

Carefully Prepared

How might the churches support couples as they prepare for a lifetime of marriage, not just a wedding day?

Churches Together for Families appointed a group to explore this question. *Carefully Prepared* is the outcome of the group's work. Thanks are due to Andrew Body for drafting the original manuscript and to Joan King for her editorial work. Members of the group were:

Andrew Body (FLAME)

Lucy Docherty (Assoc. Interchurch Families)

David Gamble (Methodist Church)

Ann Leck (former National Chair of Relate)

Graham Long (United Reformed Church)

Elizabeth Mumford (Mothers' Union)

John Murphy (Catholic Bishops Committee for Marriage and Family Life)

Michael Quinn (Family Caring Trust)

Foreword

by the Presidents of Churches Together in England

Marriage is under the spotlight in England today. As Christians we believe that marriage has been part of God's plan for men and women since the creation of the world. Good preparation for marriage, therefore, and continuing care and support for it must be a major pastoral concern for all Christians.

We commend this booklet, which has been prepared by a small group with considerable experience in the field and who represent the major Christian traditions in this country. The group has reviewed the resources available for marriage preparation, and has tried to distil what it considers to be best practice.

We commend it for the serious consideration of all priests and ministers and others involved in preparing couples for marriage.

There are ideas here that could refresh and invigorate what is already being done with couples. The booklet may simply provide a fresh look at existing work, or it may encourage those with responsibility for marriage preparation to work together to provide even better support for those contemplating marriage.

We particularly commend the booklet to the consideration of local groups of Churches Together. By working together on marriage preparation and by sharing resources they are likely to be able to provide a better service to those who come asking to be married.

The focus throughout is on practical guidance and advice. The booklet does not attempt to set out the theological basis of marriage: nor, therefore, does it address the doctrinal and pastoral questions in this area on which individual churches may differ, such as on the whole question of the re-marriage of divorced persons. This booklet is not intended to replace or supplant other necessary denominational material.

We commend the booklet to all Christians concerned about marriage and family life; and we ask them to support and pray for those who have the vital, but difficult task of helping to prepare nearly half the population of this country for marriage.

George Cantuar
Archbishop of Canterbury

Basil Hume
Archbishop of Westminster

Kathleen Richardson
Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council

Rowen Loverance
Religious Society of Friends

Chapter One

An Ideal Opportunity

The telephone rings. You lift the receiver. A voice, trembling with excitement, explains: 'My partner and I have decided to marry. We would like to fix a date for the wedding. What do we have to do?'

You offer your congratulations, take down some details and arrange to meet the couple. As you replace the receiver you thank God for the opportunity of sharing in the couple's joy as they look forward to their marriage, and you make a silent plea for help! How best might you and the Church support couples as they prepare for a lifetime of marriage, not just a wedding day?

Currently around half the marriage ceremonies in this country are held in Christian churches. The vast majority of the couples who are involved have little or no real connection with a church. They come with their own set of needs to be met, with assumptions about the nature of the local church, and with expectations of what it can and cannot do to meet those needs. However anyone wanting a church marriage is demonstrating, if only subliminally, a spiritual dimension to the contract and to their relationship. They provide the Church with one of its most powerful pastoral opportunities to serve people in Christ's name - to help them to prepare for a lifetime together and not only for a wedding day, important though that is. To take this opportunity is demanding in a world where time and available energy are at a premium.

Carefully Prepared is an attempt to help those involved with couples preparing for a lifetime of marriage:

1. to take stock of their opportunities to serve couples in Christ's name.
2. to affirm the good things already provided to help all concerned to share the couple's joy as they look forward to their marriage.
3. to develop innovative ways of offering and providing even more support for couples anticipating marriage.

What is suggested comes from a number of convictions:

- Marriage is a gift from God in creation. It is not only Christians who marry. What we can do is to share our Christian insights into marriage with couples who have a variety of religious understandings. With some we will also have the privilege of exploring what the marriage of two Christians may involve, including the marriage of two people who belong to different Christian traditions.
- In our pluralist society, it also means that we shall be called on sometimes to collaborate across the boundaries of faith and non-faith, Christianity and other religions, and frequently across the denominational boundaries with which history has left us. That challenges us to explore the possibility of setting up joint preparation schemes to serve churches of different denominations. Such joint actions give an important message about relationships to those who have little understanding of our faith.
- Every relationship is different. Good marriage preparation requires facilitators who will journey alongside couples to enable them to make the most of this great stage in their lives.

- Marriage preparation is just one part of the wider pastoral ministry of the Church. Pastoral care embraces the life cycle and includes work with children and young persons, with single people, with new parents, with those becoming grandparents, and with those facing retirement or issues of ageing.
- The aim of marriage preparation is to provide the best possible preparation for every couple.
- Preparation schemes are there to help couples, and not the other way round. They are secondary to the needs of couples themselves.
- Those involved in marriage preparation work need to be both visionary and idealistic while at the same time realistic and practical.

