



THE
ESSENTIALS
OF AN
**EXCELLENT
CHRISTIAN
MARRIAGE**

Richard Wallis

with John and Jo Collinson

Ranjini Mathew



Sovereign World Trust

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*In memory of my son Chris
who died in November 2019
just over a year
after marrying Lucy*

What others have said about The Essentials of an Excellent Marriage

'I have read this book with the eyes of an African Pastor. The book amazingly cuts through cultures just like the Bible does. This comes from Richard's rich exposure to the African cultures where he has lived and served for many years. Richard has provided practical exercises at the end of each chapter, which makes the book so helpful both as counselling manual and also for group studies. I strongly recommend this book.'

– **Pastor Peter Kasirivu**, Senior Pastor of Gaba Community Church and Founder of Africa Renewal Ministries. Kampala, Uganda.

'Richard has done it again! A simple yet profound presentation of such a seemingly complex subject that many leave untouched. "The Essentials of an Excellent Christian Marriage" is both soundly Scriptural and amazingly practical. I highly recommend it for use by Pastors and Christian Marriage Counsellors.'

– **Rev Kihu Mwangi**, Kenya Assemblies of God, National Youth Director and Lead Pastor at Lifesprings Christian Center.

'Richard writes with conviction and wisdom about marriage. His strength on this topic comes from his own personal relationship experiences, growth and depth over a span of 40 years. This message is inspirational and offers much hope. It is a useful tool with simple yet powerful practical examples on how to keep your marriage fresh and alive. I highly recommend this book to anyone dating, aspiring to date and already in a marriage.'

– **Bishop Nathan Amooti Rusengo**, Anglican Church of Rwanda/Kigali Diocese

'I have been in full-time ministry for more than 30 years and have not read such an instructive and inspiring book on marriage. It is an excellent training manual designed for use by Christian leaders.'

– **Dr. John A. Ugbeshi**, Zonal Overseer, Truth and Life Ministry, Kaduna, Nigeria

'A group of pastors and their spouses here studied this book. We were of one mind that this manual will be a wonderful weapon in our ministry. We need this material to help churches to be healthy.'

– **Pastor Evance Nauliya**, Founder of Free Faith Outreach Ministries, Malawi

'This is an excellent marriage book for married couples and those preparing to marry. What you read in this book will make your marriage alive and joyful.'

– **Pastor Arthur Mbumbuka**, Chairman, Pastors Fellowship Mbeya, Tanzania

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	6
Preface	7
How to use the manual	9
Module one: What the Bible says about love and marriage	15
Special module: Marriage preparation course only	24
Module two: So they lived happily ever after: Fact or fiction?	33
Module three: Enriching your marriage: Expressing your love	38
Module four: Enriching your marriage: Improving communication	41
Module five: Enriching your marriage: Intended for pleasure	46
Module six: Enriching your marriage: Steps to resolving conflict	51
Special module: Lesson for youth groups and students	61
What others say about marriage	66
Worksheets	67
Handouts	70
About Sovereign World Trust	78
Personal Notes	79

Acknowledgements

As I wrote in the introduction of my leadership book, in ministry you do not need to be original for the Lord desires us to learn from each other. As I read books on marriage by many Christian authors over the years and also trawled many websites, I made copious notes. I have also sought the advice of some Godly friends in Africa and England. It is as if all this has been stirred in a pot and then served in a way that I hope is easy to digest. What you have in your hands is a short summary of the wisdom of many Christians. Sadly after so many years I am unable to recall all the books and websites that I read. No copyright infringement is intended and should anything be recognized, I will willingly acknowledge this in future editions.

Thanks to John Collinson who quickly grasped the vision of this 'Essentials Series.' John has again contributed significantly to this manual, as has his wife Jo, while Ranjini Mathew's insight has likewise been most valuable. Also special thanks to Pastor Evance in Malawi who encouraged me to keep working on this book when I became discouraged. Their contribution is substantial though I take responsibility for any errors in the book.

Thanks to my brother Charles who has again used his expertise to manage the publication process of this manual. Once again designer Roger Chouler has done a magnificent job. And thanks to Melanie Keen who read and corrected the manuscript copy of this book with impressive attention to detail.

Thanks to my wonderful wife Ruth who accepts the long hours I spend at home working in my office despite me being well past the normal retirement age in the UK. I am not a perfect husband but she makes me feel like one. Ruth is a perfect wife!

And finally, and most importantly, thanks to the God who gave the vision for this series and the health to complete it.

Richard Wallis

Preface

In 2018, the first book in Mission Possible's Essentials Series about leadership was published. The Sovereign World Trust decided to send out 2000 copies of **'The Essentials of Excellent Christian Leadership'** in their Pastor's Book Packs. We received positive feedback from Christian leaders saying that they found the clear and logical structure of the book most helpful. This prompted me to consider writing more books using this same clear and logical format.

'The Essentials of an Excellent Christian Marriage' seemed to me to be the right follow-up training manual in the series. The first teaching I gave on this subject was in a seminar called **'What Men should know about Women'** in a Burundi refugee camp in Tanzania in 2004. Since then my wife Ruth and I have contributed at marriage preparation courses in England and have taught on marriage in Africa. We enjoyed this teaching and again the feedback was good if at times surprising to us. At one conference in central Africa there was public repenting by the men who attended the conference for the ungodly way they had treated their wives.

However, having made the decision to write this teaching manual, I quickly had two concerns:

- ⇒ The first concern was that people may get the impression that as I am writing about marriage I think I am a model husband. This would be a false impression. My only qualification for writing this manual is that I have been married for over 40 years to two Godly but very different women. I was married to Susan for 30 years before she died after a long illness and now have been married to Ruth for 13 years. Sometimes I say to Ruth she is fortunate that she is my second wife. I was 26 years old when I married Susan and 58 years old when I married Ruth. I learnt much between those years about being a husband. I wish I had known what is taught in this book when I was 26.
- ⇒ The second concern was that I am an Englishman writing a training manual primarily for African Church leaders although I hope Asian Church leaders will also find the manual valuable. I am aware that cultures in both continents are different to each other and exceedingly different to Europe. So I had two alternatives: abandon the idea of writing the manual or seek advice.

Below are two pieces of advice that I received which encouraged me to continue writing this manual.

- ⇒ The first was from an African pastor who wrote:
'Cultural differences vary here in Africa. Africans may be similar in colour but not in culture. And now there are big differences between urban areas adopting foreign cultures and rural areas. However Christianity is the same all over the world regardless of the cultural differences, skin colour and languages.'

⇒ The second was from an international trainer:

'The aim of your Essentials series is not fleshing out the teaching for any one national or regional group. I am convinced that Christian leaders are good at adapting teaching for their own situation, as long as the teaching is clear and fundamentally sound.'

So I continued writing the manual, seeking to teach in a clear and logical way biblically based truths about marriage, being aware of cultural differences but also not wishing to perpetuate customs that are clearly counter to such biblical teaching.

This teaching manual for Church leaders can be used both for **Marriage Preparation Courses** for engaged couples – and also for **Marriage Enrichment Courses** to help couples already married to build a stronger marriage. The material can be adapted by Christian leaders to meet local cultural requirements as long as the basic biblical principles of marriage taught here are not violated. Though not primarily written for this purpose, the manual can also be used by couples together outside of a formal training context. Finally there is single-lesson module designed for younger people who are dating. I have called this **Lesson for youth groups and students**.

In conclusion, I was asked by someone why the title of the manual included the word Christian. Why not write a manual suitable for both Christians and non-Christians? The answer is simple: there are only two people in a non-Christian marriage – the husband and wife. There are three people in a Christian marriage – the husband, the wife and God. That is why I believe a Christian marriage is so very special.

My prayer is that God will bless the relationships of those to whom you teach these essentials.

Richard Wallis

HOW TO USE THIS MANUAL

What is in the manual?

This teaching manual for Church leaders can be used for

- ⇒ **A Marriage Preparation Course** designed for those intending to have a Christian wedding.
- ⇒ **A Marriage Enrichment Course** designed for all married couples to build and grow their marriage. It is not a marriage rescue course.
- ⇒ **Youth and student groups** for which there is a short single special module called 'Lesson for youth groups and students'.

The Marriage Enrichment Course has 6 modules. **The Marriage Preparation Course** has 7 modules which are the same 6 modules plus an additional module which should be taught between module one and module two. **The Lesson for youth groups and students** is just one module. Flick through the manual and I think this will make sense.

Guidelines on teaching

Who should teach?

The teachers should be a married couple. In the manual, we have called this couple the 'Training couple'. The couple may feel they are not qualified to do this teaching. I understand this as for many years I did no teaching for this reason. However, I discovered that if God has called us to do something, He will equip.

How to teach from the manual

All teaching requires preparation. First and most importantly, the training couple must read all the material in this manual, discuss it together and seek advice if there are things they do not understand.

