

Fostering Responsible Citizenship through Effective Preparation for Harmonious Family Relationships

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Abstract

Responsible citizenship is necessary for the development of any society and it can be learned in our homes wherever there are harmonious family relationships. This is based on the premise that the family is the first contact point of any citizen of a nation. Living harmoniously is possible only if the couple who serves as the foundation of the family can handle conflict responsibly. Conflict can be a catalyst for positive change if properly handled. Responsible citizenship requires that citizens know how to handle conflicts which is a direct function of having the right understanding of conflicts; such an understanding can start from the home. This underscores the need for couples themselves to know how to handle conflict before they can help their children. This study embarked on an exploration of the effectiveness of preparation of intending couples for conflict transformation in marriage with a view to understanding the present premarital counseling strategies and possible improvements. This is a descriptive research that used one hundred and twenty (120) self-administered questionnaires and in-depth interviews of twenty persons. The respondents, all of whose marriages were conducted in Baptist churches located in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, have been married for at least five years and twenty-five years respectively. From the field survey, four major themes were identified; namely, the strategies of premarital counseling, major socio-cultural mindsets that promote conflicts, the role of pastors in handling conflict, and how the Baptist church can help in conflict transformation in marriage. Key findings include major kinds of premarital counseling, the most effective way of preparing people for marriage, the attitude of most intending couples, a comprehensive counseling approach to assist pastors, and negative socio-cultural mindsets that must change. The recommendations include the need for marital mentorship, making one-on-one counseling more appealing to couples through the use of technology.

Key Words: Responsible citizens, Marriage, Counseling strategies, Socio-cultural mindset, Conflict transformation.

Introduction

Responsible citizenship is necessary for the development of any society and it can be learned in our homes where there are harmonious marriage/family relationships. This is based on the premise that the family is the first contact point of any citizen of the nation. A marriage which is the bedrock of the family is an institution ordained by God to raise godly children who will eventually become responsible citizens (Deut. 6:6-9; Prov. 22:6).

Prevailing situations make one wonder what is becoming of some citizens by the way they live their marital life. A retired Federal High Court Judge in Nigeria was reported as saying that there is an increase in divorce at an alarming rate among highly educated couples found especially in the urban areas (Akande, 2004, pp.198-199), those whom one would expect to live as responsible citizens.

Port Harcourt falls under the category of an urban area in Nigeria where many couples experience marital problems. Personal observations reveal that most Christians when preparing to enter into marriage do so with the belief that all things will move on well. They think they will continue to live together and keep loving each other without any problem. But relationships generally play between the drama of painful and wonderful experiences (Holladay, 2008, p.21). Sooner or later, challenges begin to show up that test their love for one another. Unfortunately, many of these couples seem to think that their marriage will just work out naturally; hence, they fail to prepare for those challenges.

The marriage institution in Africa is highly honored by Africans (Oduro, 2010). This important institution serves as the foundation for many other institutions (Adams, 1972, p.4). Marriage, like any other human relationship is prone to conflict (Lederach, 2003, p.5). Therefore, whatever wants to negatively affect the institution must be fought to a standstill. This study focuses on the issue of effective preparation for conflict transformation in marriage by exploring two major areas; namely, socio-cultural mindsets that promote conflict

in marriage and approaches to resolving conflicts in a transformative manner. This is with the view of seeing those beliefs that must change for marriage to succeed. The study further explores steps that the Church must take to encourage intending couples to prepare themselves for marriage from the biblical perspective.

This paper, therefore, aims at providing enlightenment on what it takes to prepare young people for marriage, and by extension to become responsible citizens. It also intends to strike a balance between culture and faith to make room for living as responsible citizens of the society. And finally, it aims at providing an African perspective to prevailing realities in marriage preparation as they affect Africans. This research was guided by four questions: 1) which strategies do Baptist churches in Port Harcourt use to prepare young people for marital conflict 2) what are the major socio-cultural mindsets that promote marital conflict in South-Southern Nigeria 3) what are the approaches used by Baptist pastors to resolve their members' marital conflicts 4) what can the Baptist church do to help couples to engage in transformative conflict responses.