While it is important to assess the needs of couples being prepared for marriage, it is also essential to be realistic about the resources available - time, people, skills, published materials. In an ideal world, we could all do more in every pastoral situation. In the real world there are various constraints which limit us. Couples too will have time constraints that must be respected. Clearly it is worthwhile trying to find ways round the limitations and constraints. We can all rejoice in what we can, and do, offer couples if we combine vision with realism.

Chapter Two

Being Realistic

Delivering marriage preparation is a serious business. It takes time, effort, and a range of skills. No one, lay or ordained, can provide all such preparation in anything but the smallest of churches without feeling considerable pressure. To avoid this happening and to enable sensitive pastoral care for couples preparing for marriage, the following are helpful:

A team of people

More can be offered to couples if a number of people are involved in marriage preparation work. A group of people can bring together different strengths and form a team. Teams may include lay and ordained people. When both are involved, it is important to ensure that those who provide marriage preparation and those who conduct the wedding services trust each other, and understand the contribution each has to make.

In choosing team members consideration should be given among other things to skills and experience, age balance, marital status, and length of marriage. Who is appropriate, and what is expected of them will depend on the approach taken. The group need not be confined to one church, and could be shared with others in the locality. Here is a wonderful opportunity for Christians of all traditions to work together.

This approach may be especially suitable for couples from different church or denominational backgrounds. Indeed the group that prepared this booklet would go further and suggest that an ecumenical approach would be beneficial for many couples. Denominational matters could easily be covered in the couple's meetings with the person who will be preparing them for the wedding day itself.

Such a joint approach would be a very practical project for a Churches Together or similar group, who could also take on the training and ongoing support of a suitable preparation team. While the process of identifying, selecting, training and supporting a team may at first seem daunting, the benefits, in terms of the impact on marriage preparation, are likely to be great. Sharing the work with others will mean less pressure on everyone's time.

Time with boundaries

When considering preparing couples for a lifetime of marriage one of the first resources necessary is adequate time. In the view of the Ecumenical Working Group a minimum of six to seven hours is required in addition to the time needed for the mechanics of filling in forms and preparation for the wedding itself. The time might be spread over several evenings, or fitted into one day or two half-days. It is not an unreasonable investment in a couple's future, and provides the space in which something worthwhile can be achieved. It is important to agree timings, dates and frequency of sessions with couples and the team before or during the first meeting, and to be flexible and businesslike when doing so. This will help everyone involved to feel more secure, as will the knowledge that a good communication system is in place.

A range of skills

Any kind of pastoral work with people demands some skills. It cannot be the case that 'anyone can do it'. Listening skills and the ability to draw people out are common requirements for many pastoral tasks. They are the basic skills needed by those engaged in marriage preparation who are enablers and not counsellors. Every church has its own ways of recognising potential team members and providing training so that skills can be developed. If you have the people but they need to develop their skills, then a local contact may provide the necessary training. Alternatively, the information pages at the back of this booklet suggest the names of people and organisations that may be able to help with resources. Here again, training which draws on the strengths and resources of more than one church or denomination will open up further possibilities, and draw Christians together locally in a common purpose.

Chapter Three

Ways of Responding

In marriage preparation there is no 'right way' and no 'best way' - there are simply different ways. The needs of couples and the numbers of personnel available to facilitate determine what is appropriate. Below is a list of possibilities that have worked well in different situations. Only you know your situation as it is, and as it might be with some changes. Whichever pattern is chosen, provide opportunities within, or between, sessions for couples to reflect privately.

One and two

The most common form of marriage preparation over the years has been a couple meeting with one person. The advantage of this way of meeting is that it is very confidential, and may therefore provide an environment in which difficult family matters can be aired. It can provide for great flexibility in arranging meetings. However, it has the disadvantage of depending solely on one person's skills and ability to relate to all sorts of couples. Also the couples do not have the opportunity to learn from the experiences of others and may feel the situation to be intense.

Two and two

A couple working with two people as a foursome has some distinct advantages. There can be opportunity, which some value, for either partner to talk individually. This becomes quite feasible and non-threatening if it is part of a two and two situation. On the other hand, having two people talking with you (still worse if they talk at you) can feel very daunting for some. Even if the majority of the preparation work is done in some other way, the possibility of inviting a couple or two couples to a meal may be a very positive additional opportunity. This way of working is less common because it makes even more demands on time and personnel but it may be the most suitable for any couple with learning difficulties. They could benefit from having just one other couple to respond to.

Groups

Many churches provide group sessions, either instead of or as well as one of the above. A group session may include time with the whole group, time in smaller sub-groups and time for individual couples to talk to each other. There is much to be gained from sharing with people in a similar situation. It becomes possible to provide speakers/facilitators to explore particular subjects. Group activities, questionnaires and videos that open up issues may be used without too much invasion of privacy.

While the relative anonymity of a group may benefit some couples it may also become a disadvantage if it means that difficult issues for a particular couple are avoided. The couples are less likely to build up strong personal relationships with team members, but this approach may enable couples to relate to the wider church community.