Second and equally important, your aim is not only to impart knowledge but to do it in a lively and engaging way. Some of the material in the manual is presented in lists and people will soon lose interest if you are simply reading out lists.

Possible ways to enliven each session include

- ⇒ sharing your personal experiences in an appropriate way (obviously do not go into detail about your and your spouse's sexual intimacy). Amusing stories that make people laugh are always good. You do not need to use my stories – these are given just as examples.
- ⇒ rather than simply reading out each list, you can start by asking for suggestions. For example, in module 2 we say that men and women are different. We list various generalisations about the differences. Rather than reading the list, you

could ask the group what they think are the differences and simply use the list to fill in the gaps at the end. This method has the additional advantage that you may come up with differences that are not on the list. It will take longer but it also means people will engage more.

Important note: The material in this manual can be adapted to meet local cultural requirements. However, you should always be on your guard to check and ensure that such local cultural conditions or practices do not compromise or contradict the basic biblical principles of marriage taught in this manual.

How to split the workload

The 'training couple' need to agree in advance who teaches what in each session. It is good having two teachers as it makes the session less boring listening to only one voice and one teaching style for a whole session. The teaching couple should encourage one another. Most of us feel inadequate when it comes to the responsibilities of teaching and we need encouragement.

Ruth and I have found it best that when there are issues relating to women only, she delivers that part of the teaching while I deliver the part of the teaching that refers to men only.

Review together after each module how you felt it went and what could be done better in future modules.

Be ready

Sometimes couples are experiencing big difficulties in their relationship. They may decide to share these difficulties in public at one of the sessions. The 'training couple' need great wisdom if this arises. If it is inappropriate to discuss the issue further with everyone else listening, bring the particular discussion to an end and ask the couple if they would stay back afterwards and have a conversation with you. You need to be prepared for your next step. It may be best not to discuss in depth with the couple immediately unless they are in a crisis situation. If it is not a crisis situation, agree either to meet the couple in the next few days yourselves or arrange, with their agreement, for them to meet up with a more experienced and 'senior' couple in the church.

Important note: Do whatever you have agreed with the couple you will do. If you promise to do something and do not do it, broken promises in these situations are most damaging. If it has been agreed the matter will be referred to a more experienced couple, make sure that the meeting happens keeping this couple on your course well informed about the details and then briefly check with them afterwards if they felt that the meeting had been helpful.

How to conduct the marriage preparation and marriage enrichment courses

What are the ideal numbers for each course?

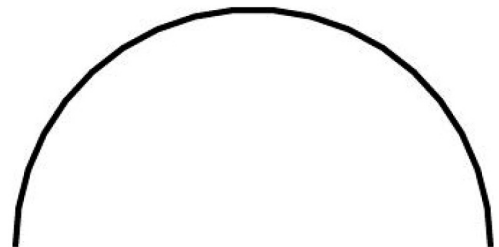
One thing that is of paramount importance is that when completing the exercises there is enough space for each couple to have a conversation with each other in a relaxed and confidential way. Of equal importance is that the courses are not run classroom style. The sessions are about relationships and as the trainers you cannot interact so easily with the group if the numbers are too big. The ideal is not less than 6 couples and not more than 12 couples on any course.

What about the venue?

Normally the venue will be in a church building as this will be rent free. It may be appropriate to ask if you can use a neighbouring church if they have better facilities than your own. The venue should be easily accessible for all those who attend the course. It needs to be big enough so that the number of couples you expect to come will be able to have a confidential conversation.

Setting the scene

Try your best to make the venue as relaxing a place as possible. Choose the most comfortable seats available to sit on. You could have a CD of Christian worship music playing as people arrive. (Not too loud!). You may wish to provide bottles of water and even a bowl of nuts or similar. Avoid putting seats out in classroom style but instead use a more informal semicircle style with couples sitting beside each other.



Consider starting and ending your time together with a short time of worship (no more than 10 minutes) including prayer. If time is running short, a prayer only at the end is fine.

How long will the course take?

There are various ways this can be done

Option one

Run the modules weekly one at a time either over a series of evenings or a series mornings or afternoons on a Saturday. Choose the same day and time each week.

- Advantages
 - ⇒ Not too much information to digest at one time
 - ⇒ Church members may be used to regularly attending midweek or Saturday meetings
- Disadvantages
 - ⇒ Not everyone may attend all modules. Couples may have other commitments some weeks: they may miss some sessions through tiredness, illness, or simply because they want to avoid a particular module. This can be really disruptive and discouraging to you as the training couple.

Option two

Do the whole course over 2 consecutive Saturdays.

- Advantages
 - ⇒ There is adequate time to complete the whole course
 - ⇒ Absenteeism is possible on second Saturday but much less likely than in option one

Option three

Do the whole course on one Saturday.

- Advantage
 - ⇒ No absenteeism
- Disadvantage
 - ⇒ It is a lot of material for you to cover in one day, and for the couples to absorb. You will need to be selective about what you teach in each module and possibly reduce time for couples' exercises. Although you could consider asking the couples to do the exercises at home together, it is human nature to let other activities take priority, and the exercises are left undone. Doing the exercises during the teaching sessions also has the advantage of providing variety during the day.

Option four

Do the course over one weekend. This would involve the whole of a Saturday and Sunday afternoon after the morning service.

- Advantages
 - ⇒ Minimises absenteeism
 - ⇒ The training flows smoothly from one subject to another with everything done in just over a day
- Disadvantage
 - ⇒ A lot of material to cover in one and a half days and again you will need to be selective about what you teach in each module and reduce time for couples' exercises

In the United Kingdom, these courses normally follow option one. However, the church I attend used option three when Ruth and I were married – it was a long day! You may need to experiment and decide which option works best for you.

Couples exercises

We have already stressed the importance of couples being able to do these exercises where they cannot be overheard. Most of these exercises include discussing very personal matters. If you choose to go for a weekend option for these courses, in many places couples can use the area outside of the building where the training is taking place for these discussions – especially if not done in the rainy season. Ruth and I can recall doing a marriage enrichment course in a rural location in Rwanda where couples sat on benches outside the church and on blankets under trees on a hillside.

In the back of the manual, you will see a section called '**worksheets**'. Sometimes it is useful for couples to see in writing what they are discussing in addition to hearing it from the training couple. This helps to remind them what they are discussing. So consider photocopying these in advance to hand out before couples split into pairs to do the exercises.

Module Handouts

There are also '**handouts**' at the back of the manual summarising the teaching. Consider photocopying these in advance and hand out to the couples at the end of each module. These are useful for couples to refer to in the weeks, months and even years after their course. Indeed some of the material for this manual comes from notes I have from the marriage preparation course that Ruth and I attended in 2007 a few weeks before we were married.

Notebooks

Each couple should be given a notebook at the start of the course. They should write their names on the front. These notebooks are for the eyes of the owner only. At the end of the course, participants can destroy their notebooks if they are concerned about confidentiality, or alternatively decide to keep them. I kept my notebook from the marriage preparation course I did with Ruth and looking at it for the first time in 13 years was interested to note that under the question 'Write down what you would like to see happen in your relationship in future years', I wrote down '**eventually being involved in joint ministry**'. It took 9 years but today Ruth and I are equal partners in the ministry of Mission Possible UK.

Celebration party

In Nehemiah 13, you read about the celebration once the building of the walls has been completed. It is good to celebrate the completion of things. I have spent several months writing this manual and these are the very last words I am typing. In a few minutes, many hours of work will be completed. So I will celebrate!

We would suggest a celebration party should be held within a month of completing the course – it could even be in the following week. It could include

- ⇒ A time of worship
- ⇒ A short talk
- ⇒ Light refreshments
- ⇒ Testimonies from those who attended the course

This party can be for just those who attended the course or you may choose to invite other couples to join the party in the hope that they agree to do the course at a future date in the light of the testimonies given.

Our hope is that not only will the couples benefit from the course but also that some lifelong friendships will be established between couples in the church.

Couples using the manual outside of a formal training context

Though not primarily written for this purpose, the manual can also be used privately by couples outside of a formal training context. They can read the book together and also do the exercises together. This may be appropriate if the couple is not able to attend the sessions for practical reasons or if your local church is not running these courses. Or it may be the right thing if the couple is feeling unusually fearful or imagine being intimidated by the idea of attending a course on an intensely personal subject in the presence of others.

How to conduct the Youth Group and Student Lesson

This can be done as a single lesson at a regular youth group or Christian Union meeting. It may be appropriate to run it 'classroom style' and the number attending is not an issue. The material and format of this lesson will work for any number attending – from 10 people to 100 people. We would recommend the lesson is led by a respected married couple who have the gift of teaching the 15 to 25 year age group. To make the occasion special you may wish to invite a couple who would not normally come to your youth/CU meeting. For example, you could consider inviting gifted married youth leaders you know from another church to conduct this session.

