth contrasts with the patriarchal narratives where women in pairs give rise to conflict (cf. Gen. 30:8) (Schwab, 2012:384). In the story of Ruth and Naomi, female solidarity is revealed as more valuable than male support, for Ruth is described as better than seven sons (Ruth 4:15) (Schwab, 2012:384). Ruth values Naomi's welfare more than her own and courageously navigates a male world to find both her and Naomi's security. Their bond helps overcome the crisis of widowhood and famine, staving off the sense of death and despair which overshadows the beginning of the story (Linafelt, 1999:23; Schwab, 2012:384).

7.6.2.3. Towards Premarital Counselling

The narratives in the historical books serve as cautionary tales, illustrating the detrimental effects of marrying outside of God's prescribed law. Marrying foreign women led to syncretism and idolatry. These narratives bring to light not only the danger of intermarriage but also the importance of shared faith in marriage. Premarital couples would have already been taught about

choosing a fellow Christian as a marriage partner during proximate marriage preparation; however, it would be important during immediate marriage preparation to emphasise the importance of couples strengthening their faith and devotion to God. This would ensure that couples avoid drifting away from their faith and values, ultimately leading each other away from faith in God and weakening their marital bond. PMC drawing from the historical books, therefore, encourages couples to cultivate their faith for the strengthening of their marriage as reflected in the Covenant Attachment model used in this study.

PMC drawing from the book of Ruth encourages the establishment of a healthy relationship between in-laws. This is especially significant in an African setting where unhealthy relations between a bride and her in-laws, particularly her mother-in-law, are not only common but normalised. The book of Ruth, however, challenges both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law to build a bond centred around love, selflessness and loyalty towards the family and each other. It dismisses the expectation of rivalry between women in pairs, and points to how women in the family can overcome crisis by standing in solidarity.

7.6.3. Prophetic books

The prophetic books of the Bible include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. These books primarily communicate God's warning, judgment and hope to his people, often using vivid imagery such as marriage metaphors to describe the relationship between God and His people. Prophetic books provide profound theological insights relevant to understanding and preparing for marriage. The most significant contribution of the prophetic books to understanding marriage is the consistent portrayal of marriage as a covenant where Israel's unfaithfulness highlights the sanctity and exclusivity of the marital bond. Below is a brief analysis of principles and observations relevant to PMC located in the prophetic books.

7.6.3.1. Jeremiah 3:1-5

Jer. 3 – 4:2 is a section comprised of various oracles concerned with the faithless acts of Israel and Judah and calls for their repentance. An underlying metaphor is the nation being identified as members of the Lord's household - either as the Lord's spouse (vv. 1-5), as unfaithful sisters married to the Lord (vv. 6-10), and as rebellious children (vv. 14-18, 21-22). In vv. 1-5 Jeremiah uses the relationship of a husband and his divorced wife as an analogy of the relationship between the Lord and his disobedient people, building on Jer. 2:2 where he addressed the nation as the Lord's bride (Dearman, 2011:73). The divorce and remarriage ethic expressed in this passage is based on Deuteronomy 24:1–4. The people of Judah have defiled themselves by prostituting

themselves to many lovers and are now estranged from their first husband, incapable of effecting reconciliation. The answer to the rhetorical question posed in 3:1 is “no”. The law restricts a husband from returning to a wife he divorced when she remarried another. The rest of the oracle indicts the nation for its harlotry and unrepentance (vv. 2-5), thus making it seem more improbable for them to return to their first husband (Brown, 2010:154). Yet, in the rest of the chapter (vv. 11-25), the Lord calls the nation to repent and return to him. He promises to forego the anger deserving of an unfaithful spouse and show them mercy instead (v. 11).

The analogy of marriage is also reflected in other prophetic writings. Ezekiel 16:6-14 is an analogy of the Lord’s courtship and marriage to Jerusalem, while the remainder of the chapter describes Jerusalem’s prostitution. The depiction of Jerusalem’s adultery can be linked with Hosea’s writing. Hosea 1-3:5 describes a comparison between the marriage of Hosea and Gomer and the covenant relationship between God and Israel. Hosea’s story progresses through three stages: (1) the destruction of covenant relationships through adultery (ch. 1); (2) confrontations and redemptive chastening (ch. 2); and (3) the restoration of the covenant relationship through love (ch. 3) (Smith, 2001:49). God instructs Hosea to marry an adulterous wife to symbolically represent the behaviour of God’s own covenant partner, Israel, who is guilty of the vilest adultery. The nation has defiled itself through worshipping Baal and is thus rejected by God. God, however, plans to win his wife back and renew his covenant of love with her. The story shows the consequences of unfaithfulness and the power of love to restore.

7.6.3.2. Malachi 2:10-16

This portion of Scripture describes Malachi’s third speech addressing the rebellion of the people who have married “the daughter of a foreign god” (v. 11). This points to how God’s people are intermarrying with other nations and are embracing their gods. Different from the accounts of intermarriage and religious syncretism in the historic narratives, in the present passage, Israel has “broken faith” with the wife of his youth (v. 14) because Israelite men are divorcing their Israelite wives to marry neighbouring heathen women (Merrill, 2008:159). As a result, God pays no attention to their offering (v. 13). Malachi says God is “acting as a witness” between them and their wives (v. 14). This not only means God takes an active role in the lawsuit between the man and the wife of his “covenant” (v. 14), but also as a witness to the marriage itself (Baker, 2006:306). Covenants in the OT included witnesses (cf. Gen. 31:44-48 and Ruth 4:9-11), and marriage is a covenant where God is witness. “Covenant” here connotes inviolability, hence the discussion on divorce in the following verses. Vv. 15-16 are, however, ambiguous. Although the exhortation to faithfulness in the latter half of v. 15 is clear, the preceding elements of v. 15 are obscure. The clause concerns unity, and in the context of covenant, unfaithfulness could refer to the marriage

unity of the first couple or the unity of genders in creation (Baker 2006:308). The next portion of the verse contains a question and answer. The question concerns unity, and the answer is the “seed of God” (v.15), which could denote those who display God’s character by following his covenant will (Baker, 2006:308). According to this interpretation, v. 16 is the strong reaction to the breaching of the unity yearned for in v.15 through divorce. The prophet seems to use a striking figure of speech to communicate the cruelty of divorce

7.6.3.3. Towards premarital counselling

Through their rich symbolic language, prophetic books offer profound insights into marriage which are vital for PMC. PMC drawing from the marriage metaphors in the prophetic books emphasises marriage as a covenant centred around faithfulness. Through the lens of God’s covenant with Israel, the prophetic books reinforce the covenantal nature of marriage and the fidelity expected within marriage. Just as God expected Israel to be faithful to Him, so should spouses be faithful to each other. The prophets also portray God’s love and compassion in forgiving and restoring his unfaithful bride instead of severing his covenant with her. In modern-day society, where marriage is perceived as a personal relationship aimed at personal fulfilment, and where there is a greater social acceptance of divorce, PMC drawing from prophetic books would challenge modern couples to approach marriage with a profound sense of its sacredness and the seriousness of a covenant.

7.6.4. Poetic books

The poetic books of the Bible include Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. These books offer a rich tapestry of human experience, wisdom and reflection on life. They present essential truths about fidelity, communication, companionship and the nature of enduring love, which are key aspects of marriage and are invaluable for marriage preparation. Below is a brief analysis of principles and observations relevant to PMC located in the poetic books.

7.6.4.1. Proverbs 5

This chapter is the first major teaching on the dangers of adultery in Proverbs. Three large blocks of similar teaching are found in 6:20–35 and 7:1–27 with supporting sayings in verses such as 22:14; 23:27 and 30:20. The extensive treatment of the subject points to its importance. As in the previous chapter, the father is here instructing his son to avoid marital infidelity. The father warns the son to follow instructions rather than desires because though such relationships promise pleasure and satisfaction, they result in pain and death since the penalty of adultery is death (cf.

Duet. 22:22) (Longman, 2015:136). He not only warns the son about adultery but also uses provocative metaphors to encourage the son to revel in the joys of intimacy with his wife.

In the first unit of the poem (vv. 1-6) the father prods his son's attention. He begins by warning him concerning the flattery of the "strange woman" (v. 3). This woman is most likely an adulteress or prostitute (cf. 6:26) because she disregards social norms (Longman 2015:138). She is an illegitimate sexual partner. The father warns that her appearance is sweet but, in the end, turns out bitter and deadly. In the second unit of the poem (vv. 7-14) the father warns his "sons" (v. 7) to avoid the presence of an adulteress, describing the negative consequences of extramarital affairs. Sexual energy spent on an adulteress is life-sapping, diminishing strength. In adultery, there is loss of material wealth, and in the end, the body gives out. Failure to take heed of this instruction leads to regret and public shame. In the last unit (vv. 15-23), the father turns to encourage the son to enjoy intimacy within the context of marital sex properly. He uses highly erotic images reflected in Song of Songs to urge his son to find sexual fulfilment with the wife of his youth instead of strangers. It is noteworthy that, similar to Song of Songs, the motivation for marital intimacy is sensual pleasure, not progeny. The father further blesses their sexual union (v. 18). He concludes by pointing out that the ultimate motivation for avoiding marital infidelity is God's watchful eye, which observes human behaviour (v. 21). As a result, the consequences of one's sinful behaviour cannot be escaped (vv. 22-23).

Proverbs 6:20–35 also warns of the danger of adultery, differentiating between illegitimate sex with a prostitute and with a wayward wife. The consequences of sleeping with a prostitute involve material loss, but sleeping with a married woman means dealing with a jealous husband, too. The teaching against illegitimate sexual intimacy in Proverbs 7 is unique in its appeal to observation as it recounts the tale of a young man who gave in to the temptation, narrating his foolish actions and their negative consequences (Longman, 2015:160).

7.6.4.2. The rest of Proverbs

Most of the rest of the book is composed of warnings, prohibitions, observations, and encouragements with no overarching arrangement. The various topics relevant to the marital relationship and family life are mentioned below:

- Communication

Proper usage and reception of words is a large subject in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs teach by contrasting, using antithetical parallelisms to accentuate the differences between wise and foolish speech (Longman, 2015:481). The tongue can either destroy or bring healing (12:18, 15:1,

18:21), while wise words nurture relationships, whereas foolish words weaken them; thus, great attention should be paid to the use of speech. Timing is also important when it comes to speaking (15:23, 25:11, 27:14). The wise give careful thought to their answers (15:28, 18:13, 29:20) and are cautious when to speak (17:27). The wise are also open to listening and taking advice and correction (12:15, 19:20).