Methodology

This researcher employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods which provided opportunities to develop descriptive, practical experiences, mindsets and understanding of married people. The researcher used a purposive sampling method to survey respondents drawn from various Baptist Churches in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The researcher used a self-administered questionnaire on married people who were legally married in a Baptist church with at least five years' marital experience. A total of one hundred and twenty people participated in the survey. Furthermore, in-depth interviews with twenty experienced married people who were legally wedded in a Baptist church with at least twenty-five years marital experience were conducted to triangulate results from questionnaires. The researcher also consulted relevant literature.

Biblical Perspective of Christian Marriage

The biblical perspective of Christian marriage is what one can call the ideal for marriage. To be effectively prepared for marital conflict calls for a proper understanding of God's intention for instituting marriage. For a marriage to operate according to God's intention, the husband as a responsible citizen must be in charge of the roles well defined. This is best stated in Hughes's words, "show me a marriage in which the roles are clearly defined, clearly understood and acted upon, and I will show you a marriage where relationships blossom like a beautiful flower" (Hughes, 1998, p.25). Wherever a relationship blossoms, members will do their best to be responsible members of the society. Furthermore, Hughes highlighted the roles of the husband and wife as spelled out by the Bible which, if properly understood, will significantly reduce negative responses to conflict in marriage and the society at large.

Adams approached the issue of God's intention for marriage in a unique way. He treated the Christian home as a place of transformation. He believes a lovely Christian home is not an idyllic place where peace and quiet, tranquility and joy continuously reign because it is a place where 'sinners' live. (1972, p.10). However, he also noted that the Christians must progress from sinful nature to righteousness (1972, pp.11-12). This underscores the need for transformation in every Christian home. He further stated that ideally, marriage is a covenant which is not to be broken by man or woman. This understanding will help marriages to function according to God's intention. Trobisch on his part made it clear that to experience marriage as God intended it, it must be entered into properly based on "leaving, cleaving and becoming one" (2000, pp.21-22). He also laid emphasis that real leaving which involves both outward and inward dimensions is difficult for men and women (2000, p.24). This explains why some people still pay more allegiance to the extended family at the expense of their

immediate families. Becoming one, he believes should not only be in body but also in thinking and feelings which involve joy, sorrow, fear, failure, and successes, etc.

A concept of shalom for wholistic development was put forward by Jakonda (2001, pp. 50-51) that can be applicable to the ideal marriage. He discussed the three-dimensional relationship between people and God which includes God at the top of the triangle while self is at the bottom left side and others on the bottom right side (2001, p.65). This underscores the need for God in experiencing smooth human relationships, be it in marriage or the society. A few gaps may be observed: Adams failed to mention the issue of mentoring people going into a marriage. Neither did he mention the need for preparation as a means of raising responsible citizens. Trobisch did not mention anything about conflict and how it can be handled, nor did he mention the need for training people as they prepare for marriage. To address the gaps in previous research and accomplish the aims of this paper, a contemporary perspective must be explored.

Marriage: A contemporary perspective

This section addresses contemporary marriage and reveals the perversion of marriage in our society today leading to many problems and ultimately to divorce. Widespread negative cultural beliefs are being placed above biblical teachings. Akande revealed that wrong criteria are being used to determine the success of marriage resulting in a high percentage of divorce amongst the educated urban population (2004, pp.41-42). Akande gave some reasons for divorce which include; immaturity, lack of mutual interests and goals, the burden of children, financial problems, physical abuse, sexual incompatibility, drinking, interference from in-laws, mental cruelty, etc. These are what can be called “wrong mindsets promoting conflicts” (2004, pp.200-205). The behaviors are contrary to what is expected of a responsible citizen.