There are no exercises in the teaching material for this lesson. It is best simply to encourage questions after the teaching. This can often lead to a valuable discussion where the participants grapple with the real issues they are facing.

MODULE ONE

First things first: What the Bible says about love and marriage

Many books on marriage seem to start by heading straight into focusing on the issues that married couples face. But as Christians, we should first consider what the Bible teaches on love and marriage.

What the Bible says about love

Prince Charles (the future king of England) and Lady Diana were asked on the day that they became engaged in 1981 – ‘*are you in love?*’ Lady Diana answered ‘*of course*’. Prince Charles then smiled and added ‘*whatever in love means.*’ Even today, I can recall how shocked I was by that response. Many wanted this to be a ‘fairy tale’ romance – handsome prince meets beautiful young lady. You do not expect a question like ‘*are you in love*’ to be responded to on the day of someone’s engagement by the statement ‘*whatever in love means.*’ But it is an interesting statement. What is love?

Love involves feelings but just having feelings is not love. Feelings can change. Unconditional love does not. Love in marriage is a choice, a decision, a commitment to being the very best for your spouse. It is not about someone else meeting your needs.

There is a definition of love written in the Bible (1 Corinthians 13). This is a well-known passage often read at wedding services. Understanding the teaching of this passage gives you an insight into true love:

- * **Love** is patient and kind
- * **Love** does not envy
- * **Love** does not boast
- * **Love** is not self-seeking. It is directed at others and not meeting your needs
- * **Love** is not easily angered or rude
- * **Love** keeps no record of wrongs
- * **Love** protects the self-worth of the spouse
- * **Love** perseveres – however difficult the circumstances
- * **Love** trusts – it is not suspicious

Couples exercise one

The training couple should share the story of how they met and what attracted them to each other. No more than 1 minute. After this, ask if any couples would like to share with the group how they first met and what attracted them to one another. No more than one minute for any couple that volunteers to do this.

What the Bible says about Marriage

I am told that there are more than 500 references in the Bible to the words “marriage,” “married,” “husband,” and “wife.” It is important and fundamental to understand that marriage is God’s idea and not a human idea. God set down some basic principles relating to marriage.

Below are some key verses. These are given in the order they appear in the Bible. The order does not mean that the ones at the top are more important than the ones at the bottom.

- Genesis 2:18, 21–24
From this account in Genesis we can see that marriage is God’s idea. In these verses we also discover that God’s purpose for marriage is both companionship and intimacy.
- Exodus 20:14
Husbands and wives are to be sexually faithful to each other in the marriage relationship.
- Proverbs 31:10
A strong marriage is precious. Proverbs 31 has been called a description of “the ideal wife.” But the ideal qualities given in this chapter apply both to a husband and a wife.
- Ecclesiastes 9:9
Marriage is a lifelong commitment.
- Malachi 2:13–14
Marriage is not an agreement or contract which can be terminated but a lifelong covenant designed by God in which the husband and wife are bonded together forever into one flesh. It thus strengthens the capability of each partner to carry out the plan of God in their lives. God’s design is for the married couple to walk in agreement making decisions together and wanting the best for their family without any expectation of reward.
- 1 Corinthians 7:1–2
This verse indicates that it is better to marry than to be sexually immoral. God designed marriage to make us holy as well as happy.
- 2 Corinthians 6:14
The Bible warns against being unequally yoked. God gives us this command, that we are only to marry a Christian, for our own protection and joy. He knows that we cannot have the best possible marriage if we have different beliefs, values, and priorities from our spouse. Some Christians may say when falling in love ‘But I am sure this person will become a Christian.’ It is possible that God may at some point bring the person to faith in Christ. But none of us knows the future. Importantly, the verse 2 Corinthians 6:14 does **NOT** say, ‘Do not be yoked together with unbelievers... unless you think the person will become a Christian.’

- Ephesians 5: 22, 25 and 31–32

The husband and wife relationship illustrates the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church. Wives should be willing to submit while husbands are urged to lay down their lives in sacrificial love and protection.

- 1 Peter 3:7

Husbands and wives are different but equal partners

In summary, the Bible teaches:

- ⇒ 'A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh' (Genesis 2:24)
- ⇒ Marriage is the closest possible human relationship making a new family unit.
- ⇒ God uses marriage to teach us about unconditional love, forgiveness and patience, faithfulness, gentleness..... in short to mould us into becoming more like Christ

Submission

Whenever I speak about marriage in Africa, I am always asked about Ephesians 5:22 which reads '**wives submit to your husbands**'. It is vitally important that we understand the teaching of this verse which is in the list of scripture verses on marriage in the previous section.

In my English dictionary submission is defined **as acting always obedient, particularly to a master. An example of submission is the state of a disciplined animal to his owner. It is an act of surrendering.**

Biblical teaching on submission is different as it is a way of harmonising together by mutual agreement and involves a condition. The Bible teaches that men and women are equal but designed by God to be different. One partner is not more important than or superior to the other. The teaching of Ephesians 5:22 that wives should be submissive to their husbands is followed by a passage that takes twice as long explaining how husbands should treat their wives. So there is a condition to submission – men must have the welfare of their wives as their number one marital responsibility.

The husband should include the wife in making important decisions, considering her views carefully and respectfully. He will be answerable to God for his choices and for the way in which he treats his wife. If a wife believes that her husband is misusing his 'headship' role, she should speak to him about her concerns. She should not feel passive and powerlessness when it comes to decision-making within a marriage. If the husband is unwilling to listen and remains excessively oppressive, it may be necessary for the wife to confidentially seek wisdom from a trusted female friend or female church leader.

John Piper, author and founder of www.desiringgod.org has written:

If you asked my wife, what does submission look like for us, she would say, 'we settled the principle early that if we can't agree, John is going to make the decision.' But it almost never happens. One of the reasons it almost never happens is that we have been together a long time, and we know what each other thinks. Another important reason is that I often yield to my wife. I do not need to be right, or to have my way, or to have the last word.

Biblical submission has nothing to do with a husband insisting on his own way. 1 Corinthians 13: 5 teaches 'love does not demand its own way'. But it does mean that the husband may have to make the final decision on rare occasions based on what he genuinely believes is the right decision for his family. It is a God-given responsibility that should not be taken carelessly.

What is described above is often called the biblical principle of headship. In summary, the Bible commands the husband to exercise his headship unselfishly, putting his wife's benefit ahead of his own.

Personal testimony

In 2015, Ruth and I were invited to minister in Zambia – a country I know well as I lived there from 1973 to 1977 and travelled extensively in my work. But one place I had not visited was the Western Province, so I suggested to our hosts that we did some leadership training deep into this remote province on the far side of the great Zambesi River. Unknown to me, Ruth was concerned about the amount of travel involved to get to this place, but she had also seen my enthusiasm about going to a new place. So she prayed about it. A few days later, I looked more carefully at a map of Zambia. The trip would involve a bus trip of about 10 hours from Lusaka immediately after a 15 hour flight from London via Nairobi. So I shared with Ruth 'You know, I think this is a crazy idea going to the far side of the Zambesi in the Western Province. We will be unfit to do any training after a trip like this.' She almost fell out of her chair in surprise! We ended up having an amazing 3 days leadership training conference in Kabwe about 2 hours north of Lusaka. On this occasion, Ruth decided to pray about it. But on other occasions she will simply discuss things like this with me. One thing I have learnt over the years is that it worth listening to your wife as most women have better intuition than men.

Mine is mine and yours is yours

While conducting a marriage seminar in Zambia on another trip, Ruth and I discovered the big issue was who 'owned' items brought into the new home by each of the married couple. Apparently in this community, such items were labelled to indicate who still 'owned' the items in case one partner died or the couple separated. If that were to happen, then the allocation of the belongings would not cause family tension.

However, Genesis 2:24 says, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh'. What does it mean, then, that a man and woman become "one flesh" in marriage? The most obvious way is

through sexual intimacy. But a man and woman also become one flesh in marriage when they share what they own. This issue of what belongs to whom relates to children too. In some tribes, I am told the children belong to the wife while in another tribe they belong to the husband. However, as you are 'one flesh' the children belong to **both** the husband and the wife. As one Malawian pastor shared with me 'This is not western culture, this is biblical culture'.

Adopting biblical culture needs wisdom and is not to be undertaken without great care. But if we do this in a sensitive loving way, we can become lights to the world.

Couples exercise two (Marriage enrichment course only)

.....

This exercise needs space so that the couples can speak confidentially with each other. At our daytime conferences, we have given couples the opportunity to sit outside together. Blankets can be provided for this.

All marriages go through different seasons. At this moment, someone's marriage may be flourishing, feel dull stuck in the daily routine of life or worse feeling like it is ripping apart. This session is an opportunity for couples to share about their marriage irrespective of the season they are in. The training couple need to recognise that many people do not find sharing these things easy. So you should encourage couples to be honest with each other. A good starting point is to encourage couples to thank their spouse for what each other is doing well and to be prepared to admit areas in which they know they are failing.

