

# The Contribution of Counseling Providers to the Success or Failure of Marriages

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## Abstract

This study is an investigation into the contribution of counseling providers to the success or failure of marriages. The purposive and the simple random sampling methods were used to select eight churches and 259 respondents (married people) in the Techiman Municipality. The instrument used to collect data was a 26-item questionnaire including a five-point likert type scale designed by the researcher and was administered to married people. The researcher however had three research questions to work with. The major result was that counselling providers contribute positively in the Techiman Municipality so far as marriage is concerned. It is therefore being suggested that premarital counselling should be maintained and encouraged in all churches.

**Keywords:** Premarital Counseling, Counseling Providers, Married Couples, Counseling

## 1. Introduction

The term counselling has been used to show a wide range of procedures including advice giving, support in times of trouble or need, encouragement, information giving and the test interpretation.

According to Altman (1996), counselling is that activity which aims to help people towards constructive change in any or every aspect of life through a caring relationship which has agreed boundaries. He argues further that, counselling can cover a spectrum from befriending and listening, through to psychotherapy, but a counsellor is generally thought of as someone in the middle of his spectrum, who is skilled in listening and helping.

George and Cristaini (1991) also defined counselling as a one-to one helping relationship that focuses on a person's growth, adjustment, problem solving and decision-making needs. Counselling is therefore concerned with creating opportunities and suitable environments for the personal, social, educational and vocational growth of the individual. It deals mainly with the affective side of the individual based on attitudes about the value and worth of human beings.

Counselling is part of the guidance programme and may be defined as an open ended, face-to face problem solving which a student or counselee can focus and begin to solve a problem with professional assistance. It is a process that takes place over a period of time. In counselling, a person in need of help is assisted to solve his problems, or to know and understand himself. It is an intimate relationship in which two people – a counsellor and a counselee come together and the former helps the latter to solve his problems. Counselling is personal and highly emotional since the counselee talks about himself.

To be effective, counselling must be characterized by communication between the counsellor and client. Each pays particular attention to the feelings and problems of the other. They interact because the client may by his behaviour and facial expression, send messages to the counsellor who is expected to pay attention. Counsellors do not only listen with their ears but also with their eyes.

The actual differences between the terms guidance and counselling have been a subject of debate, even among specialists. Categorical differences are all but impossible to find. Shertzer and Stone (1976), claim that, trying to differentiate between these two terms has not met any notable degree of success. They further argue that distinctions between them are artificial and that the terms should be used interchangeably. One can deduce from the arguments raised above that guidance and counselling are both concerned with normal developmental needs of all students. They are concerned with the assistance that can be given to students to enable them increase their self-understanding and to learn to use both their internal and external resources in the effective and responsible management of their lives.

Guidance and counselling therefore according to Ipaye (1990) provide an atmosphere as well as a setting physical, social and psychological within which a group of persons (the counsellor and counselee) can make appropriate choices and decisions from a number of alternatives. Counselling is therefore concerned with creating opportunities and suitable environment for personal, social, educational and vocational growth of the individual. It deals mainly with the effective side of the individual, based on attitudes about the value and worth of human beings. Guidance helps people to know themselves and use that knowledge to act independently to adjust to life's problem and in making choices.

According to Eshun (2006), guidance whether on individual or group basis includes all those services that contribute to the individual's understanding of himself, his attitude, interest, abilities, his physical, mental

and social maturity and his personal and social needs for optimum development, achievement and life adjustments. Guidance therefore helps people to know themselves and use that knowledge to act independently to adjust to life's problems and making choices.

All pupils and students would like to be happy, be in good health, excel in academic work and learn to assume personal responsibilities as they grow (Eshun, 2006). To achieve this, the counsellor must exhibit some characteristics of good counselling including: empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, concreteness and establishment of good rapport.

#### **Empathic Understanding**

The counsellor's ability to understand the client's internal frame of reference (to sense individual's exactly the feelings the pupils are going through at immediate) to understand the meaning of verbal and non-verbal responses. In addition, the counsellor will be able to communicate these feelings back to the counsellee.

#### **Unconditional positive regard**

The counsellor possesses the attributes of experience and communicates acceptance, respect, interest and liking for the children. The counsellor is not judgmental. He does not lay down conditions or rules for the clients before accepting and caring for them. He perceives the clients as unique persons.

#### **Concreteness**

The ability of the counsellor to make his statement about the client's behaviour clear and straight to the point. Concreteness assumes the avoidance of ambiguity and contradiction on the part of the client.

#### **Establishment of good rapport**

Rapport is established and maintained by counsellors who are genuinely interested in the individuals with whom they work. Ivey (1983) states that, the two most important micro skills for rapport building are basic attending behaviour and client observation skills a counsellor needs to tune into what the client is thinking and feeling and how the client is behaving. Establishing and maintaining rapport is vital for the disclosure of information and the ultimate success of counselling.