O'Donovan on his own part pointed to an erroneous understanding on the subject of fruitfulness in marriage as a bane to success in some marriages (2000, p. 46). Some couples believe in unlimited procreation; they do not believe in family planning. He further revealed that replacement of the Biblical truth with cultural norms is the problem of many modern marriages (2000, p.50). Kitembo et al. stated that the Christian marriage rate is declining in some African countries (1998, p.25). While that may not be absolutely true in Nigeria, one thing is glaringly obvious: Christian or local government registry marriages may seem to be on the increase, but the quality of some of those marriages does not seem to be increasing due to more cases of divorce being experienced (Akande, p.205).

The authors revealed that 're-Africanization' is one of the issues that contribute to the problem of marriage because schools that prepare people for responsible citizenship among other things were forcibly taken out of the control of the Church (Kitembo et al., 1998, pp.27-28). Akande gave a lot of helpful insights but his study was limited to Western Nigeria and cannot be blindly applied to the Southern Nigerian region. That leaves a gap to be filled by this research. Moving away from marriage as it is today, a review was done on conflict transformation in marriage.

Conflict Transformation in Marriage

This section focuses on conflict transformation in marriage. Lederach presented great insights on conflict transformation; he puts conflict as a motor of change (2003, p.5). He advocates for the need to look at the entire picture of conflict because conflict transformation is more than specific techniques but a way of looking and seeing. He stressed the need to address the content, the context, and the structure of the relationship (2003, p.9). His approach to conflict could be very helpful in relationships generally and marriage in particular. However, it must be noted that Lederach's approach lacks biblical backing and hence cannot stand for a biblical way of resolving a conflict.

Pegues, in agreement with other conflict experts, reveals that conflict is common to all due to our uniqueness by creation (2009, p.13). Four styles of conflict resolution similar to those of other authors were highlighted, namely; dictating, accommodating, abdicating, and collaborating being the best (2009, pp.32-40). This view is also supported by other scholars. The gaps in her work include not specifically focusing on marriage. Also, the work contains a primarily western emphasis, using words like ‘confrontation,’ a term that can put many African men off.

Sande and Johnson (2011) reveal the need to engage the power that brings transformation due to conflict. In highlighting reactions to conflict, they mentioned three responses; escape, attack, and peacemaking. Peacemaking is the best according to the authors. Biblical steps to resolving conflicts like prayers, giving one’s heart, seeking godly advice, doing right always, and recognizing one’s limit. The book highlighted what is expected of responsible citizens and they are also useful for handling conflict. However, one drawback is that the book is written for a foreign audience. Chapman on his own part mentioned two modes of conflict resolution, namely; argument and resolution modes. Resolution mode helps couples to learn to understand, encourage, and support each other. He also mentioned the need for some changes in mind-sets for responsible living (2006, pp.6-15).

Lederach sees peacebuilding as a part of the process needed for conflict transformation. He also sees reconciliation as a meeting place for the past and future (1998, p.27). This can only be sustained by responsible citizenship. Lederach’s work sheds light on the subject of conflict transformation and it can be useful for resolving marriage conflict in the area of study. Rothman states that conflict can bring out the best in people and emphasized the need to see conflict as an opportunity for growth (1997, p. xii). He introduced the ARIA process as a way of resolving a conflict. The acronym ARIA stands for four

operating words namely; antagonism, resonance, invention, and action. Rothman explains that each of those words stands for each step of handling conflict. Although not acknowledged by the author, there is an aspect of the process (antagonism) that can be dangerous without the help of God.

The Church as Agent of Transformation

The church as an agent of transformation is addressed in this last section of the review. For couples to be well prepared for marriage and responsible citizenship, the church has a great role to play in providing proper education and training for the young ones. Robinson and Wall emphasized leadership qualities of those who will lead others to transformation; describing the state of the church today as a place filled with all sorts of people who seem to think they are in charge. The situation of the church is such that leadership and authority are frequently being misunderstood and often contested (2012, p.1). They also state many options of what people imagine pastors to be which range from speakers, developers, managers, community activists etc. (2012, pp.31-32). They unequivocally stated the need to understand the essential work of a pastoral leader as stated in the Bible, that the pastor is to be a teacher of the faith in order to bring order to the household of God who will in turn go and affect their society positively. The church seems to be losing its grip on the society and is becoming filled with a lot of irresponsible citizens making crime rates increase.