There are four areas of their marriage that they may wish to discuss

Friendship

Are you the best of friends? Do you encourage one another? Are you good at listening to each other? How are decisions made? Are you ready to forgive each other? How could you grow in your friendship?

Family

How do you feel you are doing raising children? What is going well and what can be improved? How are relations with the extended family? Are you both comfortable about your relationship with them? If not, why not?

Finances

Are you both aware of the family's financial situation? Are you both comfortable about the way family finances are used? Do you still have a 'This is mine, that is yours' attitude when it comes to finances and belongings?

Future

Are you agreed in what is important in your family life? Can you share new ideas easily with each other? What are your dreams about the future?

Couples may wish to end this session by praying together

At the end of the session, encourage the couples. Share that for some this session will not have been easy but the good news is that the course will give guidelines on how to enrich your marriage – what I call the Essentials of an Excellent Christian Marriage.

Allow 30 minutes for this session

On completion of the module, give each couple a copy of handout one

Couples exercise two (Marriage preparation course only)

Prior to the session, photocopy or write out enough copies of worksheet one called 'Knowing me, Knowing you' to each person at the training session. You will find the worksheet at the back of this manual.

This exercise is designed to help the couple to get to know more about each other and in a non-threatening way discuss issues that they may already be facing in their relationship.

Couples should spend 10 minutes writing down brief answers to the questions and then share what they have written for 20 minutes.

At the end of the session, you may wish to invite couples to share in the wider group anything new they have learnt about their partners. No one should be forced to do this.

What the couple have written on the paper is confidential to the couple. They may wish to tear the paper into small bits so it is unreadable or they may wish to keep in a safe place to continue their discussion later. The couple must be agreed on which action they take.

Allow 30 minutes for this session

On completion of the module, give each couple a copy of handout one

Notes for training couple

These issues fall outside the scope of this manual as this manual is about Christian marriage only. But you may be asked about them, so it is best to be prepared to answer these questions.

Infertility

One purpose of marriage is to be fruitful and have children. You need to be gentle and sensitive on this issue.

Sadly, millions of couples suffer from infertility. Infertility is something we do not understand except we know we live in a fallen world. Equally sadly, often, infertility destroys a marriage both because of disappointment and tension caused by family pressure to produce a child. But this does not have to happen. Through a recognition of God's sovereignty, prayer and making the marriage—not conception—the number one priority, infertility can draw a couple closer instead of destroying them.

Infertility is **not** a punishment from God. Satan is a master of deceit, and he can whisper, 'You are defective.' Reject these lies resisting emotions such as envy, self-pity, and anger (James 4:7). God has other unexpected and fulfilling plans for your life together. Romans 8:28 reminds us 'that in all things God works for the good of those who love him'.

Remarriage after divorce

There is a diversity of views within the church regarding remarriage after divorce. Most denominations will have their own guidelines. If your church does not have such guidelines, you may find this link helpful

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-statement-on-divorce-and-remarriage-in-the-life-of-bethlehem-baptist-church>

Customary marriages, civil marriages and Christian marriages

The issue of becoming Christians after living together after only a customary marriage causes moral dilemmas in Africa and elsewhere. Again most denominations will have their own guidelines on this issue. If your church does not have such guidelines, you may find this link that grapples with the dilemmas helpful

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ajet/30-1_035.pdf

My advice is that when applying the guidelines that your church has on this issue, you must do this in a loving way. This couple will have recently moved from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light and they need to experience Christian gentleness in their early days as a new brother and sister.

Polygamy

This is an important issue though outside the scope of this book. This book is about the essentials of an excellent Christian marriage and the Bible makes it clear that Christian marriage is between one man and one wife.

Genesis chapter 2 says that it is not good that a man be alone. Therefore he made him a helper – not helpers.

1 Corinthians 7:4 addresses man and wife and not man and wives.

Ephesians 5:31 teaches a man will be united to his wife and become one flesh.

1 Timothy chapter 3: 2 teaches about having one wife (though it has been argued by some that this refers to leaders only)

It is true that polygamy was practiced in the Old Testament including by Abraham, Esau, Jacob, David, and Solomon. But as we have seen above, God's ideal is that a man has one wife and he remain faithful to that wife until 'death do us part'. It should be noted that polygamy as described in the Old Testament often led to problems.

So what is the situation if a man has two or more wives through traditional customary marriage and either wishes to become a Christian or has already become a Christian? Most denominations will have guidelines on this issue, and it is not the aim of this book to legislate on this. However, I would highlight two biblical principles when considering this issue

God has never and will never reject anyone who comes to Him.

If your denomination teaches that the man must remain only with the first wife he married and have a 'blessing of this marriage', then the other wives in effect become widows. The Bible teaches that widows are to be treated with honour and compassion and offered protection so that no one takes advantage of them. And note James 1:27 *'Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world'*. So the newly believing man must provide for his wives by traditional marriage even though not married to them in the sight of God. He must no longer have any sexual intimacy with them.

Also note that the community of God's people must plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1:17) It is not just the man's responsibility to care for the needs of the wives from his traditional marriages. His church must do more than welcome and love the new convert and his wife. It has a responsibility to ensure that everyone affected by his conversion is cared for. And this is a powerful witness.

How marriage is introduced at some marriage services

You may wish to use this to end your session on module one

Marriage is a gift of God in creation

through which husband and wife may know the grace of God.

*It is given that as man and woman grow together in love and trust,
they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind,
as Christ is united with his bride, the Church.*

*The gift of marriage brings husband and wife together
in the delight and tenderness of sexual union
and joyful commitment to the end of their lives.*

*It is given as the foundation of family life
in which children are born and nurtured
and in which each member of the family,
in good times and in bad,*

*may find strength, companionship and comfort,
and grow to maturity in love.*

*Marriage is a way of life made holy by God,
and blessed by the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ
with those celebrating a wedding at Cana in Galilee.*

*Marriage is a sign of unity and loyalty
which all should uphold and honour.*

It enriches society and strengthens community.

*No one should enter into it lightly or selfishly
but reverently and responsibly in the sight of Almighty God.*

SPECIAL MODULE FOR MARRIAGE PREPARATION COURSE ONLY

Introductory note for the couple running the training course

This module is designed to go after module 1 and before module 2 of the main course. If you like, it is module 1B for the marriage preparation course only.

The couples who come on a marriage preparation course have come to this course because they are intending to get married and want to be prepared for this momentous event in their lives.

However, this course also gives couples a final opportunity to make sure in their own minds that this marriage is God's purpose for their lives. The first part of this module is intended to make sure they have thoroughly thought through what they are planning to do – to make a lifelong commitment to each other. Marriage is a permanent and faithful union designed to strengthen the capability of each partner to carry out God's plan for their lives together. It is not to be entered into lightly.

Having reflected on the teaching and discussions within this module, it is just possible that some couples may decide that they should not be married either at all – or at least not in the short term. If this were to happen, it would not be unusual for one of the couples to come to this conclusion and not the other. In these cases, gentle wise pastoral care is required.

You have found Mr or Miss Right

I enjoy listening to stories about how couples first met. Sometimes they have known each other since childhood, sometimes they met at a church when adults. And sometimes they would not have met if God had not arranged the circumstances. This is true in the story of Ruth and Boaz in the Bible.

The question Christians usually ask when considering a person they might marry is along the lines '***is this the one and only right person or not?***' Behind this can be the thought that God has only one Mr or Miss Right for me and if I miss that person, I will be out of His will for my life and never know true happiness. This kind of thinking can put a huge pressure on any relationship. A better question to ask is 'Is he or she the right **kind** of person?' It is finding the right **kind** of husband or wife that is God's will for you. Of course they need to be a Christian (see module one) but being a Christian alone does not guarantee he or she has the qualities necessary to make a successful marriage with you.

So here is a quick check list about the right kind of person

- You are both born again Christians. As learnt in module one, you must be equally yoked
- You both have the attributes listed in module one recognising that no one is perfect and everyone has some weaknesses
- You are mutually attracted to each other

Helpfully, the Bible also lists specific characteristics of the kind of people to avoid. Read the following verses:

- Proverbs 6:17 – people who lie
- Proverbs 14:16 – the foolish and reckless
- Proverbs 19:15 – lazy people
- Proverbs 25:28 – the quarrelsome

These characteristics can destroy a marriage

In their book, **The Singles and the Married**, Kenyans Aggrey and Naomi Ayiro list many biblical ways that can be applied to seek God's will in finding a lifelong partner. Here is a condensed version

- By the Word of God (Psalm 119:105)
- By walking in the Spirit (John 16:13)
- By what glorifies God (1 Corinthians 6:20)
- By fervent prayer (Matthew 7:7)
- By fasting (Isaiah 58:6)
- By a life of obedience (Isaiah 1:19)
- By seeking God with an open mind (1 Samuel 16:7)
- By the revelation of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:17)
- By the witness/advice of others (2 Corinthians 13:1)
- By the still small voice of God (1 Kings 19:9–13)
- By waiting on God (Psalm 37:7)
- By God doing the seemingly impossible (Philippians 4:13)

Sex before marriage

There are numerous Scriptures that talk about sexual immorality and 1 Corinthians 7:2 indicates that sexual immorality includes sex before marriage.