Mix and match

What seems most productive is some combination of the three approaches above. Suppose all three are combined: a couple who come to book their wedding are offered:

- time with the minister, or another individual, who will be alongside them preparing for the day, and exploring what marriage means for them;
- a group, with facilitators, to join that includes couples planning to marry around the same time. Group members may be from different churches. The sessions may be a series of evening events, a day, two half-days, or even a weekend. The couple's personal sessions can build on the group time, and give space for any issues that it raises;
- an opportunity, alongside both those, to meet with another couple - possibly recently married - who will provide another very informal level of support and encouragement.

But that is only one possible way. Couples have very different needs, and every Christian community has different resources. Flexibility and sensitivity are vital if the principle that couples are more important than the scheme is to be maintained. For some couples it may be more practical to consider marriage preparation happening after the wedding. What is needed above all is a loving, welcoming environment that will be comfortable for the couple, and enjoyed by everyone involved. We cannot pretend to provide everything. One of the functions may be to enable couples to seek further help of a different kind if issues arise which are beyond the scope of what can normally be provided, (or which are beyond the competence of those who are providing it). What we can provide is the opportunity for couples to experience being part of a welcoming and supportive community, both before and after the wedding.

Chapter Four

Ways of Working

Those responsible for marriage preparation have three basic options when considering what they will do. The options are:

- to start from scratch and devise their own course and materials;
- to use some, or all of, courses devised by others while ensuring that they keep within copyright rules if reproducing materials;
- to enable those involved to attend a training course that will help them to do either of the above.

Some ideas for ways of working are listed below in alphabetical order.

Books

There are some excellent publications available that can form a way into some sessions. Churches may be able to have a stock of books for reference or choose a book that they might give to a couple when they first arrange a wedding. The book could then form the basis for the course.

Courses

These come in two forms for those involved in marriage preparation: published resources and courses run by others.

A number of complete published courses are available, with videos, leaflets, audio tapes and exercises. Most facilitators find that they want to pick and choose which parts are appropriate to them and the couples with whom they work. Published resources can add variety and alternative approaches to home-grown courses.

Several agencies provide training for people who prepare couples for marriage. What is available varies from place to place and from time to time, but some agencies may provide personnel to train a church or local group. There may be cost implications but an outlay that results in a more confident and skilled team will repay itself very quickly. For more information, consult [Who Can Help?](#)

Games and exercises

Most people remember what they do more easily than what they hear or see. It is wise to include participatory ways of learning into marriage preparation courses. Games and exercises that enable couples to practise using skills, e.g. listening, will be useful. Skilled facilitators may helpfully use a range of methods, e.g. role-play, case study, sculpture.

Homework

A course which includes things for couples to do or talk about between sessions, i.e. homework, sometimes encourages them to make the best use of what is provided.

Questionnaires

These can be useful tools in helping individuals to identify feelings, opinions, values and behaviours. They may be used to increase self-awareness, and for couples to share their findings in order to increase their understanding of each other. Questionnaires do need to be carefully formulated with clear objectives for their use in mind.

Talking and listening

To encourage couples to share their feelings, their hopes and fears will be productive at two levels. It will enable the discussion of issues and show that it is possible to talk about feelings. For some people this will be a new experience.

Videos

Extracts from videos, or whole videos, may be used with couples and groups in a preparation session. Some people prefer to give couples a video to watch in their own time - with the opportunity to talk about it at the next meeting.

We were told that it would be necessary for us to attend a marriage course. What a drag! We thought, 'We know we want to get married and are right for each other. We don't want to be preached at by strangers.' Despite this we attended and were both pleasantly surprised. I've learnt a lot about myself and my partner...

Chapter Five

Areas of Content

The process of preparation for marriage begins early in life. Individuals who come to the church to be married, and who engage with a partner in a course, will have understandings of marriage learned from those around them in childhood and the teenage years. Some may have expectations of marriage gained from popular culture. They may have some unlearning to do! As indicated earlier, values and beliefs about marriage may have been informed by the faith community to which the individual or pair belong. However, for most people this will not be the case. When considering the content of a marriage preparation course therefore:

Remember couples are more important than the course. Begin with their agenda, the questions and areas that are likely to be of greatest importance to them now.

Below is a list of content areas that might form part of the process of marriage preparation. How much can be done under each heading will vary according to the situation, but all are important enough to be mentioned here. The list is alphabetical. Within each content area, except the first, the core topics have been identified. They are followed by other topics that may be usefully added, depending on the situation.

Beginnings

The couple is helped to feel welcome. They talk about themselves, their relationship and how it works, their reasons for choosing to marry each other, their expectations of marriage and of the course. Previous contact with the church is also shared.

Children

Couples explore the part they hope/expect children to have in their future life together. Create a working agreement about what is appropriate for them. If there are existing children, explore how the marriage is going to affect them.

You could go on to the issues that go into planning a family, financial and career pressures, planned parenthood, childlessness and, if the partners belong to different churches or faiths, their intentions regarding children.

Commitment

Explore the meaning of commitment and how marriage could develop their commitment to each other. What does it mean to give everything - and is that realistic?

You could go on to their understandings of faithfulness - is it just physical or more than that? For instance, trust - people in general, and each other in particular, letting go and allowing each other independence.

Communication

Explore whether they are able to be open with each other, to express feelings, and to share laughter and grief. When is it easy to talk and when is

it not so easy? (Delicate areas are different for each couple.) Explore the difference between opinions and feelings.