Conclusively, the literature reviewed revealed many areas of marriage and conflict handling. The major gap is lack of focus on training or retraining for a proper mindset as applicable to the intending couple and responsible residents of Port Harcourt. There is also a shortcoming on what the church must do to help married couples who are being torn apart by conflict in a context such as in Port Harcourt. There is, therefore, a need for research that will explore the practical steps that church leaders must begin to take in order to help conflicting

couples because every unresolved conflict will snowball into affecting the larger society. The church leadership must play an uncompromising role without fear of any kind. This study dug deeper into the context of marriage in Port Harcourt and came out with recommendations that will promote conflict transformation in Christian marriage and help raise responsible citizens in the society.

Results and Discussion of Findings

The researcher was able to retrieve one hundred (100) copies out of one hundred and twenty (120) self-administered questionnaires. Also, data were gathered from in-depth interviews of twenty persons. Questionnaire respondents were 58 men representing 58% and 42 women representing 42%, while in-depth interview respondents were 10 men and 10 women making 50% for each gender. The marital experience of all the couples in terms of years is advantageous because they must have experienced a lot of conflicts over the years. Their years of staying together in marriage and their Christian testimony made their contributions of great value. The following are summaries of questionnaire results and interviews with the couples.

Interaction with Biblical and Theological context

The researcher interacted with scripture with a view to understanding the nature and manner of ideal responses in conflict situations as it can be applicable to real life situations. The study shows in conformity with scripture what can be called the most effective behaviors in handling marital conflicts. Seventy percent of the respondents cited the following behaviors; love, selflessness, humility, forgiveness, self-control, and patience as the most effective behaviors. The Bible names them “the fruit of the Holy Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23). The couples for the in-depth interviews also alluded to those virtues. The research further highlighted some of the behaviors that have helped the married couples in their marital

conflict situations. The following themes were revealed which will not only promote peace in marriage but also promote responsible citizenship:

Love: The couples established that love is the greatest factor that has helped in the handling of their marital conflicts. Couple A stated that couples must love each other because without love, conflicts will surely crop up more regularly. The couple suggested that openness to each other and that forgiveness in marriage will strengthen unity and for love to strive.

Selflessness: The couples opined that selflessness in marriage helps to keep it strong. Couple D said, “selflessness eliminates cheating and hurting each other in marriage but increases the ability to sacrifice for each other.”

Humility: All the couples opined that when there is humility, love will thrive. Humility does not mean stupidity. When there is a lack of humility in marriage there are bound to be problems. Arrogance is likely to break up marriages.

Forgiveness: Couple F indicated that marriage without forgiveness may not last. The Bible warned that we should be angry but not sin. Those who keep malice do not have peace. The peace mentioned here is very necessary because peace and holiness are like companions.

Jones said: “human beings are called to become holy by embodying forgiveness through specific habits and practices that seek to remember the past truthfully, to repair the brokenness, to heal divisions, and reconcile and renew relationships.” (1995, p. xii).

Self-control: Couple H indicated that self-control helps to keep a man from negative behaviors. They opined that this has played a great role in their own relationships.

Patience: The couples stated that there is a need for couples to be patient with each other because there must surely be some ups and downs in life but with patience, conflicts could bring about the needed transformation amicably. They further opined that patience is important because it helps to increase hope in God. For example, Mrs. H explained how she endured certain things in her marriage. She said, “I was tired of being treated like an invisible

person in my husband's house but being patient with my husband, I was able to earn his trust, so he later believed in my decision-making abilities, giving him sound advice instead of quarreling with him in an effort to make my voice count in the house." Thankfully, Mr. H has dropped that wrong mindset and the marriage is a happy one. The patience of Mrs. H and how it eventually solved the problem underscores the fact that responding to conflict with transformative behaviors helps. The case of couple H aligns with the data from the questionnaire where about 70% include patience among the most effective behaviors in handling conflict.