Sex within marriage is pleasurable, and God designed it that way. God wants men and women to enjoy sexual activity within the confines of marriage. As Nicky Gumbel, who is author of many Christian books wrote 'Keep the fire in the fireplace'.

However, sex before marriage is not an unforgiveable sin. You can repent of this sin. Repentance involves turning your back on sex before marriage. As Jesus said, 'Go now and sin no more'.

Wrong reasons to get married

Aggrey and Naomi Ayiro also helpfully urge couples not to get married simply to resolve one of these issues in one of both of your lives

- **Having lust**

Lust is a self-centred craving and not the same as love as defined in module one

- **Wanting to get away from an unhappy home**

This is not a good reason to get married. Ask God to find you another solution. If you marry the wrong person, you will be unhappy for the rest of your life

- **Wanting financial security**

No one can guarantee long term financial security

- **Overcoming loneliness**

Far better to get more involved in your local church than marry the wrong person

- **Cultural customs**

Some communities want to push people into marriage. Or the custom may be that your parents take the responsibility to find you someone to marry. However, it is not the community or your parents who are getting married. You need to be guided by God about the person you marry. Likewise, do not make a decision on your marriage partner on the influence of your spiritual leaders only. It is right to consider wise opinions of others but the decision is your decision.

- **Becoming pregnant before marriage**

In this case, do not marry because of the pressure of the moment. You may end up discovering that you are not right for each other in the long term. Getting married might actually be right for you but resist the pressure to do so 'because it is the correct thing to do'.

Important warning

'The heart is deceitful above all things' (Jeremiah 17:9). Unbelievers are quite capable of making an apparent commitment to Christ in order to win the Godly person they want to date. The fruit of the Spirit clearly seen in the believer's character (Galatians 5:22) can be incredibly attractive to an unbeliever. Very soon the unbeliever may make a profession of faith. However, such apparent conversions need to be tested. This will take time, much wisdom and the discernment of other Christians who you trust. For some, courting can be like a game and people can play act being a Christian in order to win the prize of a Godly spouse. It does not take many months of marriage to reveal the deceit and then both of you have to live with the consequences.

You need not only your wisdom but the wisdom of others in this matter. There are many unhappy marriages when one person discovers after they are married that the other person never made a genuine response to the Gospel.

The compatibility test

We are unique. God has created many different personality types. There is no problem marrying someone with a different personality. My wife Ruth has a different personality

to me. At the core she is a peacemaker. I am different. I am more of an action man and my tendency is to bulldoze through things when there is an obstacle. What motivates me is when people say something is impossible. Despite or more probably because of these differences, we are happily married.

What is important is that your individual 'visions' for your marriage are compatible and that you talk about these together before committing to each other in marriage. You may both be Christians, both have wonderful characters and be physically attracted to each other but be incompatible because your hopes and dreams are quite different. There is a lovely verse in Amos that talks of the importance of compatibility. It is translated in some Bibles as '**When two walk together, they are agreed**' (Amos3:3). Below are some of the key issues that you may wish to discuss before you get married

Parenting

Do you want children? If yes, do you have any thoughts on how long do you want to wait before having your first child?

What is your attitude towards birth control? If you are comfortable about using birth control, you may wish to discuss together the method or methods you would be happy to use.

How do you feel about incorporating children from the extended family into your household should this be required/expected?

Who will primarily be responsible for the discipline of the children or will you share it equally? And what methods of discipline are acceptable to you?

Family

What are your views about dowries? What are the expectations of your parents about this? How do you handle any differences of opinion?

What values and traditions do you want to bring into your marriage from your family?

Do you agree on your responsibilities towards parents/extended families? Do you envisage any problems in this matter? Is there are willingness to make joint decisions as issues arise over the years?

Daily life

How are you going to split up the household chores?

What is your expectation regarding how you will spend your recreational time?

Always relaxing and enjoying time together? Or do you expect to have regular time to spend on your own activities?

Money

Do you expect to make a household budget?

Do you pool your money together or keep it separate?

Are you a naturally a spender or a saver? How do you manage if one is a saver and the other a spender?

Have you honestly shared the state of your personal finances with your partner? Do they know what savings you may have? Do they know if you have any outstanding debts or unpaid fines?

Sex

Are you both comfortable about your current level of sexual intimacy before you get married? Are there adjustments you need to make before your wedding day?

Are you nervous about the physical side of your relationship after marriage? Is this something you feel you can discuss?

Spirituality

2 Corinthians 6:14 says, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. . .” This is interpreted to mean that believers should not marry unbelievers. But two Christians considering marriage can be unequally yoked. You can have a married couple who are both Christians but have different expectations about their Christian life. For example, one may want to go to all the mid-week meetings at church and the other only on Sundays. One may desire to pray together but the other never has time. One may have a more obvious spiritual gift than the other. All these can lead to huge tensions within a marriage. So:

Have you discussed your joint Christian walk together?

Regarding Christian ministry, what would you like to be doing in 5 years' time? Do you see yourselves doing this together or not? If not together, does the ministry activity that your spouse would like to do have your blessing despite the time it may involve?

Do you build each other up spiritually? Are you growing together in your faith?

Conflict

Are there any issues you are disagreeing about at the moment which you need to resolve before your wedding day?

The blessings of a marriage to the right person

So far this module has largely been tough advice and serious warnings! So it is now important to share the blessing of marriage. For marriage is one of the greatest gifts that God ever gave us. It is something beautiful that God designed for us.

- **The blessing that comes from commitment**

Your ‘forever’ commitment changes everything. For example, it is easier to work on problems when you know the other person would never consider leaving the marriage. And that is why such marriages grow and remain much more stable than any other kind of relationship.

- **The blessing of growing in Christ**

God uses marriage to teach us about unconditional love, forgiveness and patience, faithfulness, gentleness..... in short to mould us into becoming more like Christ.

- **The blessing of union with someone else**

Some people are called to be single. 1 Corinthians 7 clearly says that if we are content to be single, we should be—in order to dedicate our lives to serving God wholeheartedly. But most people are not called to be single. We were created with a longing to be with another person in an intimate way. And marriage is the vehicle that God made to fill that longing.

- **The blessing of someone who really knows you**

It is such a blessing to walk through life with someone who knows everything about you. It makes you more vulnerable but it also means that together you have a special and unique 'history' together.

- **The blessing of great sex in marriage designed by God**

It may not start out great but as you get to know each other better sexual intimacy normally gets much better.

- **The blessing of team ministry**

We are all called to ministry, whether we are single or married. Sometimes people read 1 Corinthians 7 and think that it means that only single people dedicate their lives to God. Not true! Some ministry is best done by married teams. MPUK would not have grown without me working in partnership with Ruth.

- **The blessing of children**

If you ask most parents what their greatest source of joy is, they will tell you it is their family even though at times it can make them tired and can cause worry.

You can certainly count your blessings one by one!

Couples exercise

This exercise is for couples to do together and should be arranged so they can share with each other confidentially. Give out the handout for this module. Working as couples, individually each person should write down their responses to the following questions. If they are concerned about confidentiality, they could be encouraged to write down their responses in some sort of code. Then in turn each one should share their responses with the other. Allow 30 minutes for this exercise

- Identify three good things about your relationship that makes you feel pleased and happy. Try and give examples
- Identify two things which concern you, or areas where you feel your relationship could improve. Try and give examples
- Looking at the compatibility guide, are there any issues you have not yet discussed or have discussed and not yet resolved?

Notes for trainers

The below does not need to be part of your training but you may find it helpful should these questions arise during this module.

What happens if I cannot find my Mr or Miss Right

Wanting to get married is normal and natural. So what does someone do if they cannot find Mr and Mrs Right?

Let us be honest. For most people being single is tough. You can be lonely and battle with sexual temptations especially when friends are married and having a family. Of course, singleness can provide great opportunities for serving the church and some people are called to celibacy– Saint Paul was one such person. But the truth remains that for most celibacy is a tough call.

A true story

A woman was raised in a Christian family and made a personal commitment to Christ while at college. In her early twenties she went out with an unbeliever but soon realised this was wrong and terminated the relationship. A member of her church on hearing this said ‘That is good. God will bless you soon for this’. She assumed this meant she would soon be courting a Christian boyfriend. She waited and waited but there was no Christian boyfriend for her. So she got involved with a ministry while not at work and in this way became a blessing to many other people. By 40 she had concluded that she would never get married. In the midst of this, she never became bitter despite wishing to be a wife and mother. She maintained her appealing personality and kept herself looking attractive.