You could go on to increasing listening skills, reading body language, making assumptions, the place of secrets.

Companionship

Consider the benefits of companionship and of shared interests. Think about the balance of time apart and time together. What makes them spend time apart now and how do they cope with that? How do they ensure time together now? Will developing personal interests that are not shared be part of their future pattern?

You could go on to the changes that will inevitably happen as time passes, changing interests, new ambitions, new responsibilities, employment and unemployment issues, becoming parents, illness and ageing - both in relation to themselves, and to their parents.

Conflict

No two people agree on everything, so explore how couples accept and resolve differences of opinion, e.g. over use of money. Include 'giving way', 'backing down', 'agreeing to differ', 'avoiding the issues', irritability and anger. Note the importance of sharing and expressing feelings.

You could go on to being wrong and admitting it, experiences of forgiving and being forgiven, compatibility and incompatibility.

Family culture

The way things are done in one home is different from the way they are done in the next, so explore their own family stories and practices, e.g. how birthdays or Christmas were celebrated and how they might be celebrated after marriage. Discuss family values and the religious culture of the home.

You could go on to changing and developing relationships with parents and in-laws, leaving the nest, issues of social class, race and gender.

Family role models

Explore the different experiences of family that partners had in their families of origin - parents, step-parents, adoptive parents, single parents. What are the strengths and weaknesses they have observed of their different family experiences? How are they working out the roles that feel appropriate for them?

You could go on to being able to be different in the face of family pressures, the models they prefer, issues of compromise, handling the stresses within the marriages of their parents.

God's love and grace

The personal nature of the wedding service in which the couple forge their union before God - a blessing on two people who are committing themselves

to each other for life. Their mutual love and God's love for them - how do they experience God in all this?

You could go on to individual relationships with God, their faith journeys, prayer and praying together, the meaning their respective churches or faiths give to marriage, respecting differences in issues of faith and practice, involvement with the Christian Church, if any, beliefs about basic life questions and their implications for practical issues, e.g. illness and death, wills, organ donation, childlessness, the problems and joys of belonging to different faith/church backgrounds.

Needs

Explore what couples need and want from their marriages; what they offer to each other and what they would like to receive from their partners. In what ways will marriage improve their lives?

You could go on to whether their assumptions are always right, the pressure of expectations on each other, what they see as the purpose of marriage.

Roles

Consider the roles that each expects to play in the home. Do expectations differ and, if so, from where do the role expectations come? Agree some roles, e.g. who will be responsible primarily for budgeting.

You could go on to flexibility as family circumstances change, paid employment and unemployment, money and values relating to its use - who is the spender and who is the saver, parenting.

Sex

Make time to talk about male and female; expectations of each other, perhaps drawn from the media; sexual attraction - affirming the goodness of God's gift, and exploring what it gives to their relationships. Encourage partners to learn from each other and to develop a climate in which they can talk about sexual matters.

You could go on to what intimacy of any kind means to the couple(s) - for some couples there are important questions in this area, evolving sexual needs, romance and passion, finding specialist help if required.

Ups and downs

Relationships have their ups and downs. Emphasise the normality of swings in relationships and the importance of distinguishing fantasies from realities. Explore how stress and petty irritations might affect the relationship and how they might be handled.

You could go on to ways of sharing concerns, identifying and using outside sources of help.

Faced with so many possible content areas it may be difficult to know where to start. It is probably best to begin with those content areas that will strengthen and build up the couple's relationship now - communication,

commitment and handling conflict. (Most published course materials include such content.) With skills and knowledge in these areas, couples will be better able to cope with change and crises in the future. The [next chapter](#) is offered as one way into marriage preparation.

Chapter Six The Pathway

A way into marriage preparation

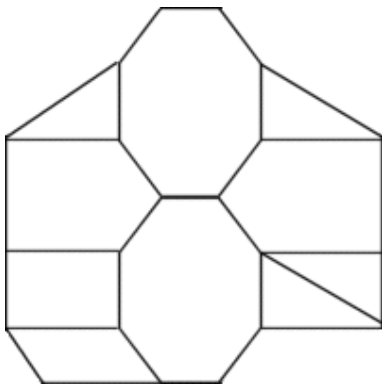
Life is a journey. All of us are travellers. Two people who are planning to marry are already travelling, but they are about to bring their individual pathways closer together, and to commit themselves to be partners along the way. On their wedding day they will walk down the church path separately to the service where they will make their promises before God and their guests. When they leave the church they will retrace their steps together over the same paving stones and continue on their journey.

There is some symbolism here that may be helpful. Suppose the pathway to the church represents marriage preparation, the pathway from the church represents marriage support. The paving stones represent the different content areas for marriage education, both preparation and support. (Content areas for both are roughly the same. In marriage preparation some areas require a couple to project into the future, while in marriage support they will be handling 'the present'.)

Each paving stone has written on it a content area.



The stones are different shapes but they fit together.



There are some content areas that are repeated. They form the core of the pathway and run down the centre, holding it together. On them are written the words: communication, (handling) conflict, commitment. The other paving stones are attached to them, forming lovely patterns, but the edge of the path is not neat.