#### **Professional and pastoral programme**

Ellis (2000) indicates that pre-marriage counselling is a psychological counselling given to prospective wives and husbands before marriage. It plays an important role in building healthy marriages. Many marriage studies and researches have shown that pre-marriage counselling helps reduce the possibility of divorce. Couples who attend pre-marriage counselling classes are able to better overcome challenges and difficulties. Pre-marriage counselling sessions create an awareness of marital issues and problems that might occur in marital relationship. Pre-marriage counselling programmes also assists people in determining if they are fully ready for marriage. Counselling sessions range from two or more meetings to relatively long discussions. Religious counsellors commonly give pre-marriage counselling. Pastoral counsellors provide spiritual as well as psychological resources to improve communication among couples. Pastoral pre-marriage counselling programmes are designed to assist the couple in building a biblical understanding and foundation for their married life (Ellis, 2000)

Religious institutions, colleges and other educational institutions, non-profit organizations, and professional marriage counsellors offer pre-marriage counselling courses. Counselling courses generally cover topics such as identifying strength and growth areas, developing conflict resolution skills, intimacy and sexuality issues, values and beliefs, setting up family goals, personality types, family origin issues, role relationships, communication skills, marriage expectations, children and parenting issues, and, the most important of all, financial issues. In addition to the above, pre-marriage counselling courses share group experiences, and encourage reading and homework activities. These activities help couples build a solid foundation for their life. Pre-marriage counselling programmes are also offered online. A number of online pre-marriage counselling programmes present a wedding information packet to the couple in the beginning (Ellis, 2000). Before choosing a pre-marriage counsellor, check his certification, educational background, professional associations, and training. Also, check whether he has experience with the job, because that can be an important factor.

#### **Personnel involved in provision of premarital counselling programmes**

According to Amato and Rogers (1997), relationships are necessarily complex. It will be helpful to a counsellor to align and govern their approach with a particular style. There are three usual styles of approach to pre-marital counselling:

##### **Instructive**

Pre-marriage counselling has previously been very much the province of churches and religious groups. In this traditional approach there was a tendency to 'instruct' people and to act as a moral and spiritual advisor to the 'right' way of going about a marriage.

Obviously a counsellor is not going to be instructive in the sense of trying to be a moral or spiritual guide for clients. Neither are they going to tell clients how to think or behave. They may however find themselves sharing knowledge they have acquired, using it as a basis for discussion.

In this sense couples might be asked to consider books, articles, DVDs and so on and see what

opinions and viewpoints are stimulated by this. This can promote a productive exchange of ideas and viewpoints.

### **Predictive**

Prediction in relationships is normally the province of psychologists and sociologists. They consult social trends while administering questionnaires to clients, gather and analyse the information and then provide feedback as to what these clients can expect in their lives and relationships.

Counsellors will not act in this role, but can draw some useful information from the social scientists. Because relationships are so complex, counsellors can gain a measure of preparedness from the research that has been done. And one can consider the research in light of two main questions: What seems to help to bring about a happy marriage? What seems to cause a marriage to break down?

### **Therapeutic**

Approaching pre-marital counselling with a certain program of actions in mind will give the counselling a degree of coherence. However, a key to all counselling lies in recognition of the unique nature of clients. In pre-marital counselling two unique people have presented themselves who have walked their own path in life, have a distinct personal identity and their own set of hopes, problems and fears as individuals.

A person-centred therapeutic approach will therefore be best, by stimulating discussion and asking about the concerns of the couple, by observing their reactions and interactions and by guiding them to form constructive conclusions and resolutions about their future together.

As always with counselling, there will be as many potential situations as there are people, so flexibility and a willingness to attune to individual needs is vital. One is not expected to be an 'expert' in relationships, one needs only to be a good listener and something of a guide. Counsellors will find themselves involved in stimulating conversations about some very precious hopes and some deep-seated fears.

As with all person centred therapy, there is no need to 'solve' anything, but simply to be there with enough compassion and interest to ensure that the conversations are as fruitful and helpful as possible.

Featherstone (2006) argues that to achieve a 'satisfactory outcome' a counsellor will need to establish a goal with the clients at the outset of counselling, but the goals will generally fall into one of three categories:

1. For those that are very certain about getting married, giving them the understanding and the tools necessary to be able to negotiate the road ahead.
2. Helping those that are uncertain to have more certainty about getting married. Time permitting they might also receive some help in preparing for what lies ahead.
3. Helping the couple to come to the realisation that they are not meant for each other, or that the time is not right for marriage. The counsellor is here partly acting as a catalyst, speeding up the reactions that might otherwise take months or years to come to light.