It was a long wait of over 20 years but eventually aged 47 she married. Both she and her husband have now been happily married for more than 10 years.

Of course, not all stories have a happy ending like this, but it does happen.

Arranged and forced marriages

The arrangements are normally made by the bride's and groom's family. If the bride or groom does not give their consent to the arrangement, but the wedding goes ahead anyway, this is known as a forced marriage.

There are a few arranged marriages in the Bible, most notably Isaac and Rebekah's marriage. Many Christians in cultures which practice arranged marriages do not have a problem with arranged marriages. The church and family can have a role in prayerfully seeking partners for their young people, but the final decision should be the couples only. The marriage should be entered into with their free and full consent.

Having said all this, some young people, particularly women, may have no or little say in the matter of whom they marry in some communities. One option is to seek pastoral advice in such a situation. If the issue is not resolved, take heart as God can still redeem an unwanted arranged marriage but it takes great faith, obedience and humility.

Shepherding and marriage

A pastor is called to teach and care for their congregation. The pastor should be a good shepherd. However, some pastors take this concept too far, demanding total and ultimate authority over the congregation, including what they eat, what they wear, where they work, who they marry, and how many children a couple should have.

Great wisdom is needed if a pastor says '*God has told me that you should marry xxxxxxxx*' Certainly the pastor should teach what is required in finding the right kind of person to marry and may share words of advice, warning or encouragement to couples courting. However, God has graciously given individuals the free will to decide on the person they will marry. If a pastor tells two individuals that they should marry each other this is a type of 'forced marriage' – unless of course they are both of 'one mind' with the pastor.

The issue of dowries

This is an issue that you may be asked to address in this session. Not all Christians are agreed on this issue. Your church denomination may offer you guidelines. If not, we would strongly recommend that you read this article from African Journal of Evangelical Theology

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ajet/15-2_128.pdf

Aggrey and Naomi Ayiro who we have quoted earlier in this module rightly say that children belong to the Lord. We should not therefore put a price tag on them as though they are animals in a marketplace. Talking about Africa they write *'the woman is not moving to the man's family but together the man and woman are forming a third family. Demanding too much from the man can put this new family into a financial crisis. However, a Christian young man should treat his new parents-in-law with respect and certainly give them as generous a token of appreciation as he can afford.'*

In some countries in Asia, it is the woman's family who gives the dowry to the husband's family (the complete opposite to the normal practice in Africa). It may be the other way around, but the Christian attitude towards dowries remains the same. Finding a spouse should not be like a cattle market. That is disrespectful. And a daughter getting married, should not impoverish any of her family members.

MODULE TWO

So they lived happily ever after: Fact or fiction?

You have had a wonderful Wedding Day. You are blissfully happy. It is all a bit like a children's story about a prince and princess meeting, falling in love, getting married and living happily ever after. Many romantic films follow a similar plot. Living happily ever after is a wonderful dream. But is it real life? The truth is that even in the happiest of marriages you discover that everything is not perfect. There are a number of reasons for this.

1. Men and women are different

It has been said that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. Indeed, it can seem at times that we are from different planets! Many books on marriage will have lists similar to the list below.

Most men	Most Women
Enjoy tasks	Enjoy relationships
Need time to think	Need to talk
Need to be admired by their wife	Need to trust their husband
Are concerned about facts	Are concerned about feelings
Gain self-esteem from being respected	Gain self-esteem from being loved
Need domestic support	Need financial support
Need sexual fulfilment	Need affection

Important note: These characteristics listed above are generalisations and not all of these things are true of all men or all women. Some men have characteristics that you will find in the women's column and some women have characteristics that you will find in the men's column, but the truth is that men and women are mostly different. Let me give you two examples:

- ☞ I work in a small room at my home and sometimes I need to go out and have a break. I visit a local coffee house and cannot avoid hearing conversations between groups of women who are the main customers at this coffee house during working hours. Their conversation is so very different from conversations between most men. Most men together in England will talk about work, money, cars, football and women. Most women together in England will talk about how people close to them are doing including their children, health issues, food, and clothes.
- ☞ It is said that when a man goes to buy soap, all he considers is that what he buys is simply soap. He makes the purchase quickly and moves onto the next

thing. A woman's approach is usually different. She is interested in the colour, smell, ingredients and shape of the soap as well as the recommendation of her friends and more. She enjoys the process of buying soap and it can take her some considerable time.

Let us continue with some more generalisations

Most women

- Have low self-esteem – even the most beautiful women often feel unattractive.
- Suffer from fatigue – from caring for children, looking after their home and more
- Feel absence of tender romantic love
- Live with moods relating to their monthly bodily cycle

Most men

- Feel they need more sexual fulfilment – a research project claims that on average a man thinks of sex 19 times a day which amazes most women
- Need to solve everyone's problems including their wife's
- Desire constant admiration
- Have a wandering eye for other attractive women – even when happily married

2. We can come into marriage with different expectations

Various things influence what we expect from marriage – including differences of the culture of the community we were raised in, how our parents modelled family, and our personalities. This can impact on a number of things such as

- How you show affection for each other in public
- How you handle conflict
- How housework is split between husband and wife
- Whether you are hoping for a small or large family
- How the children are to be raised including the approach to discipline
- How we relate to in-laws on both sides of the family

3. Money issues

Many arguments in marriage are about money. The main issue is 'Mine, Yours or Ours'. Issues include how should money be spent and how much you should support the extended family financially when you are struggling to meet your commitments. Often the wife feels powerless when only the husband earns the money.

I recall speaking at a marriage refreshment course in Central Africa in 2015. The big issue was who owned what within the house. Everything seemed to belong to either the husband or wife. Nothing seemed to be 'ours'.

4. Not equally yoked spiritually

2 Corinthians 6:14 says, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. . ." This is interpreted to mean that believers should not marry unbelievers. This is true. But Christians can be unequally yoked. You can have a married couple who are both Christians but have different expectations about their Christian life. For example, one may want to go to all mid-week meetings and the other only on Sundays. One may desire to pray together but the other never has time. One may have a more obvious spiritual gift than the other. All these can lead to huge tensions within a marriage.

5. Satan

Scripture teaches that Satan prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. He delights in a failing Christian marriage.

It is not a surprise looking through the list above that marriage is not as simple as getting married and then living happily ever after. Marriages need to be nurtured by both husband and wife. In the following modules, we will be looking at how we can nurture and enrich our marriage.

Warning signs of a marriage in crisis

Every couple can enrich their relationship through the teaching in this course. But if the relationship is already moving towards a crisis you will almost certainly require support from a Godly couple.

If most of the points mentioned below are true in your relationship, it is a huge warning sign that your relationship is probably in crisis

- Criticizing and complaining about each other (especially when done in public)
- Showing disrespect for each other
- Having no fun. Not laughing together
- When trust is a continual issue
- When there is any form of abuse, domestic violence or aggression
- When you are looking for ways to spend most of your free time away from rather than with each other
- When talk of separating from each other is used as a continual threat

I could add when you cease praying together to this list but if most of the above are true of your relationship, it is almost certain that you are no longer praying together anyway. There is a well known saying '**A praying couple is a staying couple**'.

A word of encouragement

As you come to the end of this module having read all the differences, you may wonder if a happy marriage is ever possible. It is! I delight in the difference between men and women. I am so very thankful that I am not married to a woman like me. That would be intolerable! Marriage is an adventure when two people who are different learn to harmonize with each other in a beautiful way. In a good marriage we combine our strengths and support each other in our weaknesses. This harmony needs much effort to achieve and we will be looking at guidelines on how to achieve in this in subsequent modules. For now, here is one excellent guideline **'Accept one another just as Christ has accepted you' (Romans 15:7)**

A prayer

'Lord, give us Your heart and eyes to see our spouses as You do and teach us to treasure them.'

Couples exercise

Handout worksheet two – Recognising your differences

This is an opportunity for each couple to discuss their differences. There are no right and wrong answers. The point of this exercise is to understand one another better. Arrange things so that couples can have their discussion without being overheard.

Allow 20 minutes for this exercise

To end this session, it can be valuable to remind couples about the individual vows that either couples have made or will be making if not already married. The vows will be similar to these listed below:

I take you
to be my wife/husband,
to have and to hold
from this day forward;
for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish,
till death us do part;
according to God's holy law.
In the presence of God I make this vow.

If you are conducting a marriage preparation course, you may wish to share that couples should not wait until their wedding day to consider the seriousness of their vows. Of course, they can decide on their wedding day that they cannot make these vows but that is at best most embarrassing for the couple as well as for others. So this course could

be the right time for the couple to begin to discuss together if they are both sure they are ready to make these awesome vows.