- Conflict management and resolution

Much of the advice in Proverbs concerns how to live wisely in a way that avoids problems and promotes success (Longman 2015:480). The teachings in Proverbs promote social harmony and condemn sources of conflict such as impatience (15:18), mocking (22:10), drunkenness (23:29–30), greed (28:25), and anger (29:22). Love (10:12), patience (15:18) and controlling one's temper (19:11) are amongst the antidotes of conflict. Some proverbs even advise overlooking an offence in the avoidance of conflict (10:12; 15:18; 17:14).

- Parenting

Proverbs portrays the family as the locus for instruction (4:3–4, 6:20, 23:22). Parents have the duty of training their children (22:6) through both words of instruction (30:17) and godly conduct (20:7). They are also responsible for disciplining children for their own good (23:13–14).

7.6.4.3. Ecclesiastes 4:7–12

Ecclesiastes 4 deals with the four problematic areas of life which make life enigmatic. Isolation in life and work is one of them. The Teacher observes how unfulfilling work and wealth is without community (v.8). The Teacher then makes a comparison between isolation and companionship by listing four advantages “two” have over “one”: (i) two have a better return on their labour, (ii) two provide each other assistance when the other falls, (iii) two can help each other keep warm, and (iv) two can better ward off attackers. These advantages are easily associated with travel, where travelling in pairs was safer against the dangers that came with travelling in the ANE (Bartholomew, 2009:166). The practical advantages of family and communal life are that hardships are faced together. There is help available when needed, as well as the comfort that comes with another's presence.

7.6.4.4. Song of Songs 8:6–7

Song of Songs depicts the speech of a man and a woman expressing their love and desire for each other. Occasionally, the voice is that of the women of Jerusalem. The poem portrays mutual love and desire from both the point of view of a man and a woman. The poem reaches its climax

in vv.6-7. In these verses, the woman makes the Song's only didactic pronouncement about the power of love. Unlike elsewhere in the song, she does not speak specifically about the love between her and her lover but speaks about love itself (Exum, 2005:323). She personifies love as a force contending with cosmic powers. She compares love to death and a raging fire. Love is as unyielding as death and the grave. Love is also described as a consuming fire that cannot be quenched. Love is a passion synonymous with jealousy. Love has an overriding value over material wealth.

7.6.4.5. Towards Premarital counselling

PMC drawing from the poetic books emphasises the importance of marital fidelity. It teaches couples about the exclusivity of marriage and warns against the dangers of extramarital affairs. Proverbs provide principles for healthy communication and conflict management that are key for marital success. PMC based on the book of Proverbs, also empowers couples for their role as parents. PMC drawing from the poetic books also creates awareness about the benefits of companionship and mutual desire, ensuring that couples enter marriage understanding what they stand to gain and the importance of protecting it.

7.6.5. Gospels

Jesus' teachings on marriage, divorce and sexuality elevate the sanctity of marriage to its original divine design. Below is a brief analysis of principles relevant to marriage preparation located in the Gospels.

7.6.5.1. Matthew 19:4-6 (also Mark 10:6-9 and Luke 16:18)

In this chapter, Jesus is engaged by some Pharisees who wish to test his understanding of divorce law, wanting to prove that Jesus contradicts Moses. They seem to think that Moses commands divorce (Deut. 24:1), but Jesus does not deal with Deut. 24 but instead focuses on Gen. 2:24, placing the creation narrative over the ad hoc legislation of Deut. 24. Divorce is a result of hard-heartedness and is inconsistent with the original institution of marriage reflected at the beginning. Gen. 2:24 as God's original purpose for marriage, therefore, overrides the Mosaic concession for human sin (Turner, 2008:459). The gist of Jesus' teaching is that monogamous marriage is normative and that the oneness in marriage prohibits divorce. Marriage is permanent unless ruined by infidelity. This passage reprises his previous teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:31-32).

7.6.5.2. Towards Premarital Counselling

Because Jesus' teachings and comments on marriage draw from the Marriage Text, his teachings in the gospels establish the theological basis for marriage similar to Gen. 2. Marriage is again described as a divine institution characterised by monogamy, oneness, and permanency. PMC drawing from the gospels, therefore, prepares couples for a sacred, lifelong commitment marked by intimacy and exclusivity.

7.6.6. Pauline letters

Paul's letters offer ethical and practical instructions for Christian living and interpersonal relationships. His teachings on marriage, sexual ethics, and household roles provide material for couples preparing for marriage. Below is a brief analysis of principles relevant to marriage preparation located in the Pauline letters.

7.6.6.1. Corinthians 7:2-5

As indicated in section 3.4.2, this text is not intended to teach theology on sexuality, marriage and divorce but rather is Paul's response to a set of issues around marriage that were threatening to disrupt the church in Corinth (Wanamaker, 2005:839). In his response to the Corinthians, Paul presents both the man and the woman as sexual actors (Wanamaker, 2005:843) by employing reciprocal language, arguing that spouses have a mutual sexual obligation. Paul encourages an active sex life in marriage and discourages sexual abstinence in marriage, which was deemed virtuous at that time. Paul commands spouses not to abstain from sex because marriage brings sexual obligations, and neither spouse has authority or the right to withhold without consent. He asserts that husbands and wives have authority over one another's bodies and commands that they not deprive one another. The yielding of one's authority over their body to their spouse, however, does not mean a spouse can do to the other whatever they want irrespective of what that spouse wishes (Verbrugge & Harris, 2008:126). Christian marriage has no room for any spouse to seek their own way selfishly. Spouses willingly give up self-determination to pursue pleasing their partner (Garland, 2003:337). Paul therefore instructs that abstinence not be imposed on a spouse but that it be a mutual decision, limited to a short period, to avert sexual immorality.

7.6.6.2. Eph. 5:21-33 (also Colossians 3:18-19)

In this passage, Paul gives specific instructions to husbands and wives, outlining their reciprocal responsibilities within the framework of Christ's covenant relationship with the Church. Marriage is therefore elevated beyond a human relationship to a spiritual covenant ordained by God. v.21

stands as a superscription to the entire household code, meaning all relations in the family including that of husband and wife should be governed by mutual submission in reverence to Christ (Maisiri, 2015:39; Mwit & Dueck, 2006:179; Vorster, 2008:477,). The wives' submission is viewed as part of her commitment to the Lord (Thielman, 2010:486). In contrast, the husband's headship is patterned after Christ's headship over the church. In this context, headship does not imply dominance or superiority but instead expresses the idea of servant leadership (Unachukwu, 2024:8). Paul concludes by reaffirming Gen. 2:24, reiterating the profound unity of marriage.

7.6.6.3. Towards premarital counselling

PMC rooted in Paul's writings, teaches on the mutual sexual obligation in marriage. Premarital couples are instructed that in marriage, a spouse yields authority over their body to their spouse and cannot impose abstinence. Short periods of abstinence should be agreed upon mutually. PMC drawing from Paul's letters also defines the husband and wife's reciprocal responsibilities within the framework of Christ's covenant relationship with the Church. It equips couples with practical guidance for navigating sexual intimacy and marital roles, helping Christians build a satisfying, Christ-centred marriage.

7.6.7. General Epistles

Peter's first epistle contains a section providing instructions to wives and husbands concerning their roles and how they ought to live them out in a God-honouring manner.

7.6.7.1. Peter 3:1-7

Peter addresses spouses to provide clarity on how their newly found identity in Christ should affect their relationship with their unbelieving spouse. The instructions to wives and husbands appear in a unit of discourse exhorting Christians to live lives that glorify God and that do not give Christ a bad name among unbelievers. Different to Paul's description of the wife's submission, the wife's submission to her own husband is here motivated by evangelistic intent. The unbelieving husband may be won to Christ by observing his wife's good behaviour, which is a result of her Christian beliefs. Drawing from Jewish tradition, Sarah is presented as the paradigm of submission (Jobes, 2005:253-254). In his exhortation to husbands, Peter calls for respect for the wife without differentiating between a believing and an unbelieving wife. Peter, referring to the wife as a 'coheir of the gracious gift of life' indicates that the wife should be treated as a sister in Christ. The description of the wife as a 'weaker vessel' refers to a woman's physical weakness relative to a man's strength (Jobes, 2005:259). Peter further states that God will not hear husbands who unduly assert authority over their wives.

7.6.7.2. Towards premarital counselling

Although Peter's letter emphasises the evangelistic or apologetic value of the wife's submission, and premarital couples would have already been discouraged from marrying an unbeliever during proximate marriage preparation, PMC drawing from 1 Peter 3 teaches about the significance of the wife's submission as glorifying God. PMC rooted in this epistle, also teaches the husband to treat his wife with respect and consideration. It equips couples with an understanding of the character and conduct required to build a God-honouring marriage.

7.7. Summary and conclusion

This chapter focused on a theological reflection of PMC by analysing biblical literature. Firstly, the grammatical-historical approach was defined as the selected exegetical method. What followed was an overview of marriage preparation in Bible times. It emerged that marriage and preparation thereof were a family affair in both Ancient Israel and in the first-century Greco-Roman world. In androcentric patriarchal societies, marriages were arranged by male family members, and marriage preparation was not only during the betrothal stage but also part of the gendered upbringing of children. More focus was placed on preparing the girl child for marriage because it was the daughter who would leave her family upon marriage to occupy the demanding role of a wife as a manager of the household, and because girls were married off younger than their male counterparts. The bearing this overview has on PMC is the understanding that marriage preparation should reflect an understanding and accommodation of social and cultural marital norms and expectations of the context in which the premarital couple exist. It also emphasises the key role parents play in modelling marital roles, thus informing their children's perceptions of marital roles and responsibilities.

The greater part of the chapter was devoted to the analysis of the few biblical texts that relate to marriage preparation. The analysis of Gen. 24 revealed the understanding of marriage as a family affair and the need to acknowledge the family's place in marriage formation. This is especially significant in the African context, where marriage is a union beyond two people but involves their families too. Rebekah's agreement to leave her country points to the importance of couples discussing and reaching an agreement concerning the marriage conditions before its finalisation. Agreeing on living conditions is especially significant in the African context because of practices such as *ukukotiza*. The narrative also points to how PMC should create an opportunity to examine and confirm readiness for marriage. It emphasises that PMC is not just about teaching couples' knowledge and skills, but evaluating the knowledge and skills for marriage gained in remote marriage preparation.

From the analysis of Gen. 27, the significance of affection in a marital relationship is realised. The couple's affection should not be dismissed as infatuation but should be used as an opportunity to teach about *agape* love. This is especially significant in a time where the marital relationship is no longer strictly a family arrangement, but a personal relationship characterised by love, intimacy and romance. Jacob's example also serves to encourage couples to remain chaste even though they are physically attracted to each other.