Marriage is a commitment, but one should keep in mind that there are different types of commitment in marriage. There is the fear of the social, financial and emotional costs of ending a marriage. There is a commitment based on the idea of the importance of the social institution of marriage.

These commitments have their own relevance according to what individuals feel is important to them. Ideally, however, we are seeking a commitment that is based on attraction, devotion, satisfaction and love (Adams and Jones, 1997).

Couples who are in a lasting marriage are found to be more accommodating towards each other and more tolerant of each other's faults, they are also found to be better and more consistent in communicating and problem solving, including the way they handle conflict (Adams and Jones, 1997).

Therefore a counsellor can look at helping a couple to be 'accommodating' in the sense of developing realistic goals and expectations of marriage and their marital partner. The counsellor can also consider helping the couple to be better communicators and also better at handling the conflicts that will inevitably arise.

As stated earlier, it should be kept in mind that it is not necessary to apply every step to each and every client. It is best to get some preliminary information and then tailor an approach to the clients. Another suggestion is that sessions should be kept light if possible and a spirit of fun maintained in the counselling, where this is relevant.

Normally one will be talking to two people who are very excited about what lies ahead and they will not want to delve too deeply or heavily into all sorts of life issues. Part of the adventure of marriage is the unknown and it will not be possible to cover all bases and all possible eventualities.

In other words the counsellor should not try to be the 'be all and end all' to the clients with this counselling. The counselling may only last a few sessions. Whatever the outcome, counsellors should endeavour to have our clients leave with a better understanding of who they are, what they want in life and how to go about achieving that.

A general interview should be done at the beginning of the counselling. This is a way of getting to know the individual needs of the couple and something of their history. Then an approach can be tailored to suit them. One of the decisions a counsellor needs to make is to what extent they will be seen as individuals and to what extent they should be seen together. It is recommended that early on in the counselling they are both seen

separately.

The reasons for this may be obvious. A counsellor may need to be a bridge between the two at times and there may be issues that some people are sensitive about discussing in front of their partner. A counsellor may also find that they have to deal with an individual's very unique and personal problems, something that may require individual attention.

If the couple are seen separately early on in the counselling it will not seem unusual or 'conspiratorial' if they need to be seen separately later on. So the approach could go something like this:

- Interview them as a couple
- See each of them separately
- From then on, vary the sessions between couple and individual

The first interviews will be an opportunity for a counsellor to make two major lines of enquiry:

1. What sort of positive issues and negative issues are they bringing into the relationship? As individuals what has been their history? Do they have a traumatic background? If so is their partner ready to deal with this? What sort of family of origin issues are they likely to bring into the relationship?
2. How are they interacting as a couple, what does their communication and body language tell us? When the couple is interviewed together, it is useful to watch for signs of one person simply going along with what the other one says. It may be opportune to follow up on this, and ask the one who is being 'agreeable' if they have needs and opinions they are not stating, as this could be a source of conflict that will arise later on.

One can also watch for signs of latent aggression. Is one showing signs of losing their temper with the other? Is one overtly or covertly putting the other one down? Anything else can be noted, according to the observational skills and experience of the counsellor. From a couple's perspective, it is unlikely that anything will help more, in their negotiation of any difficulties in the future, than clear, heartfelt communication with each other.

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What category of persons typically deliver premarital counselling?
2. In what way do marriage counsellors contribute to the break in marriages?
3. What factors contribute to the success of marriage apart from premarital counselling?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The descriptive survey was used for the study. According to Gay (1992), the descriptive survey design involves the collection of data in order to test hypotheses or to answer questions concerning the current status of the subject of study. A descriptive survey determines and reports existing conditions. This design was considered the most appropriate because the issue of study already exists.

### The population

The population of the study consisted of all married people in selected churches in Techiman, numbering 2,399. Churches were mainly used for the study since it appears that they are very particular about premarital counselling and therefore a lot of their members go through it before marriage.

### Sample and sampling technique

The sampling procedures employed for the study were the purposive and the simple random sampling. The purposive sampling brought out churches which actually offer premarital counselling and the simple random sampling gave equal chances to all the churches to be selected and also the counselors as well. The researcher chose 330 as a sample size since her population size is 2,399.

To arrive at the figure 330, 14% of the total population of each church were sampled. According to Alreck and Settle (1985) a sample size of 10% or more of a population is enough to obtain adequate confidence. It is important to indicate that 259 out of the 330 returned their questionnaires, representing 78 per cent retrieval.

### Instrumentation

Questionnaires were the main instruments used for the data collection in the study. They were designed based on the review of related literature and the research questions.

### Data analysis procedure

Respondents were requested to respond to all the items on the questionnaire. In scoring the questionnaire, each of the 259 questionnaires which were retrieved was given a code to facilitate easy identification. Responses to the various items were coded and tabulated. In most of the items, options were provided for respondents to choose from.