When creating a marriage preparation course it may be helpful to use the paving stone/pathway idea. The words themselves will provide a powerful image both for couples and for those providing marriage preparation. All pathways provided in marriage preparation will contain similar stones, but they will be arranged differently, thus creating unique patterns for each

group, and within them for each couple. Couples will interact with the content of their course, make connections with their own situations and place the 'paving stones' into a pattern which is theirs.

There is an illustration of a [pathway](#) showing paving stones labelled with content areas for marriage preparation (the pathway is a graphical image that is 52kb in size, so it will take a moment or two to download into your browser). It is provided for use as a tool and may be used in several ways.

1. Use it with individual couples to help identify content areas that they want to explore with you, and areas that you feel it is important to explore with them individually or in a group. In such a situation it may be used as a helpful tool for negotiation, enabling you to dovetail what they suggest with what you think is important. This process may guide you in adjusting any published resources that you might use to meet the needs of specific couples or groups.
2. Use it to construct your own course. You may find it helpful to enlarge the illustration of the pathway, cut out the paving stones and move them around to form a pattern for a course. Actually moving the 'paving stones' will help you to clarify the order in which they might be laid, or used in a course. In other words, they will help you to identify your syllabus and to design the course. This could be a useful way for a group of people involved in marriage preparation to plan a course together.
3. Use it after each session to check what has been covered and what remains for the future. Also, give each couple a copy so that they can keep their own records of what has been covered.

As part of any course couples may find it helpful to 'play' with coloured paper cut into the shapes of the paving stones. They can label them and create a patterned pathway that may be pasted on to card to form a visual reminder, perhaps a symbol, of how their joint pathway through marriage may be. Couples could be encouraged to frame them, or to place them somewhere significant such as in their wedding album, Bible or on the bathroom mirror!

If marriage preparation strengthens couples' relationships now, the beginning of their joint pathways will be firm. They can step out into the future better able to face whatever life may throw at them. Through marriage support the churches have an opportunity to help them to keep their pathways in good repair. When their pathways become difficult, perhaps swampy, those involved in marriage support can enable couples to find ways through by placing 'stepping stones' in their path.

Chapter Seven

Special Considerations

Everyone brings personal 'baggage' to a marriage. Part of the fun of becoming a couple is unpacking that baggage, a process that can continue throughout the relationship. For example, assumptions about how to be parents, which chiefly come from each one's childhood experiences, may only surface when there is a child in the cot.

Among the baggage there may be some items that could raise special concerns for those providing marriage preparation. It would be quite wrong to label them simply as 'problems', although sometimes that may be a very accurate description. In order to honour the uniqueness of every couple, those responsible for marriage preparation need to be alert so that they become aware of any special situations or issues which a couple may face. In some situations, it is simply a matter of handling particular topics sensitively, and giving them space to explore issues that are not relevant to the majority. In others, it may be a matter of pointing them in the direction of further sources of help and information. [Some useful addresses are provided.](#)

The following list of sensitive situations is in alphabetical order. It is not exhaustive, but it does focus attention on some important issues.

Abuse

Increasingly society is aware of the number of people who have suffered childhood neglect and abuse - physical, emotional, mental or sexual. The wounds caused by abuse often manifest themselves much later in life, when something else that may be entirely good triggers the bad memories. If this appears to be an issue, it is important that partners have shared it in whatever way they find possible, and that they have the opportunity for professional help if necessary. Abuse occurs later in life as well, and scars from abuse by former partners or others may be clouding the happiness of someone approaching marriage.

We do no service to people by attempting to cope with issues beyond our competence. Everyone involved in marriage preparation should know their limitations, and be aware of sources of help.
Ecumenical Working Group

Age

There are issues that relate to age: those specific to older couples; those relating to very young couples; those faced by couples with a wide age gap.

Older people may have difficulty in adjusting to change or they may expect a new marriage to work like a previous one. They may have different expectations about sex or about family responsibilities. Children and grandchildren of earlier marriages sometimes do not welcome a new partner with open arms. All these issues may need attention in the couple's preparation for marriage.

The very young may have extra pressures from family as well, and may find it hard to get the balance of independence right. So asking for help may be difficult and yet very necessary. If they have a child, they may feel they are losing out on their youth and freedom.

When there is a large age difference between partners, there are yet other areas of concern. They also may be receiving mixed messages from family and friends.

Culture

There are some obvious issues that arise when people come from different countries. Every country has its own distinctive culture, which includes attitudes to marriage, sex and family. The same will be true in some respects of couples marrying across cultural differences within one nation. That may include people from different regions, different socio-economic, religious and educational backgrounds. Those who marry into the culture of a particular profession may have specific issues to explore, e.g. those who marry a farmer, a nurse, a soldier or a minister of religion need to understand what demands the jobs make on them as a couple. Shift work and long commuter journeys also influence the development of home and family life.