When asked about the method(s) they employ to engage in transformative conflict behavior, the respondents outlined the following: Studying the Bible together, the use of dialogue, prayers. Husbands and wives have the responsibility to maintain unity because they have been bonded together for life with their spouses.

Research Question One: Which strategies do the Baptist churches in Port Harcourt use to prepare young people intending to marry for marital conflict?

The questionnaire survey revealed that the key strategies used for premarital counseling by Baptist churches in Port Harcourt include one-on-one counseling, Bible study, and general teaching. Also, a few of the respondents (3%) identified; marriage committees, discipleship, seminars and mentoring as additional strategies used to prepare intending couples for marital experiences. The results from the in-depth interview collaborate the results of the questionnaire. The responses of Couples A-J stated that they all had premarital preparation that took the form of counseling. This goes a long way to reinforce the fact that premarital counseling is usually considered when marriage is to be considered among the Baptists in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. However, the duration of the counseling differs from congregation to congregation, a fact which was revealed by the research through the questionnaire with a large percentage (61%) of respondents going for three months of

counseling. Of the respondents, 31% went for durations like two months, six months and two years. About 8% went for one month. The in-depth interview also confirmed the findings. The least length of time spent in counseling was 3 months while 2 years was the highest amount of time spent. These almost totally agree with the results of the questionnaire.

Comparing the two results presents a worrisome development; it shows that some people in the modern Church are beginning to reduce the seriousness attached to premarital counseling. Furthermore, due to results from both sides, the researcher observes that there is no definite order and every local congregation does what seems right to her. This development is confirming the statement of Robinson and Wall who state that, “several kinds of infection or illness are besetting the congregation today, especially due to lack of order.” (p.124). Where there is no order, people do what they like, and this is against the tenet of responsible citizenship.

Content and Effectiveness of Baptist Strategies

The content and effectiveness of the strategies used by the Baptist church in the area of study were revealed. The questionnaire revealed that 85% of respondents believe that Baptist’s strategies are good. Ninety-seven percent of the same respondents believe they are rich in biblical content, this is reinforced by 80% who believe that the strategies are targeted towards conflict transformation, and 82% believe that the strategies are effective. From the in-depth interviews, there is agreement with the questionnaire results that the content of the strategies is good and rich in biblical virtues. Mr. E said, “the sessions were scripture-based and we were encouraged to speak freely about any topic we were anxious or unclear about before entering into the union.” Couple A also supported the idea and they opined that the content of the marriage was based on the word of God. Both of them agreed that the strategies adopted were efficient in their marriage. Their submission confirms the finding Markman et. al. on what training can achieve. They state that couples who went through a

training program appear to have a significant advantage in communication and conflict management up to 4 years later.” (p.75). The fact that Couple A were still able to remember what they were taught 32 years previously because the teaching was scripture based is worthy of note. This, therefore, covers the gap that was not cover by Markman et al. who focused only on communication and conflict management. This goes a long way to underscore the fact that where there is proper preparation and training, responsible couples will be raised who themselves will raise responsible citizens for the society.

Research Question 2: What are the major socio-cultural mindsets that promote marital conflicts in South-Southern Nigeria?

The study confirms that marital conflicts are promoted by negative mindsets with 63% of respondents supporting the fact. Furthermore, responses of the couples interviewed also confirm the fact that negative socio-cultural mind-sets promote marital conflict in the area of study.

The survey revealed that the major socio-cultural mind-sets include materialism, individualism, negative western civilization and genderphobia among others. The data from in-depth interviews further collaborates the results above as the couples identified the above and others as major socio-cultural mind-sets promoting conflicts. For example, Mr. A strongly believed that the people of Southern Nigeria find it difficult to separate their culture from marriage and this has led to collapse of many marriages in the area. This has also made some to produce children they cannot care for, with the result that the children are abandoned. Mrs. A agreed with her husband and pointed towards polygamy and keeping of concubines as cultural practices as some of the issues promoting conflicts which are detrimental to happiness in marriage and responsible citizenship. While Couple B shared the belief that materialism is a major socio-cultural factor in marital conflict – they indicated that when there is an excessive passion for material things, it can affect marriage. Materialism as

one of the identified mind-sets has affected not only conflict in marriage but also the society. Many citizens live irresponsibly in order to amass wealth at the expense of their family and others in the society.