The analysis of Ps. 45 points to how the psalm serves as a caution against the teaching of patriarchal norms and values in PMC. It is a reminder to teach about the wife's submission and husband's authority in a way that reflects the equality between husband and wife in being created in the image of God.

The analysis of 1 Cor. 7 revealed the need to affirm the goodness of marriage in PMC. Just as Paul affirms marriage in the face of sexual asceticism, pastoral premarital counsellors should affirm marriage in urban African society where contemporary attitudes towards marriage and divorce can discourage those pursuing marriage. Paul's repeated reference to his personal decisions, preferences, and recommendations points to how personal experiences can be used as a source of knowledge in preparing couples for marriage. In the chapter, Paul warns engaged couples about the affliction they will face once married, pointing to how preparation should create awareness about the challenges of marriage. PMC should allow couples the opportunity to know each other better. The analysis also revealed that PMC should help couples understand the value of faith in their relationship and guide them in balancing their devotion to God and each other.

The chapter concludes with an overview of Biblical principles relevant to PMC. And with guidelines on marriage and family life, helpful for marriage preparation, were extrapolated from bible passages. From the Pentateuch, a theological and ethical framework for marriage is established. That is, marriage is a sacred institution established by God. It is a heterosexual and monogamous lifelong commitment marked by intimacy, exclusivity, equality and a shared purpose as image bearers. Such a framework is helpful in helping premarital couples reach a biblical understanding of marriage.

By taking caution from the tales which illustrate the detrimental effects of marrying outside of God's prescribed law, PMC draws from the narratives of the historical books and encourages couples to cultivate their faith and devotion to God for the strengthening of their union. This is supported by the Covenant Attachment model used in this study. PMC drawing from the book of Ruth in particular encourages the establishment of a healthy relationship between in-laws. It dismisses the normalised rivalry between women in pairs, especially in the African setting, and challenges women in the family to build a bond centred around love, selflessness and loyalty.

The marriage metaphors in the prophetic books emphasise marriage as a covenant centred around faithfulness. PMC drawing from prophetic books challenges couples to approach marriage with a profound sense of sacredness and seriousness as a covenant. This is especially significant for couples in contemporary society, where marriage is perceived as a personal relationship aimed at personal fulfilment, and where there is a greater social acceptance of divorce.

PMC drawing from the poetic books teaches couples about the exclusivity of marriage and warns against the dangers of extramarital affairs. It also educates on principles for healthy communication and conflict management that are key for marital success. PMC drawing from the poetic books creates awareness about the benefits of companionship and mutual desire, and empowers couples in their role as parents.

Jesus' teachings on marriage in the gospels draw from the Marriage Text and thus reiterate the theological framework for marriage. Similar to PMC drawing from Gen. 2, PMC draws from the gospels preparing couples for a sacred, lifelong commitment marked by intimacy and exclusivity.

By emphasising the mutual sexual obligation in marriage and defining marital roles within the framework of Christ's covenant relationship with the Church, PMC rooted in Paul's writings equips couples with practical guidance for navigating sexual intimacy and marital roles. Thus, helping couples in building satisfying, Christ-centred marriages.

Peter's exhortation to wives teaches submission from an evangelical perspective, showing the significance of the wife's submission as glorifying God. It also teaches the husband to treat his wife with respect and consideration. Thus, equipping couples with an understanding of the character and conduct required in building a God-honouring marriage.

CHAPTER 8 A PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO GUIDE PREMARITAL COUNSELLING

8.1. Introduction

This research project is a practical theological study due to its focus on the religious dimension of the praxis of PMC. Thus, this chapter explores the meaning of practical theology and how a practical theological approach is instrumental in informing ministry practice. A model of practice for PMC in black South African churches is also introduced.

8.2. A concise understanding of practical theology

Practical theology relates to the interaction of theory and praxis with the key task of developing effective modes for Christian practice (Osmer, 2008). Practical Theology is the branch of theology that investigates human experience using a practice-theory-practice model as suggested by Browning (1993). There is, however, no straight line from theory to practice (Magezi, 2019a:119). Praxis is the object of study and reflection in practical theology. Praxis refers to how religion is lived. Thus, practical theology's focus is on reflecting theologically on human experience. Practical Theology seeks to understand present praxis and its context. Practical Theology is concerned with understanding lived religion "from its own characteristics and in light of its own understandings and intrinsic normativity" (Ganzevoort, 2009:6). Scripture is therefore explored to determine what it implies about praxis in the present context. It then attempts to develop a theory of action to guide ministry practice. Practical theology is practical. It is meant to be lived and theological because it is rooted in Christian Scripture (Draper et al., 2023:30). It is the infusion of faith into practical life. This 'hermeneutics of lived religion' distinguishes practical theology from other theological disciplines as well as from the social sciences of religion (Ganzevoort, 2009:1). Practical theology focuses on praxis due to its roots in three historically different types of theology, namely: pastoral theology, empirical theology, and public theology (Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014:98). Tracy (1981) articulates how each of these styles targets a particular audience. The church is the audience of pastoral theology, academy is the audience of empirical theology, and society is the audience of public theology (Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014:98). Thus, practical theology deals with the praxis of pastoral ministry, the life of the church, the life of the church in the world, religious/moral life in the world, and human spiritual/existential experience (Maddox, 1991:162). Practical theological practice is concerned with answering four questions: (1) What is going on? (2) Why is it going on? (3) What ought to be going on? and (4) How might we respond? (Osmer, 2008:4). Responses to these questions define the core tasks that should be addressed

by practical theology: (1) the descriptive-empirical task, (2) the interpretive task, (3) the normative task, and (4) the pragmatic task (Osmer, 2008:4).

Recently, there has been an emphasis on practical theology being reflexive. Reflexivity challenges practical theologians to ensure they are explicit about how their locations and realities inform their reflections (Magezi, 2023:1). The turn to reflexivity represents an attention to the contextual nature of practical theological knowledge. This study is therefore grounded in African practical theology.

As previously mentioned, the current study bears significance on the pastoral care and counselling aspect of practical theology. Pastoral care refers to helping acts by persons in ministry, while pastoral counselling specifically refers to pastoral caring in the form of dialogue and communication (Magezi, 2007:656). Pastoral counselling “functions on entry level where other professions such as psychology counselling function” (Magezi, 2016:2). The primary functions of pastoral care include healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling (Nanthambwe, 2024:2). Besides relieving and healing distress, pastoral care also aims to prevent distress (Lartey, 2003:30). This is the scope of pastoral care under which this study falls as PMC is aimed at avoiding marital problems before they arise.

8.2.1. An African Practical Theological Approach

Magezi (2019a) comprehensively defines African practical theology as “a theological approach that seeks to understand, communicate and live out life of faith within a context where the individual exists within struggles arising from blackness and African geographical location. The theology goes beyond reaction and referencing of Western theological patterns to engage holistic African situations. The theology is characterised by reflecting on ways of living, understanding and communicating God in a postcolonial African context that is constantly changing” (Magezi, 2019a:131). Based on this definition, practical theology in Africa is firstly a theological task entailing reflecting and discerning God in matters of life with a pastoral focus (Magezi, 2019a:131). Pastoral care is thus the greatest manifestation of African practical theology and theology. Secondly, African practical theology is concerned with understanding, sharing and living out the Christian faith (Magezi, 2019a:131). African practical theology is thirdly involved with the struggle born out of blackness and the persistent aftereffects of colonialism as well as the postcolonial position of White Africans (Magezi, 2019a:131). This aspect of African practical theology necessitates a public practical theological approach. Fourthly, practical theology in Africa calls for consciousness and engagement of the complexity of life in Africa. Lastly, African practical theology demands consciousness concerning the opportunities and challenges of post-colonial

Africa (Magezi, 2019a:132). Hence, Larney (2022) labels practical theology in Africa as 'postcolonial theology'.

African practical theology is focused on lived religion in pastoral ministry rather than intellectual or disciplinary reflection in universities (Magezi, 2019a:117). "Lived religion exists and is publicly practised within a religious plural context where the interaction of Christianity and indigenous religions is constantly negotiated, and positions exchanged" (Magezi, 2023:8). The lives of Africans are influenced by the interaction of religion and culture. Postcolonial practical epistemology is therefore intrinsically variegated and plural, recognising its hybridity and participation in multifaceted dialogues and practices (Larney, 2022:672). Postcolonial practical discourses and practices are "always ambiguous and at times contradictory, full of contestation and controversy, wary of over-privileging any one form over all others" (Larney, 2022:672). African practical theology assists Christians in negotiating and navigating through tensions such as those between Christianity and indigenous African religious practices; indigenous culture and Western culture; individualism and collectivism, among other tensions. These tensions mean African Christians live life 'in between' (Magezi, 2023:9). African practical theology is dynamic because the issues it deals with are constantly changing. Its analysis, therefore, reflects time, change and movement (Larney, 2022:672).

8.2.2. A Public Practical Theological Approach

As stated above, African practical theology necessitates a public practical theological approach. Practical theology becomes public when it focuses on the broader issues of society rather than merely focusing on the church community (Magezi, 2020:68, Nanthambwe, 2024:10). This dialogue between Christian tradition and social issues benefits both the church and society. Public practical theology recognises the need for practical theology to engage with broader social issues and is corrective to the individualistic, parochial and inaccessible practical theology which does not engage with society (Magezi, 2019b:4). Public theology is interdisciplinary and dialogical, challenging and refuting the bipolarity and division of the secular and sacred (Magezi, 2019b:4). Public practical theology involves ensuring that society is an audience of practical theology, that everyday concerns and issues are included in reflection and that a dialogue between theology and contemporary culture is facilitated (Osmer & Schweitzer, 2003:218). Public practical theology grapples with "the complexities of faith in the contemporary world, seeking to provide meaningful insights into the myriad of challenges individuals face" (Nanthambwe & Magezi, 2024:1).

8.3. Practical theology as a framework for premarital counselling in the African Christian context

This understanding of practical theology challenges the ministerial practice of PMC in Africa to, on the one hand, be deeply immersed in the biblical text to determine the theological concepts for marriage and preparation thereof as reflected in the biblical analysis of PMC presented in Chapter 7. On the other hand, the ministerial practice of PMC in Africa is challenged to be immersed in the contextual realities of African Christians as reflected in the empirical findings of this study.