## 3. Data Analysis And Discussion Of Findings

### The persons who typically deliver premarital counselling

The research question one sought to find out the persons who provide premarital counselling services in the

Techiman Municipality. Out of the 259 respondents, 126 went through premarital counseling and could really tell who deliver premarital counseling. Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents' responses on the item.

**Table 6: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Counselling Providers**

Person	Frequency	Percent (%)
Pastors	57	45.2
Church Elders	5	4.0
Church Counsellors	43	34.1
Counsellors outside the Church	5	4.0
Others	16	12.7
Total	126	100

Source: Field work, 2008

From Table 1, all the five categories of people in the table render premarital counselling services. However, of more prominence are pastors, followed by church counsellors and others. Church elders and counsellors outside the church come last with 5 (4.0%) of the respondents each.

**Ways by which marriage counsellors contribute to the break in marriage**

In what ways do marriage counsellors contribute to the break in marriages?

This research question sought to find out whether marriage counsellors contribute to the break in marriages and how they do this. The item on the questionnaire which addressed this research question sought to know whether or not it is true that counselors contribute to the break in marriage. Table 2 gives the data on this item.

**Table 2: Frequency distribution of responses on whether counsellors contribute to break in marriage**

Response	Frequency	Percents (%)
Yes	67	26
No	192	74
Total	259	100

Source: Field work, 2008

From the information on Table 2 above, counselors do not contribute to the break in marriage. This is depicted by 67 (26%) responses from respondents who responded 'Yes' and 192 (74%) responses of respondents who responded 'No'.

On how counsellors contribute to the break in marriage, the following facts were revealed. Some of the responses of 67 respondents who indicated that counsellors contribute to the break in marriage were as follows:

1. "If they do not put across the right message the marriage can break down"
2. "They are human so they can make mistakes"
3. "When counselors bring class into marriage (an educated person should not marry an illiterate)"
4. "Some counselors use their own experience to counsel would-be couples". These experiences may not be applicable to those being counselled".
5. "If would-be couple are not made to know possible problems which could arise later"
6. "They sometimes give wrong information"

In conclusion, it can be said that majority of the respondents do not agree that counsellors contribute to break in marriage

**Other factors that contribute to the success of a marriage**

What factors contribute to the success of a marriage apart from premarital counselling? This research question explored other possible factors that are responsible for the success of marriages apart from premarital counselling. Table 3 gives the data on this item.

**Table 3: Frequency distribution of factors contributing to the success of marriage apart from premarital counselling**

Factor	Frequency	Percent (%)
Love, patience/tolerance/understanding, and trust/honesty/faithfulness	68	26.3
Prayer/word of God, marriage seminars/books, and advice from pastors and church elders	60	23.2
Others	131	50.6
Total	259	100

Source: Field work, 2008

Table 3 indicates that 68 (26.3%) of the respondents admitted that love, patience/tolerance/understanding, and trust/honesty/faithfulness are three factors that have worked out to ensure the success of their marriage. Sixty (23.2%) of the respondents on the other hand indicated that prayer/word of



God, marriage seminars/books, and advice from pastors and church elders are the factors that have sustained their marriages apart from premarital counselling. The majority, 131 (50.6%) of the respondents claimed that other factors such as good financial management, respect for each other, caring for each other, unity, doing things in common, and openness are the factors that are responsible for the sustenance of their marriages.

In conclusion, apart from premarital counselling other factors that account for the success of marriages according to respondents, are love, patience, tolerance, understanding, trust, honesty, faithfulness, prayer, word of God, marriage seminars, reading of books, and advice from pastors and church elders good financial management, respect for each other, caring for each other, unity, doing things in common, and openness to each other.

#### 4. Conclusions

Research question one sought to address the issue on counselling providers and it was realized that pastors were the most prominent, followed by church counsellors and church elders. Counsellors outside the church had the least on the distribution of responses.

“In what way do marriage counsellors contribute to the break in marriage?” was posed for research question 2. Here most of the respondents (74%) refuted the idea that counsellors contribute to the break in marriage. The few who agreed to this said some counsellors do not give the right message because they always want to use their own experiences which may not work for their clients.

Finally, it was established that the following factors contribute to the success of a marriage apart from premarital counselling: love, patience, tolerance, understanding, trust, honesty, faithfulness, prayer, word of God, marriage seminars, reading of marriage books, pieces of advice from pastors and church elders. Others are good financial management, respect for each others, caring for each other, unity, doing things in common and openness to each other.

#### 5. Recommendations

In light of the findings and the conclusions outlined above, the following recommendations are made:

It is recommended that the intensity of marriage counselling should not be limited to only the Christian churches, but also Muslim mosques. There should also be a lot of secular counsellors to also help. All these can be a reality if more counsellors are trained. This means that universities should increase their intake for guidance and counselling so that more could be turned out as professional counselors.

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