Negative cultural mind-sets were exhibited by extended family members. This was identified by Couple I, who identified intervention from extended family as a significant factor that leads to conflicts in the marriage. According to Mr. I, this intervention might be intentional (such as pressure heaped upon the couple if the union isn't blessed with a child immediately) or unintentional (the problem of allocating resources to the extended family members). This confirms the assertion of Trobisch who states that "real leaving that is not only outwardly but inwardly is difficult for anyone but is a command for both man and woman." (p.24). This mindset can also be grouped under materialism which took the largest percentage (58%) from questionnaire responses because the reason some family does not want to leave is that of financial benefits. However, if they follow the general rule of "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31, Matt. 22:39, Luke 10:27, Lev. 9:18) as stated in the Bible, it will be easy to leave the negative mindsets that promote unnecessary interference. Couples are to decide together among themselves without interference from outsiders. This fact bridged the gap to Trobisch's work because it provides an African perspective to the issue of leaving and cleaving.

Research Question 3: What are the approaches used by Baptist pastors to resolve their members' marital conflicts?

The research reveals the approaches used by the Baptist pastors in the area of study to resolve the marital conflicts of members. This gave an insight on what is obtainable therefore providing the possibility for improvements. The questionnaire survey reveals that 70% of the approaches are through one-on-one counseling, 7% is general teaching, 6% is Bible study, while all of the above is 15% and others are 2%. The experiences of the couples gathered

from in-depth also supported the idea of one-on-one counseling carrying the day as the common approach to handling members' marital conflicts. All the couples supported the idea of one-on-one counseling. The results are in agreement with the scriptural injunction that says, "plans fail for lack of counsel..." (Prov. 15:22).

Couple D wholeheartedly supports the one-on-one counseling of pastors in marital conflicts. They are of the opinion that pastors are not inclined to blame one party or act in a biased manner but settle conflicts using Bible-based principles. Another couple identified as Couple F gave their undivided support; Mr. F wholly supports the input of the pastor in resolving their marital conflicts. Mrs. F even went as far as saying, "it was the intervention of pastors through one-on-one counseling that helped our marriage last through that turbulent period. The pastors counseled both of us, encouraged open discussion between us and this helped to discover the root cause of the problem and eventually resolved it." This was a great learning experience for the couple according to Mrs. F. However, a few of the couples are of the opinion that not everything must be openly brought to the pastor. For example, Couple E believes that only sensitive issues should be referred to a pastor and even then, the pastor should be someone who the couple has found to be mature enough and disciplined enough to keep their marital problems confidential. Couple G on their part had no opinion on the subject of pastors' roles in conflict transformation. They believe that every couple should decide for themselves if they want to involve the church in resolving their marital problems. Their stand confirms what Robinson and Wall state that "the situation of the church is such that leadership and authority are frequently being misunderstood and often contested." (2012, p.1). Couple I have an opinion that is similar to that of Robinson and Wall on the subject of pastors. They strongly believe that some pastors are simply not fit to mediate in a conflict or offer sound marital advice and because of this the couple strongly advises that before a pastor

is called in to resolve or transform a conflict situation, that pastor should be competent enough to intervene.

Effective ways of preparing members to handle marital conflicts.

After the subject of methods comes the issue of better ways of helping to handle marital conflicts. The study reveals that about 44% of the responsibilities were laid solely on the couples themselves while 26% was on the counselor's responsibility. The result from the questionnaire is supported by induction made from the couples interviewed. In the course of the interview some of the couples mentioned that they did certain things like comparing their families to others though it was contrary to what they were taught during premarital counseling. These statements show that unless the intending couples are willing, there is little the counselor can do to help them. This goes a long way to establish the fact that couples have great roles to play in taking responsibility for themselves. This fact is underscored by the submission of Akande that some of the intending couples pursue vanities while preparing for marriage instead of consecrating on important things. This should be a challenge to all intending couple.