The study analysed the context of PMC in an African Christian context by outlining the praxis (lived experiences) and theory (literature and biblical texts) of PMC in African churches in South Africa. The analysis has revealed that both African indigenous and Christian epistemologies influence PMC amongst African Christians. Literature and empirical findings reflect the ministerial contextual realities as (1) the amalgamation of African cultural marriage preparation customs and Christian marriage preparation traditions, (2) the lack of structure in the counselling process (3) inadequate training to conduct PMC (4) competing value systems between traditional patriarchal values and modern egalitarian values, amongst other issues. These ministerial contextual realities and the biblical principles about marriage challenge clergy to engage in ongoing critical reflection on, among other things, the conceptualisation of Christian marriage and the integration of cultural and biblical epistemologies. Practical theology thus provides tools for clergy to function in a complex reality. Clergy therefore need to: (1) continuously perform double exegesis between context and Bible text; (2) critically reflect on theory and praxis given real life marital situations; (3) apply reflexivity regarding the marriage situation; (4) appreciate the need to integrate contextual norms to ensure the epistemologies jointly inform the premarital couple; and (5) sensitively approach reality of epistemological tension between biblical principles about marriage and cultural knowledge.

The implication for ministry practice is a design for premarital programs that is context-sensitive, being sensitive to: (i) African epistemologies and value systems, (ii) Christian epistemologies and value systems, and (iii) modern value systems. The need for PMC to be sensitive to the influence of modernity is due to the context being dynamic. The investigation has shown how the African Christian context has shifted over the years under the influence of Western culture and civilisation, urbanisation and modernity. For example, marital roles have evolved. The rise in the recognition of women's rights, together with women's education and participation in the labour force, has affected attitudes towards the role and status of women in the family. Thus, contemporary households are organised according to more egalitarian models of marriage instead of in a

patriarchal hierarchy. A context-sensitive design for PMC must therefore reflect time, change and movement.

Marriage preparation is one of the few interventions which link social issues with religion (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010:253). Marriage, being a public institution, gives rise to the need for ministerial practice to engage with society. An evident picture emerges from the literature showing how South Africa is facing a marital crisis. Divorce is a prevalent issue both within and outside the four walls of the church. The investigation established the various ways through which divorce threatens social institutions and how marriage preservation is significant from a social, cultural and theological perspective. The study also verifies PMC as a method utilised to enhance marriage to prevent the risk of divorce. The marriage preparation efforts of ministerial practice can therefore help serve society, especially black Africans, who are the majority population and occupy the position of the highest number of divorces when compared to other population groups (Stats SA, 2025a:19). By offering their insights on marriage and preparation thereof to the public, clergy can contribute towards marriage stability beyond the borders of the church.

8.4. Model of practice for premarital counselling for African Christians in South Africa

Osmer's last task, the pragmatic task, involves drawing on all the previous tasks of practical theology to offer models of practice and rules of art. "Models of practice offer leaders a general picture of the field in which they are acting and ways they might shape this field toward desired goals. Rules of art are more specific guidelines about how to carry out particular actions or practices" (Osmer, 2008: 176). The insights provided by this study contribute to the contextualization of PMC in South Africa. Study insights were thus used to develop a model that can be implemented to inform ministry practice with regard to PMC in an African Christian context. Lived experience (praxis) analysed in Chapters 2 to 6 and biblical Scripture (theory) analysed in Chapter 7 are combined to offer one inclusive model (Figure 6) for clergy providing PMC for African Christians.

The model is intended to provide a framework that clergy can use to design their own comprehensive PMC program. The model is not meant to replace existing programs where they exist, but is a tool meant to improve existing programs and enhance practice. The model is designed to be fluid, allowing for it to be changed overtime. This is because of the understanding the African context in which marriage is lived out is constantly changing. The model is not exhaustive but gives the layout to efficiently perform PMC in an African Christian context.

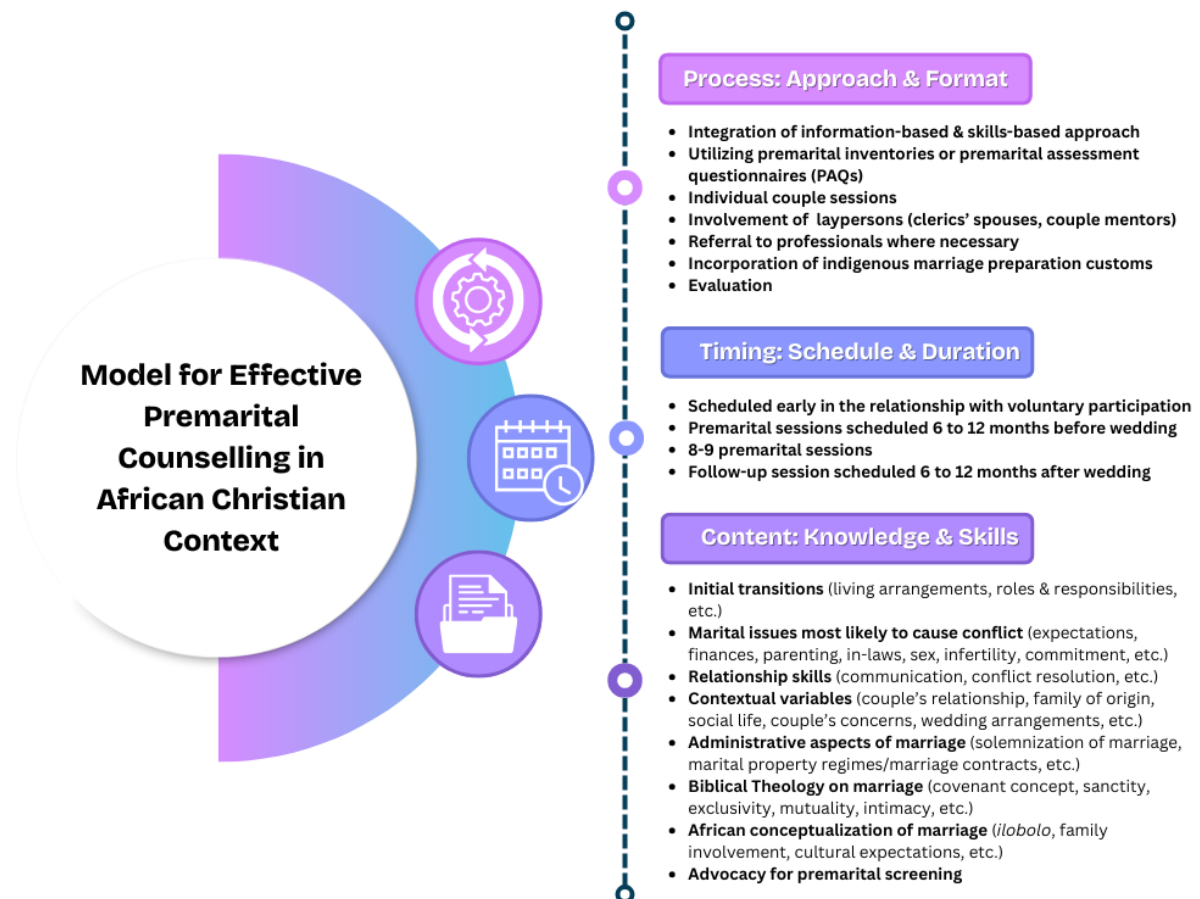


Figure 6: A model for effective premarital counselling in the African Christian Context

The research findings and discussion established the need for clergy to adopt a structured approach to PMC. The model is developed to meet this need, especially considering that the lack of a structured program results in disparities in the quality and effectiveness of PMC (Moeti et al., 2024:4). Meta-analyses and survey research have established the effectiveness of PMC in stabilising marriage and preventing divorce. However, the effectiveness of PMC in improving marital stability and preventing divorce rests on three aspects as identified by Giblin (1994): process, timing and content. The model is based on these three determinants of effective PMC and is aimed at meeting the main goals of PMC as outlined by Stahmann (2000). These include easing the transition from single to married life, increasing couple stability and satisfaction, increasing couple intimacy, enhancing communication skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, increasing attachment and commitment to the relationship (Stahmann, 2000:105). Each element of the model is described below:

8.4.1. Process

The first determinant of an effective PMC process refers to *how* the PMC takes place. It concerns the approach that is used and the format in which PMC is delivered. For PMC to be effective, it should assume the following approach and format:

8.4.1.1. Information- and skills-based

Of the two types of PMC, information-based and skills-based, findings confirmed that PMC in religious settings is largely information-based. This is the least effective of the two types, as research shows skills-based marriage preparation to be more helpful in influencing marital outcomes (Wilmoth, 2015:106). Pastoral PMC is, however, not only aimed at relationship enhancement but is also aimed at teaching a theology on marriage; thus, it should maintain its information basis. It is, however, recommended that the information-based approach be fused with a skills-based approach for maximum effectiveness. The approach should therefore not only transfer knowledge, but also teach skills (e.g. communication skills, conflict resolution, problem-solving skills).

8.4.1.2. Incorporating premarital assessment inventories

Because premarital couples expect to spend time together and learn more about each other through PMC (, Murray 2006:70; Stahmann 2000:111), approaches that help couples dialogue with each other are perceived to be more useful when compared to approaches that simply lecture (Giblin, 1994:148). Premarital inventories or PAQs are helpful in achieving this since they are intended to facilitate a dialogue between a couple (Williams, 2011:314). Other advantages of using premarital inventories or PAQs include promoting couple-involvement, the couple's investment in the process, and eliciting information more efficiently (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010:255). Clergy are advised only to use empirically supported premarital inventories or PAQs.

8.4.1.3. Individual couple sessions

PMC can either be conducted in a group format or an individual couple format. Findings revealed that an individual couple format is more advantageous. It allows the counsellor to focus attention and energy on one couple instead of having to deal with group dynamics; the topics the counsellor addresses can be personalised to meet the couple's specific needs and context; and the couple can focus on their issues without being side-tracked by the issues of others (Stahmann, 2000:112).

8.4.1.4. Involvement of lay persons

PMC facilitated by a team has been found to be most helpful (Stahmann, 2000:112). The empirical findings of this study revealed that clerics conduct PMC together with their spouse and that married individuals would appreciate the involvement of mentor couples. The participation of the cleric's spouse not only fosters the couple's openness and honesty during the sessions but also allows for individual counselling at some point during the counselling process. The model thus recommends the involvement of additional laypersons, such as mentors, in the PMC process. It is advised that the lay persons be oriented about their role and the program used.

8.4.1.5. Referrals to a professional

Clergy need to be self-aware concerning their limitations and refer when complex issues present, requiring expertise they lack. The model proposes that clergy either refer to or collaborate with professionals like therapists, physicians, financial advisors, notaries, etc. when the need arises.