If you are conducting a marriage enrichment course, it can be valuable to remind couples of the vows already made.

Notes for trainers

You may be asked what is the situation if one partner becomes a Christian after marriage but the other partner does not make this commitment to Christ.

First, let us stress what should not happen. You should NOT initiate separation. (1 Corinthians 7:13–16)

Here are a few suggested steps irrespective of the Christian being the wife or husband:

- Do not be anxious. Follow the steps taught by Saint Paul in Philippians 4: 6–7. Pray.
- Love unconditionally (1 Corinthians 13). Act as a Christian towards your partner. Practice the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). Aim to be the perfect spouse practising the expressions of love found in Module 3 even if never reciprocated.
- Recognise you cannot force or pester your spouse into becoming a Christian. God has given us free will in these things and it is the Holy Spirit who convicts people of sin.
- When the time is right, do talk to your spouse about their feelings on you being a Christian. For example, ask how does your spouse feel about you going to church? Ask what does your spouse feel about the Bible etc? Be careful not to argue or judge.
- Make time to have a conversation about issues like how often you go to church meetings, the children joining you at church, your monetary giving to the church, etc.
- Then pray some more!

Remember two things

- God can use this trial of being unequally yoked (James 1: 2–4)
- God can do the unexpected (Matthew 19:26)

We cannot promise your spouse will become a Christian. But follow the steps above and you will have been an excellent witness. That is all that God requires from you in these situations.

MODULE THREE

Enriching your marriage: Expressing your love

The Bible, without ignoring the importance of romance, puts greater emphasis on marriage as companionship. Marriage is being the very best of friends with some unique wonderful extras. Ecclesiastes 9:9 can be interpreted as reading '*Enjoy life with the person you married*'.

We have looked at the warnings of a marriage in crisis in the last module. In this module, we look at the four ways through which we can actively show love to our husband or wife and so enrich our marriage.

The Four Expressions of Love

Loving words

- Paying compliments
- Saying thanks
- Being encouraging
- Appreciating housework done
- Comforting words
- Making requests, not demands
- Saying 'I love you'

Read: Proverbs 16:23–24 and Proverbs 18:21a

Kind actions

- Giving small gifts to each other
- Doing something special that delights your spouse
- Changing who does some domestic routines
- Being creative in surprising your spouse

Read: Galatians 6:9–10

Quality time

- It is extraordinary that we find so much time for others but not our spouse
- Make time to talk **and** listen to each other with no interruptions
- Eat together whenever possible (In our household, we thank God for the food together before we eat)
- Have fun together
- Show an interest in the interests of your spouse

Read: Amos 3:3

Physical touch

What is appropriate differs in different cultures, but touch is important in all cultures.

Not to be confused with sexual intimacy, physical touch includes:

- Kissing
- Embracing
- Holding hands
- Patting on the back or knee

Note: It is amazing how often Jesus ministered through touch. See Matthew 8:3 and Mark 7:33

More on the 4 Expressions of Love

Probably all these four expressions of love are practiced when a couple is courting. You said how much you loved each other, you did things that delighted each other, you could not spend enough time with each other and in some cultures you probably enjoyed kissing each other. These are good habits but they can disappear after a few years of marriage.

Couples who are courting need to retain these habits once married and for married couples often these habits need to be restored as you seek to enrich your marriage. It is never too late to do this.

‘Sow a good thought and reap a good habit, sow a good habit and reap good character, sow good character and reap a good destiny.’

Chuck Swindoll (American preacher)

All these expressions of love are important and each should be practiced. But most people have preferences. One person finds it easier to show their love expressing it one way whilst the other person may prefer receiving expressions of love in a different way. It is important to discover the preferences of the one you love, so you can express your love in a way that is extra special.

Learning from Jesus

Loving words	John 15:9
Quality time	Mark 6:31
Kind actions	John 13:5
Physical touch	Luke 5:13 Also see Luke 15:20

Something to think about

‘Falling in love is easy, but staying in love is very special.’

‘Love me when I least deserve it because that is when I really need it.’

‘Christian love is an affair of the will.’

Couples exercise one

Split the group into couples in a way that they can have a conversation without being overheard. Ask the couples the following. Think of 5 occasions when you have especially noticed your partner's love for you. It could be regular demonstrations of love or unusual events. When you have had time to do this on your own and written them down, share them with your partner.

Now discuss together which two expressions of love are most important to you. Allow 20 minutes for this exercise.

Notes for trainers

Some people find it difficult to express love. They find the words or actions that are commonly used to express love unusual or awkward. Maybe such expressions were not used by their parents as they grew up. Or maybe they are afraid of using loving words or loving actions having had past disappointing love experiences. Partners can be a great help in healing and restoring such people after such negative influences. This needs loving patience as trust takes time to build. As the saying goes *'Rome was not built in a day'*.

In extreme and prolonged cases, counselling by an experienced and qualified person will be required. Please note the golden rule of such counselling. Only women must counsel women and only men must counsel men.

MODULE FOUR

Enriching your marriage: Improving communication

I heard a story once about a wife who decided only to talk to her husband when really essential for an entire week because she was upset with him getting home very late one evening. The husband did not realise he was being punished in this way and at the end of the week declared to his wife, 'I think we have been getting along much better lately!'

This is an amusing story about poor communication. But the truth is that poor communication is not amusing. If you were to ask people in most organisations including churches what is their single biggest weakness, the highest vote is normally the lack of effective communication. And poor communication can also be a problem in marriages.

Why does my spouse not listen to me?

Why does my spouse not understand?

Why do I have to ask so many times?

Let us pretend we are overhearing a conversation between a husband and wife on communicating with each other. The exchange could go like this

Wife *'When I ask that you to listen to me and you interrupt by starting to give me advice, that is not listening. When I ask you listen to me and you interrupt by telling me why I should not feel that way, this is not listening. All I asked was that you listen, not talk or do. I know my fears sound irrational to you.'*

Husband *'When I want you to listen to me, you are always doing something else. Then you want to tell me every single detail about your day. I have fears too but can feel judged when I share them with you. So I prefer peace to sharing my inner thoughts with you.'*

Genuine communication is to understand and to be understood. It shows that you care. Genuine communication is not the same as conversation. Conversation is good but you can have many conversations without discussing what is important in your life. Genuine communication is as much about listening as talking – indeed more so.

In *The Essentials of Excellent Christian Leadership*, I shared the important/urgent matrix:

	Urgent	Not urgent
Important	Crisis Pressing problems Deadline for project	Relationship building Planning Rest/family
Not important	Interruptions Some meetings	Procrastination Time wasters Trivia

Much of the conversation we have with our spouses is **important/urgent**. In marriage you must make sure that the **important/not urgent** is not squeezed out.

Why do couples struggle with communication?

There are a number of reasons why couples can struggle with communication:

- The parents of one or both of the couple may not have communicated well with each other, so one or both of the couple did not learn these skills from them
- A spouse does not think their opinion will be valued, or peace at any price is more valued than risking disagreement
- The couple simply do not make time to communicate in a meaningful way
- One of the couple is very talkative leaving no time for the other to talk

Sheldon Vanauken, the author of *Severe Mercy*, has described the process where genuine communication in a relationship is dying as 'creeping separateness'.

Decide to make the time to communicate

Few good things just happen; if you want to communicate well in your marriage you have to make the decision to make time at least once a week to communicate. To do this, you need to agree a regular time when you can communicate. You will never simply find the time. Finding time can be especially difficult when we are raising children and their needs become the priority.

Personal testimony

In 1980, I became involved in full time ministry for the first time. This involved much travel throughout England and looking back I was probably away from home on average at least two nights a week. Even when I was at home, I would have to travel to London to the office which meant I left home at 6 am and returned at 7pm. Meanwhile my wife was caring for our 3 children. Of course, we had many conversations when I was at home, but we realised that we were simply too tired to discuss what was important to us. So we decided that once a month, we would go out for a coffee in a café that was quiet, have our favourite coffee which was a real treat for us at a time when we had little money and focus on what was important rather than what was simply urgent. I remember we used to take our diaries with us so that we knew each other's

commitments for the following month. Being in a café ensured we calmly shared with each other any difficult issue we were facing as you cannot get 'angry' in a café! I realise that this is all very formal but it worked for us at that stage in our lives. You need to work out what works best for you at this present time. My parents always had their special time after the evening service each Sunday. I can recall so well after sixty years that my brother and I never interrupted my parents while they enjoyed eating celery together. (Celery is a marshland plant with long stalks cultivated as a vegetable. It is a very noisy vegetable to eat!) Today my wife and I normally make time on Saturday mornings – this is possible as we have no young children.