However, the study also reveals that other responsibilities are shared by couples and other stakeholders. Twenty-four percent of respondents from the questionnaire point out what can be called a shared responsibility, which is the responsibility of allowing the Word of God and not culture to be the final authority in handling conflicts. This result shows that the Word of God is very important for all areas of life, marriage inclusive. To enjoy marriage, the purpose of God must be understood and the only way to know that is through the Word of God. The purpose of marriage as highlighted by the Bible are: 1. The glory of God (1 Corinth. 10:13), 2. companionship (Gen. 2:18), 3. procreation (Gen.1:28), and 4. sexual intimacy (Gen. 2:24; 1 Corinth. 6:16). So every serious Christian must return to the Bible and not culture for guidance on all marriage matters. Furthermore, whereas some cultural mind-

sets fail, the scripture cannot fail, so following scriptural injunction makes for responsible citizenship.

Research Question 4: What can the Baptist church do to help couples to engage in transformative conflict responses?

The research reveals what the church can do to help members to learn and practice transformative responses in conflict situations. Different shades of responses by married people of different years of experiences in marriage were generated. It is interesting to note all experiences ranging from 5-10 year and those of 21 years and above all happen to correspond to what the church can do on the two occasions. They opted mostly for ‘emphasis on teaching the Bible’ and ‘organizing more marriage-related programs which cumulatively amount to 35% and 43% respectively. The fact that respondents from all levels of years of experience in marriage subscribed to two actions which account for 78% of what the church can do to help couple is very instructive. This shows that as far as these issues are concern age is not a barrier, hence both the younger and older couples are interested in experiencing peace at home.

The survey further shows that the organization of routine teaching by pastors can help couples engage in transformative responses. Others include outdoor activities such as couples’ nights, picnics and games. This will advance love among couples. The study also pointed out the need for couples to appreciate the uniqueness of one another as this will help them to respond to conflict better. Understanding each other’s temperaments and needs will help each spouse not to be surprised with a certain disposition of the other. This finding is in agreement with LaHaye’s teaching on temperaments (1999, pp.51-96). The research also shows that to be more effective, more emphasis must be placed on, i) one-on-one counseling, seminars, Bible study, Christian films and picnics that center on marriage. Experienced resource persons should be invited to deliver training in some cases, ii) books on marriages

should be made available to members to read and be transformed in their mentalities, iii) The church should always educate youths to know that marriage is a lifetime engagement. They should be introduced to materials, seminars and programmes that will aid them to get prepared for marriage (teach them to know that choosing a life partner has little to do with academic qualification and material possessions but to look unto God for whom he has prepared for them), iv) Young couples should be taught to base their marriage relationship on God and when there is a conflict, they should involve their pastor if they cannot resolve it.

All these findings are Scripture-based and are in line with most of what other scholars have written concerning experiencing peace and joy in Christian homes. However, it must be noted that they are adding originality to the subject matter thereby bridging some of the gaps in previous works because they are now speaking from the perspective of those who have been married for long and are living in the area of study. They have experiences about some of the issues raised and understand the peoples' needs and how they can be addressed

The study shows two directions which should be given maximum support; the first is early preparation for marriage through the Bible, prayers, and practical experiences. These suggestions were given by 22% respondents and more experienced couples. The second is making marriage a priority in the church. Generally, churches give their music ministry the highest priority, but there was unanimous support for raising more awareness of marriage, because as one respondent stated, "when the purpose is not known, abuse is inevitable."