8.4.1.6. Incorporation of indigenous marriage preparation customs

It was evident from the research findings that African Christians uphold the African communal duty of preparing young couples for marriage. Hence, the African marriage preparation practice of *ukuyalwa* is prevalent in black churches. The model proposed that such practices be upheld and enhanced to meet the needs of contemporary African Christians better. Indigenous PMC may also need to be corrected, especially where it perpetuates harmful gendered conceptualisations of marriage, which research has found to fuel GBVF (Chisale, 2018:1; Maisiri, 2015:19; Zungu et al., 2024:18). It may therefore be necessary to identify and train elders who are key role players during *ukuyalwa*, guiding them in formulating an agenda for the content of their session as well as creating awareness around harmful conceptualisations of marriage.

8.4.1.7 Evaluation

To assess effectiveness, the model proposes that couples evaluate the PMC they received following completion. Couples should provide feedback concerning their satisfaction with the program's content and its delivery. They may also suggest improvements.

8.4.2. Timing

The second determinant of effective PMC, timing, refers to *when* PMC takes place. It concerns when PMC is scheduled and the duration of the PMC. For PMC to be effective, it should adhere to the following:

8.4.2.1. Scheduled early in the relationship with voluntary participation

The timing of PMC needs to take into account the possibility of re-evaluating a relationship or a decision to delay or cancel the marriage. Research suggests that PMC is most beneficial when obtained early in the relationship (Stahmann, 2000:112). The findings revealed that the onset of PMC varies, but that the beginning of *ilobolo* negotiations is a determining factor. The model advocates for PMC to begin during courtship, prior engagement or *ilobolo* negotiations commence where possible. This ensures that the couple is able to examine, confirm or alter their decision to marry without any pressure.

The perceived helpfulness of PMC is positively linked to voluntary participation (Duncan et al., 2010:625). Correlating with this, the research findings established a relation between mandatory PMC and a lack of commitment from couples. The model therefore suggests that participation in PMC be voluntary yet strongly encouraged.

8.4.2.2. Sessions scheduled six to twelve months before the wedding

PMC should not take place within close proximity to the wedding/solemnization of the marriage, as this impacts its usefulness. Research shows that when PMC is less beneficial when it takes place within two months of the wedding (Russel & Lyster, 1992; Stahmann, 2000; Williams, 2011). Concurring with Mwititi and Dueck (2006), the model recommends that PMC commence at least twelve months before the wedding, and at most, six months before the wedding.

8.4.2.3. Between eight and nine sessions

The perceived helpfulness of PMC is positively related to the length of the program (Duncan et al., 2010:625). Research suggests that PMC is most beneficial when the couple attends eight to nine sessions, as more sessions do not necessarily prove to be more helpful (Williams, 2011:320).

8.4.2.4. Follow-up session scheduled 6 to 12 months after the wedding

Research has shown that the postnuptial session is an essential part of PMC (Stahmann, 2000:112). The six-to-twelve-month period after the wedding presents a window of opportunity for couples to learn and practice marital coping skills when they really need them (Giblin, 1994:148; Moeti et al., 2024:5).

8.4.3. Content

The third and last determinant of effective PMC, content, refers to *what* is covered during PMC. It revolves around the knowledge and skills shared during PMC. The research findings found that

because most clergy use an unstructured approach to PMC, the content varies according to the clergy's views, experiences and doctrinal influences. For PMC to be effective, it should at least cover the following categories of topics:

8.4.3.1. Initial transitions

Because PMC is aimed at easing the transition from single to married, the findings illustrate that PMC content should focus on dealing with the initial transitions of adjusting to married life. These include topics such as living arrangements, marital roles and responsibilities, etc.

8.4.3.2. Marital issues most likely to cause conflict

Generally, the content consists of topics that address marital issues which are likely to cause conflict in the relationship, such as expectations, finances, parenting, in-laws, sex, infertility, commitment, etc.

8.4.3.3. Relationship skills

PMC is helpful when it teaches couples skills such as communication, conflict resolution, problem-solving etc. It is therefore crucial for clergy to incorporate exercises in their PMC.

8.4.3.4. Contextual variables

Couples do not value all topics treated during PMC equally since the context of each couple's relationship differs. To be helpful, the content of PMC therefore needs to consider the couple's unique situation. The individualised feedback that premarital inventories and PAQs provide makes it easier for facilitators to focus on specific issues that are relevant for the couple. These can be specific issues in light of the couple's relationship, couple's concerns, their family of origin, social life etc. Hence, we reiterate the importance of utilising premarital inventories and PAQs in the PMC process.

8.4.3.5. Administrative aspects of marriage

Marriage is legally sanctioned and is constitutionally recognised and safeguarded in South Africa. However, the findings revealed that the clergy's strict Christian conceptualisation of marriage limits the PMC content, neglecting very crucial issues related to the legal aspects of marriage. The model therefore recommends that topics regarding the solemnisation of marriage in South Africa and marriage contracts be discussed. There should be a thorough explanation of the different marital property regimes, their implications, and the requirements of each. Couples

should be made aware of the various marriage registration pathways and the importance of verifying whether their officiant is legally qualified to solemnize their marriage.

8.4.3.6. Biblical theology on marriage

The study established that pastoral PMC is not only aimed at relationship enhancement but also at the teaching of a theology on marriage. This aspect of pastoral PMC is directly linked to relationship wellbeing. The findings, however, revealed that the poor interpretation of biblical texts leads to the promotion of dangerous masculine and feminine conceptualisations of marriage, which are detrimental to the health of a relationship. It is therefore imperative for clergy to responsibly teach a sound theology on marriage. This study presents Gen. 2:18-24 as foundational to a biblical theology on marriage. As the origin and prototype of marriage, it presents God's ideal for marriage. PMC should discuss, amongst other things, the sanctity, exclusivity, mutuality, and intimacy of marriage. It is also important for the concept of marriage as a covenant to be explored, as it motivates couples to strive to display behaviours portrayed in God's covenant relationship with his people.

8.4.3.7. African conceptualisation of marriage

African Christians live out marriage in an African reality, making it important for their preparation for marriage to encompass an African conceptualization of marriage. The content should therefore give guidance on matters such as *ilobolo*, family involvement, cultural expectations, etc.

8.4.3.8. Advocacy for premarital screening

Premarital screening is one of the preventative measures that a couple can take to avoid health problems that can result from marriage. Research, however, shows how CHTC remains under-utilised by couples in sub-Saharan Africa despite its multiple access points (Hampanda et al., 2023:2). It is therefore important to encourage couples to seek premarital screening. Clergy are, however, cautioned against making premarital screening mandatory as this might be considered discriminatory and a violation of human rights.

As previously mentioned, the model is fluid. This allows it to accommodate the wide range of Christian denominations in South Africa with their varying marriage doctrines and practices. The implementation of the model will however be affected by the capacity of and resources available to each congregation. In anticipation of low-resource settings, the following minimal viable pathway is proposed:

- Information- and skills-based approach.
- Voluntary participation.
- Sessions scheduled six to twelve months before the wedding.
- Six couple sessions conducted by clergy with the aid of his/her spouse, and/or a mentor couple before the wedding.
- One follow-up session scheduled six to twelve months before the wedding.
- *Ukuyalwa* session conducted by elders who have been prepared in terms of relevancy and sensitivity.
- The content that cannot be accommodated in the sessions can be prepared for self-reading.
- Evaluation by couple providing feedback of their experience.

8.5. Conclusion

The premise of practical theology is critical in influencing PMC in black South African churches. Practical theology offers a framework, together with social and theological systems, to innovatively design and perform PMC. Practical theology provides a framework to assist African Christians in negotiating and navigating through the various tensions and complexities that come with being both African and Christian by seeking to integrate theological and indigenous epistemologies. This is of great significance as the study has established that the widely used programs and inventories used in PMC originate in the United States and do not deal with the realities of the African Christian context. Thus, practical theology offers a conceptual and methodological system to correct, improve, practice, and provide ongoing adaptation of PMC to ensure relevance. Thus, this chapter is the culmination of the current study, responding to the question posed by the pragmatic task of practical theology: 'how might we respond?' Guided by a practical theological approach, I have answered this question by designing a model that can be utilised to when conducting premarital counselling in the African Christian Context.

The next chapter draws the study to a close by outlining the key findings, conclusions and recommendations.

9. KEY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings, conclusions, and recommendations derived from this study. The research was primarily driven by the central question: What are the experiences of married African Christians with premarital counselling as they prepare for stable marriages?

The following specific clarifying questions elucidated this main question:

- a. What is the nature and content of premarital counselling among African Christians in South Africa?
- b. Why are African Christians in South Africa being prepared for marriage through this approach?
- c. How does the currently utilised premarital counselling approach address African Christians' marriage needs and realities?
- d. What is the theological understanding of marriage within the pluralistic South African context that can be discerned to inform effective pastoral premarital counselling for African Christians in South Africa?
- e. What strategies can be developed to enhance the theory and practice of pastoral premarital counselling for African Christians in South Africa?

To thoroughly answer the central question, the study aimed to explore and understand the premarital counselling experiences of African Christians in South Africa. This central aim was supported by five sub-objectives, corresponding to each of the clarifying questions:

- a. To assess the nature and content of premarital counselling among African Christians in South Africa.
- b. To understand the approach currently utilised in preparing African Christians in South Africa for marriage.
- c. To evaluate how the current premarital counselling approach addresses African Christians' marriage needs and realities.
- d. To explore the theological understanding of marriage within the pluralistic South African context that can inform effective pastoral premarital counselling for African Christians.
- e. To identify strategies that can be developed to enhance the theory and practice of pastoral premarital counselling for African Christians.

Accordingly, the presentation of findings and conclusions in this chapter follows the structure of these specific research questions, which guided each facet of this investigation.

9.2. Key Research Findings

9.2.1. Research objective one: to assess the nature and content of premarital counselling among African Christians in South Africa.

This section responds directly to the specific research question: What is the nature and content of PMC among African Christians in South Africa? The study revealed the following:

9.2.1.1. Role players in premarital counselling in the church

The study revealed that clergy are central in preparing couples for marriage in their church communities. In most churches, PMC is a prerequisite before marriage and it is the pastor's duty to perform. Thus, this role is enshrined in the pastor's ministerial role, making it somewhat mandatory for pastors despite the lack of training for pastors to fulfil this role. Despite this seemingly obvious role of pastors as premarital counsellors, the study findings revealed some contradictions. For instance, a significant number of married participants did not undergo pastoral PMC. Instead, the church and broader community are found to play a more active role in preparing couples for marriage. Thus, the study reveals gaps regarding the pastoral and communal role in PMC. Firstly, there is a gap between the assumed pastoral role in PMC versus the prevailing reality, which indicates a disconnect between expected ideal situations and prevailing practice. Secondly, there is an assumption of pastors as default premarital counsellors with little skills verification and monitoring of the efficacy of PMC practices. This results in an inconsistency in the PMC provided by clergy and leads to couples feeling the need to supplement pastoral PMC with more 'professional' PMC. Thus, the involvement of clergy in PMC, at a superficial level, appears to suggest evident involvement. Yet, when one probes deeper, there are apparent deficiencies that, in some respects, can render PMC inadequate in preparing couples for marriage.