Disability

Since disability is such a wide concept, covering a huge range of human experience, it is difficult to know when it becomes a specific issue. But when people marry someone with a progressive illness, or with a major disability, the couple needs to think things through carefully. As with so many other issues, there may be family attitudes with which to cope. People with moderate or severe learning disabilities may require a different approach to marriage preparation: the content remains the same. Some people with physical disabilities may require special help with sexual issues. This is available through specific self-help groups and other agencies.

Faith

Partners from different Christian traditions or other faiths will have some extra questions to face, whether or not they are personally practising the faith in which they were nurtured. Family attitudes are again significant, and the couple will have various decisions to make about the way in which they will relate to the communities from which they come. If one partner practises faith and the other does not, or has none, there will be things better faced earlier rather than later. They must both understand the assumptions the other may be making about how faith may be practised after marriage and agree their real and practical intentions.

Living together

The majority of couples getting married today have lived together and/or had a sexual relationship prior to the wedding. It is important to look at what the wedding means in their total life story, and to consider how they think it will affect their relationship, if at all. Those planning marriage preparation sessions may find that it will be helpful to include an element of marriage enrichment as well as marriage preparation.

Second marriages

The first marriage may have ended with death or divorce. If so, there will be memories in all cases, both bad and good. After any significant loss, it is important that the grieving process is worked through. This is especially so for those who may want to marry for a second time, and for their new

partners. Attention needs to be given to: how they will acknowledge the past without its becoming a threat to the new relationship; how divorce has been dealt with; how much of the story has been shared; continuing issues and problems, e.g. maintenance and access to children. If one partner has been married previously or lived in a long-term relationship, and the other has not, their different expectations and perceptions of marriage may need careful attention. Should there be children from previous relationships, there will be important issues of step-parenting to address. The children themselves deserve careful preparation for their parent's new marriage. There may also be questions about grandparents and new step-grandparents to address.

Although this section is headed 'second marriages', many of the issues will apply to those who have lived in previous long-term cohabiting relationships.

Chapter Eight

The Wedding Day

This booklet is about marriage preparation - preparing people for a lifetime together. But it would not be complete without a reminder of the importance of preparing for the wedding day itself. The most wonderful scheme of marriage preparation could be negated if a couple felt that their wedding service was not taken seriously. Indeed, when a couple initially book a wedding, probably the only thing they consciously ask of the church is that it provides a wedding service to remember. To achieve this requires considerable effort. First impressions count. The way the telephone is answered may be the first stage in creating a fruitful relationship with the couple. Each denomination has its own questions here. It would be impossible in this booklet to spell them out in detail. In general terms, it is vital that every couple has ample opportunity to say what it is they would like, even if all is not possible and some adjustments or compromises have to be made. It is important that the couple is made aware of all the choices - especially if two churches or faiths are involved. (They may not like to ask much unless prompted to do so.)

The wedding service needs to feel 'personal'. Therefore it is essential that whoever is conducting the wedding service gets to know the couple well enough to make the service 'theirs'. This may require careful timetabling if others are conducting the marriage preparation.

When the day comes the person conducting the service may have four weddings. It is important to enable each couple to feel that this is their one and only wedding. Their wedding may be one of the few contacts that they and their guests have with the Christian church.

Many non-churchgoing couples are very nervous when meeting clergy. A leaflet about planning for the wedding day could be immensely helpful. It could include notes on:

- Legal requirements
- Denominational rules/requirements
- Possible order of service
- Choice of hymns, music and readings
- How to contact the organist
- Flowers, bells, red carpets, extras
- Printing order of service
- Rules re photography, recording, confetti
- Copyright issues
- Fees
- Marriage preparation scheme
- Service rehearsal
- Who to contact about what

Chapter Nine

After the Wedding

When it is all over - the preparation sessions and the service - what next? For the newly-weds, it is the beginning of the rest of their lives. For the church, there is the opportunity to keep in touch with the couple, and to offer appropriate encouragement or support. In some places the following have proved beneficial:

- Marriage preparation groups have turned into friendship/support groups which continue to meet.
- A follow-up session is arranged about six months after the wedding. Experiences are shared and opportunities are given to discuss issues that have arisen. Such a post-wedding session could be part of every marriage preparation scheme. Marriage preparation would then merge into the churches' calling to support marriage in an ongoing way.
- Couples who move away are commended to the care of another community.
- Christmas or anniversary cards are sent to couples married in the church.
- Couples are invited to an annual service for the renewal of vows. The take-up such offers receive is a measure of the value couples put on the care and attention they received before their wedding. Such care and attention is also a measure of the value put by churches on helping marriages to start well and to go on well. May all that we do together in God's name be blessed.

Chapter Ten

Training the Team

Earlier it was suggested that it is good to share the responsibility for marriage preparation with a team. The team will need one or two designated leaders and other members who have a range of relevant skills and experience. Their role in marriage preparation is to be alongside couples as facilitators. They need to be enthusiastically positive, committed and realistic about marriage. While they may already have skills to offer, they may need to learn to use them in the context of marriage preparation.

Sense of team

The first task of the training programme is to create a sense of common purpose for the team. Most of the time they are preparing couples for marriage they will work in pairs rather than all together. However, they will work to common goals and with agreed ground rules. These need to be made known. The training process and the support received while working are important in creating and retaining a sense of team, and in building trust and understanding. Among those who join the team may be some people who are unsure of themselves. They will value the encouragement given by time together.