Conclusion

In conclusion, raising responsible citizens calls for a harmonious family relationship and this is achieved by learning to handle conflict in transformation among other things. As long as the relationship exists, conflicts will also co-exist. Humans are emotional beings who are not static but sometimes unpredictable, usually seeing things from the different perspectives due to their different temperaments, exposures, knowledge, etc. Therefore, to

work towards a society permeated by responsible citizens, deliberate efforts must be made to handle conflicts in marriage from time to time.

The researcher wants to conclude by stating that the summary of one of the things needed to experience responsible citizenship is to help intending couples or married couples handle their conflicts in marriage. To achieve this, the researcher calls for marital discipleship and mentorship. These can give room for the transformation of citizens at home and will have a positive multiplier effect on the society. A “once and for all” approach to counseling intending couples will not solve the problem of negative approaches to conflict in marriage. Responsible citizens need to be reminded from time to time using various helpful means like discipleship and mentoring, and the harmonious home is a good starting point.

Recommendations

Since conflict is common to all marriages, all couples must learn to continue to live together harmoniously after. Likewise, couples must learn to settle and continue to live together in peace and harmony because in harmony they can raise responsible citizens. Furthermore, the Bible should be the sole authority for guiding marriage relationships, not culture, whether foreign or local.

Since the harmonious marital relationship is necessary for responsible citizenship, structured and non-structured counseling on marital experience should not start only when the intending couple has fixed their wedding date. Counseling must start from the homes, at a very early stage of life because it is better to train a child than an adult.

Counseling on proper sexual relationships should be improved on. The information on sex in the society is not healthy for responsible citizenship; some are ignorant of what sex entails in marriage. So, the church must not shy away from giving the right knowledge that will enable citizens to use the gift of sex responsibly.

Pastors involved in preparing young people for marriage should constitute a standard premarital team for more robust and effective preparation for the lifelong journey of marriage. Pastors should demonstrate what they preach and serve as good role models. Pastors must be living epistles that people can read for a good example, maintaining a high level of confidentiality by keeping the information they gathered from their counselees to themselves alone.

Pastors in Port Harcourt should spend more time in educating married and intending couples because marriage is the bedrock of the society. If a marriage fails, then the society as a whole will be impacted. Furthermore, pastors should preach on the fruit of the Spirit regularly.

Pastors involved in premarital counseling must be well trained in the subject of conflict and relationship. Since conflict is a normal part of life and relationship, they are encouraged to apply the acquired knowledge in conflict transformation in their general teachings from time to time and practice referrals to more experienced counselors when necessary.

Intending couples should be encouraged to lay the foundation of their marriage on Christ. They should allow the Spirit of God lead them in making their choice of whom to marry. Furthermore, intending couples should be encouraged to prayerfully choose a disciple/mentor couple in the church that they will be willing to relate to as they live their marital lives. This will guide against the idea of some couples dying in silence because they do not want to expose the secrets of their family to another.

In conflict situations, couples should avoid the following behaviors: claiming of rights, trading blames, un-forgiveness, spreading the problem, prayerlessness, unnecessary silence, running away from responsibility, negative comments, painting the spouse bad,

talking back at each other, making reference to past mistakes, and correcting each other in the presence of the children.

Couples should open up about their problems only to those who have the capacities to help them. They should not go to people who will cause the conflict to increase. It is necessary to state that under normal circumstances, there should be no reason why a couple should not trust their pastors to help them in conflict situations. So, couples always open up to their pastors when facing conflict which they cannot handle on their own. The church should stand up to raise her members to be more responsible citizens. Furthermore, for members of the church, there must be an agreed discipline for erring members. It is unacceptable that a member who is to be disciplined runs to another church. The next thing you see is that the man may have been given a prominent post in another church. This attitude is killing the power of the church and must stop if the church wants to help her members to live responsibly both for now and eternity.

Finally, to further achieve the goal of effective preparation of young people for conflict transformation in marriage that will help them become responsible citizens, and raising other responsible citizens, a specialized training on conflict transformation in marriage should be inculcated into the premarital counselling sessions encouraging them to handle conflict in a transformative way, a flow of suggested steps is recommended below:

Graphical Flow of Handling Conflict in a Transformative Mann



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