9.2.1.2. Prevalence of indigenous marriage preparation practices

The study revealed that indigenous PMC is more prevalent than pastoral PMC. In African communities, PMC is not strictly a pastoral duty as the church, family, and broad community are significant role players in preparing couples for marriage. For instance, many of the participants were formally or informally prepared for marriage by elders in their family, church or community, despite the lack of provision of PMC by their pastors. The implication is that indigenous PMC is the sole means of marriage preparation for some African Christians. This reveals a gap in the

conceptualization of marriage among African Christians. The study findings demonstrated that participants prioritise a Christian conceptualisation of marriage in their definition of marriage over cultural and legal perceptions of marriage, yet their marriage preparation is pre-eminently born of the African philosophy on life and marriage. The African conceptualisation of marriage is rooted in principles of *ubuntu* and is considered a family affair and a public event. Thus, elders maintain a parental commitment and responsibility towards the marriage of the young in their community. There appears to be a disconnect and tension between the value systems within which African Christians exist. This is evident in how, even though indigenous PMC takes precedence over pastoral PMC, it is received with mixed feelings by modern African Christians who question its relevance and thus its value. In the vacuum of pastoral PMC, preparation for marriage through traditional means is also found to be lacking in competency.

9.2.1.3. Subjectivity of content

The study revealed that the content of PMC is subjective, relying on the perceptions, experiences and doctrinal influences of those conducting the counselling. The content therefore, varies, depending on who is conducting the PMC. Content also varies as a result of PMC being undertaken without the guidance of a standardised program. There is therefore no consistency in the delivery of the content, and by implication, the efficacy of PMC. To a certain extent, the content of PMC is meant to be subjective since couples will not value all topics equally due to contextual differences. PMC should consider a couple's unique situation when it comes to determining content; however, this does not disqualify the adoption of a standardised program, as topics might be the same, but they are treated differently with each couple. Thus, the study demonstrated the necessity of a standardised program for the helpfulness of PMC. It was determined that the current premarital programs and assessments are not only inaccessible to clergy in South Africa but are also not designed to deal with the realities of the African Christian context. This research, therefore, fills the gap by proposing a model for effective premarital counselling in the African Christian Context (Figure 6 in Chapter 8), which identifies the content categories that should be covered for PMC to be effective.

9.2.2. Research objective two: to understand the approach currently utilised in preparing African Christians in South Africa for marriage.

This section addresses the question: Why are African Christians in South Africa being prepared for marriage using the current approach? The study revealed the following:

9.2.2.1. Unstructured approach and the clergy's lack of counselling training

The study revealed that PMC in black South African churches is predominantly unstructured, resulting in disparities in the quality and effectiveness of PMC. The prevalence of an unstructured approach to PMC is a result of clergy relying on their personal views and experiences to prepare couples for marriage. This reliance of PMC on the clergy's discretion is connected to clergy's lack of training to conduct PMC. Thus, the study reveals a gap between the clergy's theological training for pastoral ministry versus training in counselling skills, which indicates a deficiency in the pastor's preparation for all ministerial duties. Having its historic roots in the church, PMC is a key part of pastoral ministry, requiring the proper preparation of pastors to fulfil their role as premarital counsellors, positively affecting marriage stability in the church.

9.2.2.2. Limitations of the information-based approach

The study demonstrated how PMC is delivered through lecturing as a result of its aim to provide couples with information for marital success. The narrowness of PMC due to its biblical orientation is reflected in its understatement of relationship skills enhancement. This reveals a limitation in pastoral PMC that leaves couples feeling a need to supplement it with counselling from professional counsellors. This is justifiable as the empirically proven usefulness of skills-based approaches over information-based approaches renders PMC in the church less effective in comparison to PMC provided by professional counsellors.

9.2.2.3. Preference for couples counselling format and spousal involvement

The study revealed that PMC is conducted in couple sessions rather than group sessions and that clerics involve their spouse in conducting sessions. This is beneficial to the counselling process as couple counselling is more advantageous over group counselling and counselling conducted by a team more helpful than counselling by an individual. However, a new gap is identified: the verification of the skills and capabilities of the cleric's spouse in conducting counselling. Clergy, who are theologically trained, have already been found to be poorly prepared for their role as premarital counsellors. It is therefore not far-reaching to assume that their spouses are not better prepared than they are. Thus, the involvement of the cleric's spouse, although helpful on the basis of two being better than one, may be limited in impact as a result of lack of training.

9.2.3. Research objective three: to evaluate the ways in which the current premarital counselling approach addresses African Christian's marriage needs and realities

This section examines the question: How does the currently utilised PMC approach address African Christians' marriage needs and realities? The study revealed the following:

9.2.3.1. Perceptions of the usefulness of premarital counselling

The study revealed that African Christians hold a generally positive perception of PMC, perceiving it as helpful in creating awareness, influencing perceptions and behaviours, ensuring readiness for marriage and gaining a better understanding of one's partner. Its helpfulness is, however, impacted by the couple's commitment, the influence of the pastor's role and the proximity of the counselling process to the wedding. This points to how the effectiveness of PMC is linked to various factors such as the attitude of the recipients, the character of the provider, as well as the timing of the marriage preparation process. The content of PMC was problematic to those participants who held adverse perceptions of the usefulness of PMC. Evidently, some of the teachings and guidance provided through PMC render PMC not only ineffectual but harmful. PMC is counterproductive when permeated by patriarchalism and androcentrism, which is often communicated through both African cultural ideologies and traditional Christian perceptions. It is however argued that some of the gender disparity in African Christian marriage preparation is a consequence of the erosion of traditional practices such as *ilobolo* and *ukuyalwa* as well as the poor interpretation of biblical texts such as Eph. 5:22. Thus, the study demonstrated the need to correct indigenous marriage practices which reinforce oppressive gender stereotypes and perpetuate the normalization of unhealthy family relations. Through the analysis of bible passages concerning marriage, the study addressed harmful misconceptions and misinterpretations that are counterproductive to building stable marriages. The study demonstrated the preference contemporary African Christians have towards modern egalitarian models of marriage over traditional patriarchal models and how reevaluating traditional perceptions presents an opportunity for intergenerational dialogue in African Christian marriage preparation practices.

9.2.4. Research objective four: to explore the theological understanding of marriage within the pluralistic South African context that can be discerned to inform effective pastoral premarital counselling for African Christians.

This section addresses the research question: What is the theological understanding of marriage within the pluralistic South African context that can be discerned to inform effective pastoral PMC for African Christians in South Africa? The study revealed the following:

9.2.4.1. One-dimensional conceptualization of marriage

The study revealed that African Christians solely observe a Christian understanding of marriage, upholding a Reformed perspective of marriage which maintains that the creation order describes the origin and prototype of marriage. Although not articulated, clergy do observe an African understanding of marriage as a communal affair. This is evident in their accommodation of the family's role in initiating a marriage. For instance, some clergy guided couples on how the process of *ilobolo* is meant to unfold with some even participating in *ilobolo* negotiations. This shows the interplay of religion and culture amongst African Christians who are constantly negotiating and navigating through the tensions and complexities that are a result of the interaction between Christianity and African culture. Although customary marriage is supported, legal marriage is starkly neglected. The failure to observe a legal conceptualisation of marriage is seen to restrict PMC as topics related to the legal aspects of marriage are often neglected in pastoral PMC. It is plausible that discussions over marital property regimes are intentionally neglected due to the understanding of the sanctity, oneness, and permanency of marriage among Christians, which implies the discussion is counterproductive in preparing couples for the ending of a marriage. Also, the covenant language that Christians use discourages the perception of marriage as a contract and can result in Christians perceiving marriage to be beyond legislation due to its sanctity.

9.2.5. Research objective five: to identify the strategies that can be developed to enhance the theory and practice of pastoral premarital counselling for African Christians.

This section addresses the research question: What strategies can be developed to enhance the theory and practice of pastoral PMC for African Christians in South Africa? The study revealed the following:

9.2.5.1. Suggestions for improving premarital counselling

The study presented the participants suggestions for the enhancement of PMC in the church. The suggestions revealed the necessity of a structured approach when participants recommended that clergy use a standardised PMC program. Participants suggested the modification of PMC content to be more relatable in PMC, pointing to the importance of contextualising PMC for an African Christian audience. Participants also called for the teachings in PMC to be more practical instead of heavily spiritual, pointing to the insufficiency of PMC when it is only aimed at giving information instead of teaching skills. The study revealed that the needs of African Christians would be better met if PMC were not restricted as a pastoral duty. Participants identified means

to mitigate the current shortcomings of PMC. Not only did they recommend that clergy undergo training, but they also suggested the involvement of other role players in the PMC process. These include professional counsellors as well as couple mentors. For instance, participants recommended the inclusion of same-generation couple mentors that would allow for more transparency and relatability. Lastly, the study revealed that immediate marriage preparation alone cannot adequately prepare couples for marriage, but that there needs to be a focus on proximate marriage preparation. Hence, the suggestion that marriage preparation start earlier through youth ministry programs and regular teachings about marriage, instead of once a couple is ready to marry.

9.3. Conclusions

The primary objective of this study was to explore and understand the PMC experiences of African Christians in South Africa. The conclusion therefore answers the main research question: what are the experiences of married African Christians with PMC as they prepare for stable marriages?

The study revealed that the experiences of married African Christians regarding PMC are varied in their administration, content, and practices. The study revealed a general positive perception of PMC. African Christians regard PMC as crucial in creating awareness, influencing attitudes and behaviours, ensuring readiness for marriage and gaining a better understanding of one's partner. *Ukuyalwa* was found to be the prevalent form of PMC in black churches as pastoral PMC is not a widespread practice. The few married African Christians who did undergo PMC from their pastors found it helpful and beneficial through influencing their perceptions and behaviours, thus better preparing them for the challenges of marriage. Some married African Christians perceived *ukuyalwa* to be helpful for marriage preparation, but some were critical of its usefulness due to teachings being impractical, sexist or irrelevant. This demonstrates how contemporary African Christians appreciate traditional customs while also critical of their impact, seeking its contextualization to ensure effectively meeting current needs. African Christians suggested the following to ensure PMC efforts meet their needs: the content covered during PMC should be personalised and contextualised to be relevant to contemporary African Christians. The content should address concerns that the couple has and should cover topics related to both African cultural conceptualizations of marriage and modern marriage values. They also suggested that the content should be practical and interactive instead of heavily spiritual and instructional. It was also suggested that the content should be devoid of androcentric views, and that health screening should be incorporated in the PMC process. African Christians are in favour of premarital marriage preparation and suggest churches teach regularly about marriage to contribute towards

preparation for marriage. Lastly, African Christians suggested that clergy either undergo counselling training or outsource counselling services.