Team relationships

It is always important to nurture team relationships, and this requires time. When the team is ecumenical, time is also needed for exploring each other's attitudes and practices. It will not help to gloss over differences, but it will be helpful to work in a team that handles differences openly and positively. Such honesty takes a lot of mutual trust.

Self-awareness

In addition to the aims and constituent elements of the marriage preparation course, the training programme will need to allow time for team members to explore their own attitudes to marriage. Increased awareness of how they feel and respond when their own dearly-held beliefs about marriage, faith and sex are challenged will sensitize them for marriage preparation situations. Time may well be spent in exploring how they might handle themselves when dealing with delicate issues with couples.

Confidentiality

This is probably the most important ground rule for the team to establish with couples. What couples say in sessions must normally be treated by everyone involved, including those leading the group, as confidential. This must be made clear to team members during their training programme, and guidelines about procedures for handling difficulties should be agreed. For instance, if there is cause to raise an issue with fellow team members in discussion, the anonymity of the person(s) must be preserved. However, there is a legal requirement to break confidentiality when the safety of children is at risk.

Role of lay people, ministers and clergy

Both ordained and lay people need to be clear about their roles in relation to preparation for the marriage and preparation for the wedding. Both are important, and need to be delivered with care. So who is responsible for each, and where the boundaries lie, needs to be discussed. Important questions require exploration. Are some or all of the ministers part of the team? If so, are they in equal partnership with lay members of the team? If not, how will the team and ministers relate to each other?

Trust

In marriage preparation work, trust is exercised between team members, between lay and ordained people possibly from different denominations, between couples and team members, and among couples. Team members not only need to be trustworthy but they need to be seen to be so, especially in the area of confidentiality. It is possible that something serious may be disclosed, such as unfaithfulness or medical problems. In such situations couples should be encouraged to talk to appropriate professionals who can help them with their difficulty.

The content of any training scheme needs to include guidelines on all of the above.

Suggested basics of an initial training scheme

1. Background
 - Purpose of marriage
 - Why a training scheme
 - Getting to know each other
 - Participating churches - who does what; who is responsible?
2. The training programme
 - Aim
 - Structure
 - Practicalities - venue, dates, times
 - Listening skills
 - Facilitation skills
 - Opportunities to practise skills
 - Possible problems/self-awareness
 - Confidentiality
 - Awareness of denominational views/practices
3. Practicalities
 - Contacting couples - what if only one of the couple is able/willing to participate?
 - Will the course be delivered to couples separately, or to groups? Venues?
 - Finance
 - Feedback, evaluation, modification of the course
4. Beyond the course
 - Ongoing support and training of the team
 - Further support for couples; attending the wedding.

In all of this there is the question of who will deliver the training of the team, and who will run the ongoing support and training sessions. If there is no one with the appropriate skills locally, it will be a worthwhile investment to seek them further afield. An inadequately prepared team may be worse than no team.

Although the delivery of marriage preparation may not always be possible or appropriate on an ecumenical basis, there may be tremendous value in an ecumenical training course.

Recognition in the wider church community of what is being undertaken is important. Those involved will be encouraged by the knowledge that they have the support of their communities, and that what they provide meets community requirements. At a practical level they may need to have the scheme financed by them. They will certainly need their spiritual support in both public and private prayer.

Chapter Eleven

It Can Be Done

What has been described on this web site is not just a theoretical dream. There are places where elements of these ideas have been tried out. Here are some stories for your encouragement.

Ecumenical cooperation in training

FLAME (Family Life and Marriage Education) in the Anglican Diocese of Exeter regularly works with Roman Catholic lay workers from Marriage Care in training ministers and lay people to lead marriage preparation sessions with groups of engaged couples. The aim of these sessions is to enable couples to develop their communication skills through training in active listening, in how to share feelings and in how to handle conflict. The hope is to raise awareness of each other's attitudes, values and expectations. Leaders are trained to handle groups and to use a wide variety of working methods, including exercises, scenarios and games, to enable the couples to communicate better with each other. When groups of churches wish to work together, the ministers do their part of the preparation and then pass the names of couples to a co-ordinator (usually a lay person) who acts on behalf of all the churches. Once three or four couples are referred, the co-ordinator passes on their names to the next pair of trained facilitators on their list, who contact the couples and arrange to meet them. Sometimes the groups formed are ecumenical.

The success of the scheme depends much on the cooperation of the clergy and the administrative skills of the co-ordinator. Regular oversight, monitoring, encouragement, support and ongoing training is necessary for the group facilitators. However the method does not create enormous burdens for facilitators, as they usually only lead one group a year. This means that they have time to follow up the couples in the group after their weddings, and to attend the weddings if they live within reach.

One network is thinking of offering its programmes to the local register office, and another to a nearby stately home which is proving to be a popular wedding location. They feel sure that such cooperation is going to evolve and is a strategic way forward.