9.4. Recommendations from findings

As the culmination of this research study, this section's focus is on the pragmatic task of practical theology which answers the practical question of: how might we respond?

9.4.1. Recommendations for clergy involved in premarital counselling

Further to the model proposed in 8.4, it is also recommended that pastors seek out professional training in PMC skills or train as a facilitator in an empirically supported PMC program. To ensure they remain competent in their PMC skills, pastors can participate in Continual Professional Development (CPD) programs. CPD encompasses a range of learning activities through which pastoral counsellors grow and develop. It also ensures that pastoral counsellors remain competent and effective in their ministry. Pastors can access CPD events and materials through organizations such as The South African Association for Counsellors, The Council for Pastoral and Spiritual Counsellors, as well as the Association for Supportive Counsellors and Holistic Practitioners.

The study established that although PMC is essentially a pastoral duty, it is not strictly a pastoral duty. Pastors need to be self-aware concerning their limitations and refer when complex issues present, requiring expertise they lack. Thus, it is recommended that pastors refer couples to professionals like therapists, physicians, financial advisors, notaries, etc. when the need arises. The involvement of other experienced couples as mentors is also recommended for the effectiveness of PMC bearing in mind that a team of people providing PMC is proven to be more effective.

9.4.2. Recommendation for theological training institutions

This study confirmed that clergy undergo theological training yet feel inadequately prepared for their role as premarital counsellors. It is therefore recommended that theological training institutions incorporate couple counselling skills and techniques in their curriculum. This is beyond the theoretical instruction on pastoral care and counselling subjects, but training aimed at equipping clergy entering into ministry with skills to effectively fulfil their role as premarital counsellors.

9.4.3. Recommendations for churches

The investigation demonstrated how preparation for marriage should not be treated as an event but a gradual and continuous process beginning remotely in the home. Parents have the primary responsibility of preparing their children for marriage and family life, but communities like the church have a key role to play in supporting parents in fulfilling this task. Thus, it is recommended that churches, through specified programs and teachings, intentionally equip and support parents in their role of preparing their children for future marriage.

The study also demonstrated the need for a focus on proximate marriage preparation. This entails marriage preparation forming part of youth ministry programs and regular teachings about marriage. In this way, the PMC that takes place once a couple is engaged can focus on filling the gaps of knowledge in the couple's basic formation. It is therefore recommended that youth ministry programs incorporate lessons and activities aimed at teaching knowledge and skills necessary for building a sustainable marriage.

The study highlighted the significance of the six-to-twelve-month period after the wedding in supplementing PMC. It is therefore recommended that marriage ministry programs prioritise newly wedded couples.

The study established the significance of the church participating in public ministry through premarital counselling. To ensure that the church serves the needs of the society it exists within, it is recommended that churches make their marriage preparation services available to the public.

The study identified other key role players in marriage preparation in the church. These include church members such as the pastor's wife and mentors. It is recommended that these role players undergo some basic training as lay counsellors to be more efficient in their role.

The study established that *ukuyalwa* in the church is widely practiced in preparing couples for marriage. The practice provides African Christians the opportunity to fulfil their communal duty of preparing younger generations for marriage, a duty consistent with the Christian duty to disciple younger Christians as outlined in Titus 2:3-5. It is therefore recommended that the practice be upheld and enhanced to better meet the needs of contemporary African Christians. Firstly, *ukuyalwa* in the church should be formalized. Churches should outline how it will be conducted and identify the key role players who will be involved in administering it. The content should also be predetermined and advisers should be given guidelines that will ensure the advice shared is not counterproductive. To help curb the current crisis of GBVF, which is fuelled by the promotion of dangerous masculine and feminine conceptualisations of marriage, those involved in giving

advice must be particularly cautioned against perpetuating gender stereotypes through marital advice. To achieve this:

- *Ukuyalwa* should be directed towards both the bride and groom as equal partners in the marriage.
- Accurate exegesis of Bible passages should undergird expectations, values and beliefs about marital roles.
- *Ukuyalwa* should adopt a reciprocal language instead of an androcentric outlook.

9.4.4. Recommendations for governance policy

Marriage is essential for the stability of families and society's well-being; hence, it is safeguarded by legislation in South Africa. The country's government is currently in the process of introducing a new marriage policy. In its initial investigation, government identified the importance of PMC and proposed in the Green Paper on Marriage in South Africa (2021) that PMC be a prerequisite for marriage. Unfortunately, this course of action was not adopted by government as it no longer forms part of the Marriage Bill (2023). In addition to encouraging PMC, a prescribed PMC sessions prior to marriage was proposed for all peoples wishing to marry in South Africa. "To ensure compliance with this requirement, persons who wish to marry shall be required to furnish the marriage officer with written proof that they have indeed undergone PMC. A standard form affidavit shall be provided by the DHA for these purposes. PMC should include explaining to couples the various marriage regimes and their implications" (Department of Home Affairs, 2021:57). It is recommended that this proposal be reconsidered in future marriage policies.

9.5. Limitations and aspects for further research

I conclude by discussing the limitations of this study that can be linked to possible future studies.

Firstly, the study reviewed a relatively small sample of the total population. The sample size of this study was smaller than desired, as recruiting participants proved difficult. The sample size was also confined by the qualitative nature of the study as well as the selected sampling technique (purposive sampling). The size of the sample therefore limits generalization as it might not be a representation of the total population. It is hence recommended that further research consider a larger sample size to represent the total population best.

Secondly, the study did not represent the wide range of confessions of Christianity in South Africa. The study only provided the views and experiences of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians from only four provinces as those were the only candidates who responded positively to the recruitment efforts of this study. The participation of participants from diverse Christian traditions

and different parts of the country could have led to more nuanced results. Further research that includes participants from Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, and African Independent churches is therefore recommended. If participants from different parts of the country had participated in the study, the results might have also been more diverse. Further research that includes participants from urban and rural areas in all nine provinces is also recommended.

Lastly, since PMC is not strictly a pastoral duty in African churches, church members involved in preparing couples for marriage, such as the pastor's wife, church mothers and fathers, could have been included in the study. Interviews with such church members could have given the study a richer dimension by incorporating their perspective. I therefore recommend that further research consider the participation of all church members involved during the marriage preparation process.

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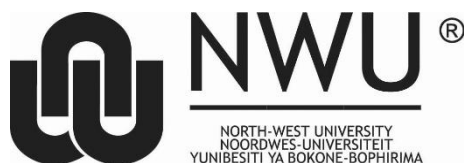
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ANNEXURES

ANNEXURE A: CONSENT FORM (CLERGY)



Private Bag X1290, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520
Tel: +2718 299-1111/2222
Fax: +2718 299-4910
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

The Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Office of the North-West University is acknowledged for the use of their document with minor adjustments made by the North-West University Education, Management and Economic Sciences, Law, Theology, Engineering and Natural Sciences Research Ethics Committee (NWU-EMELTEN-REC).



INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENTATION FOR CLERGY

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY: Experiences of premarital counselling among African Christians in South Africa: A practical theological study.

ETHICS REFERENCE NUMBERS: NWU-00885-23-A6

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Gugulethu Engelbetter Ndlovu

ADDRESS: 21 Taurus str. Milan Park, Bethal

CONTACT NUMBER: 078 294 7021

You are being invited to take part in a **research study** that forms part of a Doctoral study. Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this study. Please ask the researcher any questions about any part of this study.

that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you might be involved. Also, your participation is **entirely voluntary** and you are free to say no to participate. If you say no, this will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do agree to take part now.

This study has been approved by the **North-West University Education, Management and Economic Sciences, Law, Theology, Engineering and Natural Sciences Research Ethics Committee (NWU-00885-23-A6)** and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of Ethics in Health Research: Principles, Processes and Structures (DoH, 2015) and other international ethical guidelines applicable to this study. It might be necessary for the research ethics committee members or other relevant people to inspect the research records.

What is this research study all about?

- *I plan to learn about the experiences of married African Christians and the marriage preparation practices they undergo. The research study will look into the type of premarital counselling African Christians receive and its content. It will also try to determine the type of impact premarital counselling has on the marital relationship of the couples. The results of this research study can be useful in improving premarital counselling in South African churches.*
- *This study will be conducted either at your church building/office or virtually (depending on your proximity to the researcher). The study will be done by an experienced researcher trained in interviewing. Ten (10) participants will be included in this study.*

Why have you been invited to participate?

- *You have been invited to be part of this research because you are a member of the clergy with at least five years' experience of pastoring a predominantly black Christian church.*
- *You will unfortunately not be able to take part in this research if you cannot proficiently communicate in English or isiZulu.*

What will be expected of you?

- *You will be expected to participate in a one-on-one interview. The interview will either be conducted in-person or online, depending on your proximity to the researcher. The interview is estimated to take between an hour and an hour and a half.*

Will you gain anything from taking part in this research?

- *The gains for you if you take part in this study will be the opportunity to reflect on the premarital counselling practices of your church.*
- *The other gains of the study is for the society at large by utilizing the knowledge gained through this research to improve marriage stability among African Christians in South Africa.*

Are there risks involved in you taking part in this research and what will be done to prevent them?

- *The risks to you in this study are the inconvenience and discomfort of participating in an interview but will be limited by the researcher's experience in conducting interviews.*
- *There are more gains for you in joining this study than there are risks.*

How will we protect your confidentiality and who will see your data?

- *Anonymity of your data will be protected by ensuring that results are reported in a manner that does not make you identifiable. Your privacy will be respected by ensuring no personal information is required from you. Your results will be kept confidential by identifying you through a participant number instead of your name. Only the researcher will be able to look at your data. Data will be kept safe by locking hard copies in locked cupboards in the researcher's office and for electronic data it will be password protected. Data will be stored for five years.*

What will happen with the data?

- *The data of this study will only be used for this study. The data will be destroyed after five years.*

How will you know about the results of this research?

- *We will give you the results of this research when the research study is concluded by email.*
- *You will be informed of any new relevant data by email.*

Will you be paid to take part in this study and are there any costs for you?

This study is not funded therefore you will not be paid to take part in the study. Mobile data costs will be reimbursed for those participants whose interviews are conducted virtually. Therefore, there will thus be no costs involved for you, if you do take part in this study.

Is there anything else that you should know or do?

- You can contact Ms. Gugulethu Ndlovu at 0782947021 or 22272836@mynwu.ac.za if you have any further questions or have any problems.
- You can also contact the North-West University Education, Management and Economic Sciences, Law, Theology, Engineering and Natural Sciences Research Ethics Committee via Mrs Villera le Roux at 018 299 4707 or villera.leroux@nwu.ac.za if you have any concerns that were not answered about the research or if you have complaints about the research.

- You will receive a copy of this information and consent form for your own purposes.

Declaration by participant

By signing below, I agree to take part in the research study titled: Experiences of premarital counselling among African Christians in South Africa: A practical theological study.

I declare that:

- I have read this information.
- The research was clearly explained to me.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to the researcher and all my questions have been answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be handled in a negative way if I do so.
- I may be asked to leave the study before it has finished, if the researcher feels it is in the best interest, or if I do not follow the study plan, as agreed to.

Signed at (*place*) on (*date*) 20....

.....
Signature of participant

Declaration by researcher

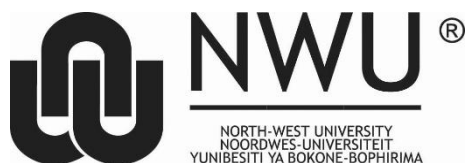
I (*name*) declare that:

- I explained the information in this document to
- I did not use an interpreter.
- I encouraged him/her to ask questions and I was available should he/she want to ask any further questions.
- I am satisfied that he/she adequately understand all aspects of the research, as described above.
- I am satisfied that he/she had time to discuss it with others if he/she wished to do so.

Signed at (*place*) on (*date*) 20....

.....
Signature of researcher

ANNEXURE B: CONSENT FORM (MARRIED INDIVIDUAL)



Private Bag X1290, Potchefstroom
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Tel: +2718 299-1111/2222
Fax: +2718 299-4910
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The Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Office of the North-West University is acknowledged for the use of their document with minor adjustments made by the North-West University Education, Management and Economic Sciences, Law, Theology, Engineering and Natural Sciences Research Ethics Committee (NWU-EMELTEN-REC).



INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENTATION FOR MARRIED INDIVIDUALS

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY: Experiences of premarital counselling among African Christians in South Africa: A practical theological study.

ETHICS REFERENCE NUMBERS: NWU-00885-23-A6

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Gugulethu Engelbetter Ndlovu

ADDRESS: 21 Taurus str. Milan Park, Bethal

CONTACT NUMBER: 0782947021

You are being invited to take part in a **research study** that forms part of a Doctoral study. Please take some time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this study. Please ask the researcher any questions about any part of this study that you do not fully understand. It is very important that you are fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you might be involved. Also, your

participation is **entirely voluntary** and you are free to say no to participate. If you say no, this will not affect you negatively in any way whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do agree to take part now.

This study has been approved by the **North-West University Education, Management and Economic Sciences, Law, Theology, Engineering and Natural Sciences Research Ethics Committee (NWU-00885-23-A6)** and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of Ethics in Health Research: Principles, Processes and Structures (DoH, 2015) and other international ethical guidelines applicable to this study. It might be necessary for the research ethics committee members or other relevant people to inspect the research records.

What is this research study all about?

- *I plan to learn about the experiences of married African Christians and the marriage preparation practices they undergo. The research study will look into the type of premarital counselling African Christians receive and its content. It will also try to determine the type of impact premarital counselling has on the marital relationship of the couples. The results of this research study can be useful in improving premarital counselling in South African churches.*
- *This study will be conducted either at your home/office or virtually (depending on your proximity to the researcher). The study will be done by an experienced researcher trained in interviewing. Twenty (20) participants will be included in this study.*

Why have you been invited to participate?

- *You have been invited to be part of this research because you are a black South African who has been in a heterosexual marriage for between a year and fifteen years. You are also a practicing Christian.*
- *You will unfortunately not be able to take part in this research if you cannot proficiently communicate in either English or isiZulu.*

What will be expected of you?

- *You will be expected to participate in a one-on-one interview. The interview will either be conducted in-person or online, depending on your proximity to the researcher. The interview is estimated to take between an hour and an hour and a half.*

Will you gain anything from taking part in this research?

- *The gains of the study is for the society at large by utilizing the knowledge gained through this research to improve marriage stability among African Christians in South Africa.*

Are there risks involved in you taking part in this research and what will be done to prevent them?

- *The risks to you in this study are the inconvenience and discomfort of traveling to the venue to participate in the discussion groups but will be limited by creating a seamless experience by ensuring convenient transportation and a comfortable environment for discussions.*
- *There are more gains for you in joining this study than there are risks.*

How will we protect your confidentiality and who will see your data?

- *Anonymity of your data will be protected by ensuring that results are reported in a manner that does not make you identifiable Your privacy will be respected by ensuring no personal information is required from you. Your results will be kept confidential by identifying you through a participant number instead of your name. Only the researcher will be able to look at your data. Data will be kept safe by locking hard copies in locked cupboards in the researcher's office and for electronic data it will be password protected. Data will be stored for five years.*

What will happen with the data?

- *The data of this study will only be used for this study. The data will be destroyed after five years.*

How will you know about the results of this research?

- *We will give you the results of this research when the research study is concluded by email.*
- *You will be informed of any new relevant data by email.*

Will you be paid to take part in this study and are there any costs for you?

- *This study is not funded therefore you will not be paid to take part in the study. Mobile data costs will be reimbursed for those participants whose interviews are conducted virtually. Therefore, there will thus be no costs involved for you, if you do take part in this study.*

Is there anything else that you should know or do?

- *You can contact Ms. Gugulethu Ndlovu at 0782947021 or 22272836@mynwu.ac.za if you have any further questions or have any problems.*
- *You can also contact the North-West University Education, Management and Economic Sciences, Law, Theology, Engineering and Natural Sciences Research Ethics Committee via Mrs Villera le Roux at 018 299 4707 or villera.leroux@nwu.ac.za if you have any concerns that were not answered about the research or if you have complaints about the research.*
- *You will receive a copy of this information and consent form for your own purposes.*

Declaration by participant

By signing below, I agree to take part in the research study titled: Experiences of premarital counselling among African Christians in South Africa: A practical theological study.

I declare that:

- I have read this information.
- The research was clearly explained to me.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to the researcher and all my questions have been answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be handled in a negative way if we do so.
- I may be asked to leave the study before it has finished, if the researcher feels it is in the best interest, or if I do not follow the study plan, as agreed to.

Signed at (*place*) on (*date*) 20.....

.....
Signature of participant

Declaration by researcher

I (*name*) declare that:

- I explained the information in this document to
- I did not use an interpreter.
- I encouraged him/her to ask questions and I was available should he/she want to ask any further questions.
- I am satisfied that he/she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as described above.
- I am satisfied that he/she had time to discuss it with others if they wished to do so.

Signed at (*place*) on (*date*) 20.....

.....
Signature of researcher

ANNEXURE C: INTERVIEW GUIDE (CLERGY)

KII: Clergy Interview Guide

Date: _____

Time: _____

Place: _____

Respondent no.: _____

1. What is your understanding of marriage?
2. Why is it important to prepare couples for marriage?
3. Is premarital counselling mandatory before performing a wedding ceremony in your church?
4. What is your experience of preparing couples for marriage?
5. What processes are involved in preparing couples for marriage?
6. How are the couple's families involved in marriage preparation?
7. What content do you cover in your premarital counselling?
8. What programs/techniques/approaches do you use in preparing couples for marriage?
9. How effective do you find this program/technique/approach?
10. How would you recommend premarital counselling be improved to better meet the needs of African Christian couples?

ANNEXURE D: INTERVIEW GUIDE (MARRIED INDIVIDUAL)

KII: Married Individual Interview Guide

Date: _____

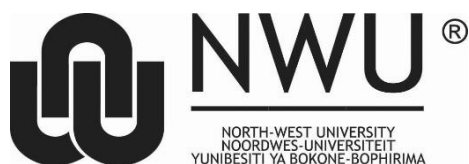
Time: _____

Place: _____

Respondent no.: _____

1. Why do you think marriage preparation/premarital counselling is important?
2. Describe the marriage preparation practices you underwent as a member of your family and/or community.
3. Describe the marriage preparation practices you underwent as a member of your church.
4. What was the content of the premarital counselling you underwent?
5. What did you benefit from the above-mentioned marriage preparation practices?
6. Did the premarital counselling you received meet your expectations? Why/why not?
7. What could have been done differently to better meet your needs as a couple?
8. How would you recommend premarital counselling be conducted in churches in order to better meet the needs of African Christian couples?

ANNEXURE E: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



Private Bag X1290, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222
Fax: 018 299-4910
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Senate Committee for Research Ethics
Tel: 018 299-4849
Email: rsdethics@nwu.ac.za

2023/11/28

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER

Based on approval by the **Theology Research Ethics Committee (FTHE-REC)** on 27 November 2023, the Theology Research Ethics Committee hereby **approves** your research as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-SCRE) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the research may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Application Type: Research Proposal

Title: Experiences of premarital counselling among African Christians in South Africa: A practical theological study

Student: Ndlovu, G = #22272836

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Study Leader(s): Prof Vhumani Magezi

Minimal Risk

Ethics number:

Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable): None

General conditions:

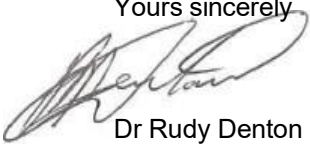
While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- *The study leader/supervisor (principle investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the FTHE-REC:*
 - *annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the research; and*
 - *without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the research.*
- *The approval applies strictly to the article as stipulated in the application form.*
- *In the interest of ethical responsibility, the NWU-SCRE and FTHE-REC reserves the right to:*
 - *request access to any information or data at any time during the research or after completion of the article;*
 - *to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the*

The FTHE-REC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well

with your research. Please do not hesitate to contact the FTHE-REC or the NWU-SCRE for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Denton', written in a cursive style.

Dr Rudy Denton
Chairperson NWU Theology Research Ethics Committee (FTHE-REC)

ANNEXURE F: EDITING CERTIFICATE



Certificate of Language Editing

I confirm that I, Luan Krige , edited the doctoral thesis entitled:

**Experiences of premarital counselling among African Christians in South Africa: A
practical theological study**

By **G.E. Ndlovu** (Student No: 22272836)

on **24 July 2025**. The document was edited with respect to English grammar and spelling, and limited lay-out changes were made in keeping with standard practices.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L Krige', with a small circular stamp to its right.

Mr Luan Krige
(Professional Editors' Guild No: KRI008)

24 July 2025



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