Some responses to training events for facilitators

'Everyone returned with new confidence and great enthusiasm'

'Enjoyable weekend'

'Encouraging... really useful'

'It has given me a lot to think about'

Ecumenical clergy cooperation

'My fiancé and I belonged to different denominations - he is a Roman Catholic and I'm from the United Reformed Church - so our families weren't pleased and we had some problems getting married. But his priest and my minister talked to us together about how we would worship and how we might bring up our children. They shared together in our wedding. It gave us great strength for our marriage.' (From an interchurch family.)

A parish approach using a team

'We have a group of lay couples, led by a married deacon, who organise and carry out all the marriage preparation in our Roman Catholic parish. Some of these couples are in "mixed" marriages, which helps when we meet couples from different church backgrounds. We see individual couples in our own homes. We are not qualified counsellors - simply married couples prepared to share our experiences. We provide the opportunity for couples to concentrate on what marriage is really about - themselves, their love and the spiritual context of their relationship. By the time we meet they will already have seen the parish priest to talk in general terms about the wedding and themselves. After their individual meetings with us, couples join a group for three further sessions. The first session deals with wedding day administration and legal form-filling, together with an outline of our course and why we provide it. The second session looks at becoming married, and focuses on the early years of marriage. The third session is called "communicating together". In it we acknowledge that relationships constantly change and that we communicate on emotional, spiritual and sexual levels. The final session is with the deacon and his wife, to pick up any loose ends and finalize the arrangements for the wedding.' (From an RC parish.)

An ecumenical day course

Churches in the centre of Rugby invited all couples known to be planning to marry within a year to a marriage preparation day. Their aim was to supplement local church preparation with expertise and opportunities that none of the participating churches could offer by themselves. The sessions were led by experienced counsellors who were supported by an older couple from one of the churches. A meal was included in the programme. All costs incurred were met by the churches.

Materials used on the day included some prepared by FLAME, and videos produced by Marriage Care and the Church Pastoral Aid Society. The programme employed a variety of learning techniques, but aimed to offer a very relaxed atmosphere. Some light-hearted exercises helped to achieve this. Couples received a take-home pack of materials to stimulate further discussion.

Contributing churches included: Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, New Testament Church Of God, Religious Society of Friends: Quakers, United Reformed, Roman Catholic.

Using an outside agency

A local ecumenical clergy team wanted to set up a joint day preparation course. They discussed this in their own churches, but were unable to get a group to plan, organize and run it. They decided to invite the local Relate Centre to run the course for them. The small group appointed to organize the day met the Relate trainer, and talked through the issues of contract and costs. The clergy took responsibility for meeting each couple before the course, encouraging them to attend it and offering them the opportunity to discuss it afterwards, as well as adding specific denominational input. The couples were invited to contribute towards the expenses, and the churches shared the outstanding costs. The one-day course was run by the Relate trainer, and covered topics such as expectations and assumptions about marriage, communication, managing change and dealing with conflict. The feedback given by couples was good and a follow-up day is planned.

Some responses from course participants

'Our communication has increased tenfold'

'It brought the Church's beliefs into everyday life'

'We could never talk about sex and sexuality before'

Ideas for involving the church community

Some churches have found it helpful:

- to invite groups of engaged couples to a 'normal' Sunday service for a general welcome and a blessing;
- to bless the engagement ring at a public service as soon as the wedding is booked;
- to pray for engaged couples at Sunday services;
- to pay the church costs of couples who would not otherwise marry in church;
- to help couples with the cost of reception or flowers;
- to put the names of engaged couples on the pew leaflets;
- to give each couple a recording of their wedding service;
- to give each couple a Bible soon after arranging their wedding date;
- to decorate a banner with the initials of each couple and place it in church.

Can we invite our friends who've recently married? They are having problems and this is just what they need.

(from a course participant)

Chapter Twelve

What Can I Do Next?

Think!

- How useful have you found this booklet?

Discuss!

- Discuss this booklet with colleagues in your church.
- Discuss this booklet with colleagues in your denomination.
- Discuss this booklet with your local ecumenical group.

Pray!

- Compare what is happening currently with what has been put forward here. Be affirmed in the good things you do, and be challenged to do more.

Decide!

- What you will do to enhance marriage preparation in the future.

Chapter Thirteen

Member Churches and Organisations

Association of Interchurch Families	International Ministerial Council of GB
Association of Separated and Divorced Catholics	Methodist Church
Baptist Union of Great Britain	Moravian Church
CARE for the Family	Mothers' Union
Catholic Bishops Committee for Marriage and Family Life	NCH Action for Children
Catholic Child Welfare Council	National Christian Education Council
Catholic Marriage Care	Network of Access & Child Contact Centres
Christian Aid	Partners in Learning
Church of England Board for Social Responsibility	Promoting Marriage
FLAME (Family Life and Marriage Preparation)	Religious Society of Friends
Family Caring Trust	Salvation Army
Focolare - New Families	Scripture Union
Free Churches' Council	Seventh Day Adventist Church
Greek Orthodox Church	Spurgeon's Child Care
Independent Methodist Churches	St George's House
International Anglican Family Network	Teams of Our Lady
	The Children's Society
	United Reformed Church

Mailing members

Christians Aware
NACCAN (National Association of Christian Communities and Networks)