You need this time each week or each month to communicate genuinely – to share what is going well, what has gone wrong, how things can be improved, what your fears are, what your dreams are and more. Try and make the time relaxed and special, so it is not a time to be feared.

What is good communication?

Hopefully we are now agreed that excellent communication is not the same as much conversation. Here are the basic essentials of excellent communication within a marriage

- Sharing exactly how you feel on things that matter to both of you
- Listening to what your partner says
- Acknowledging their opinions and feelings even if different than your own

Six steps to developing listening skills

For most of us, talking is not a skill to be learnt in adult life – though some of us do need to learn to talk less and others need to be encouraged to talk more. However, most of us have to learn listening skills in adult life. This takes effort and we must train ourselves to be good listeners. Remember the dictum: Practice makes perfect. Becoming a good listener in your marriage includes these six steps:

1. Allowing no distractions except in an emergency. Yes, switch your phone off!
2. Letting your partner share an issue by paying attention (including most importantly with your eyes) and without interruption
3. Keeping an open mind to what they are saying
4. Making a special effort to show self-control and never respond emotionally when your partner is saying something that you do not agree with. Take time to think through what your partner has said rather than instantly respond
5. Clarifying anything you do not understand by asking questions. Do not offer an opinion
6. Ask what your husband/wife would like to be done about the situation

It is interesting to note that God gave us just one mouth but two ears. Maybe God did this to emphasise the importance of listening.

Praying together

As a Christian married couple, you should also be communicating together with God. There is a saying 'A praying couple is a staying couple'. While there are no verses in the Bible that specifically speaks of a praying couple, there is enough in scripture to indicate that this is what couples should do (for example see Matthew 18:19–20).

Initially praying together can be awkward. And even if you do pray together, it can quickly become routine. As someone who has struggled with this over the years (but thankfully persevered with it), this is my advice

- **Be realistic.** For many an extended prayer time each day is unrealistic. Unless you are prayer warriors, it is better to start with even just 3 minutes a day than be ambitious and then end up not praying together at all after a few months.
- **Realise that this is not a performance.** You are communicating together with God. Do not worry if you stumble in prayer or feel your prayers are simple. Jesus says come to me like little children.
- **Decide what time each day you will pray together.** Before or after breakfast or before going to sleep works for many. Do not feel guilty if you miss one day. It is Satan who condemns.
- **Review and adapt.** If praying together is becoming a burden or boring, it is not time to give up but review and adapt. For example you may decide to shift the time or decide you should use a daily readings booklet. Here are two guidelines:

Ensure your prayers are vertical. You are communicating with God. It is not an opportunity for the two of you to use these times to get at each other or to be manipulative

Start with thankfulness. That gets the focus right.
(1 Thessalonians 5 :16–18)

I believe that thanking God for your food before meals is important. Family devotions should also be part of Christian family life.

Couples exercise one

As usual, the couples need to talk to each other in a way that they are not overheard. Invite the couples to discuss with each other for a few minutes any barriers they may have to communicating at a deep level with their partner. The trainer should read out slowly the following typical examples of such barriers:

- My partner will not be interested
- I have to be strong and therefore should not share how I feel
- I do not want to worry him/her
- He/she might be angry with me
- He/she might laugh at me
- I may sound weak
- I may be misunderstood

- Any other

Allow 6 minutes for this exercise

Couples exercise two

Once the first exercise has been completed move onto exercise two. Ask the following:

Each of you think of an issue that has been bothering you and you have not discussed recently. Choose an issue you have not already argued about.

Using the 6 steps already taught for effective listening (Note to trainer: You should remind everyone what the steps are) take it in turns to share your feelings and opinions about this issue.

Allow 12 minutes for this exercise.

Couples exercise three

Finally, invite the couples to do the following. Discuss and agree together the best time for you to have a regular weekly (or monthly) session for real communication with each other. By making it the same time each week (or month), it will help establish this as a habit. If you cannot agree today, agree when you will decide!

Discuss and agree together your devotional life together as a couple and if you have children as a family. Remember that whatever you agree upon needs to be realistic. Better two minutes to start with that becomes a habit than ten minutes that is only achieved on rare occasions and eventually never.

Allow 8 minutes for this exercise.

Notes for Trainers

Jesus the listener

You may find it helpful when stressing the importance of listening to share this: We think of Jesus as the teacher. But He also listened. In Luke 24:13–35, we find the account of Jesus on the road to Emmaus with two of his followers. Now this is Jesus' big moment having just risen from the dead. Surely it was time for Him to be the centre of attention. But what does He do? Jesus walks seven miles with His two followers listening to their conversation and then asks a few questions so He can listen some more.

MODULE FIVE

Enriching your marriage: Intended for pleasure

In 1980, I became Managing Director of the Scripture Union Bookshops in England. A new book had just been published entitled *Intended for Pleasure*. My bookshop managers did not know what to do with this book as sexual intimacy was not at that time something that Christians read about or were taught about. Several shops sold it from under the counter on request from customers only. Thankfully this has changed over the past 40 years. What we need to understand first is that God intends sexual intimacy both for procreation and pleasure. This module will focus on pleasure. Genesis 1:31 says ‘God saw **all** that he had made and it was very good.’ Note the ‘all’. It is for the pleasure of **both** husband and wife.

Sex remains a taboo subject in many cultures, but it is not a taboo subject to God. So it is alright to talk about sex. What is sad is that in cultures where it is no longer a taboo subject, sex has become commercialised and is being used to make money.

Let us start with some common beliefs about sex–life:

- The whole world is enjoying sexual intimacy except us – **this is not true**
- Sexual intimacy is always wonderful – **this is not true**
- Sexual intimacy is a measure of love – **this is not true**
- The time comes in life when our sexual intimacy will cease– **this would be sad**

The truth is that healthy sexual intimacy in marriage can become a wonderful delight though like most things in life, it may take time to get it right. The Bible does not shy away from the reality of romantic love – nor even from the sensations of physical passion. The Song of Songs is a love song in the Bible describing sexual love between a husband and a wife. See Song of Songs 1:2–4 and Song of Songs 7:6–8.

Before we go further on how to enrich sexual intimacy within marriage, let us remind ourselves that **‘love seeks one thing only: the good of the one loved’**. With this in mind we need to understand that men and women are different in the bedroom. To put it directly, most men like the physical act of sexual intimacy while most women prefer the gentler romantic aspects of sexual intimacy. Again this is a generalisation but broadly true.

Most men	Most women
Sex is a high priority	Other priorities such as family may be higher
Stimulated by sight and smell	Stimulated by touch and tenderness
Quick excitement	Slow excitement
Usually initiates	Usually responds
Difficult to distract during lovemaking	Easily distracted during lovemaking
Satisfied after climax	Needs to be cuddled after lovemaking

It is said that men are like a pot of water that comes quickly to the boil while women are more like charcoal which takes time to glow and then continues glowing for a long time.

Note to training couple

The material below is suitable for both the marriage preparation course and the marriage enrichment course. But the context is different. In the marriage preparation course, the context is for the couple's future lives and it is good that couples know all this in advance of being married. In the marriage enrichment course, the context is an opportunity for couples to review where they are when it comes to sexual intimacy.

These are some basic steps you need to take to enrich your sexual life within the context of a Christian marriage:

1. Agree that you want an enriched sex life.

This is fundamental and not something to be discussed by married couples when tired or after a time of unsatisfactory sexual intimacy. When and how married couples do this depends on where you are in your relationship. You may have a relationship where you are relaxed to talk together about what you enjoy or do not enjoy regarding sexual intimacy. Such a discussion normally needs to be agreed in advance so that it does not come as a surprise. Of course the conversation needs to be confidential between just the two of you only. It would also be good if possible to talk in a place where neither of you would wish to raise your voice. It is exceedingly damaging if the conversation simply becomes one of blaming each other. One other important piece of advice: you may wish to share what you enjoyed after a time of sexual intimacy and a sensible spouse will listen and learn from this.

If sexual intimacy is a matter you struggle discussing together, this course gives you the opportunity to start having these discussions recognising that God wants the best for both of you. If you find it impossible to have this conversation after the course and there is no apparent compatibility between the two of you regarding sexual intimacy, you may need counselling from a qualified Godly couple (always a couple) who you trust and respect. This needs courage to do and you should prayerfully agree who to approach for this counselling. You need to decide if it is best to seek advice from someone you already know and see regularly in daily life or someone of good repute who you would not normally relate to.

Almost certainly what you enjoy regarding sexual intimacy will be different in your later life than when you are young. So this would not be a 'once-only-in-a-married life' conversation.

2. Share where you think things are

During the conversation

- Say exactly how you feel without blaming your spouse

- Listen to what your spouse says
 - Remember that the tone of your voice, your body language and keeping eye contact where possible are all important during such a conversation
3. Go through the differences listed above between what men and what women enjoy when it comes to sexual intimacy.
- Share what you like and dislike regarding sexual intimacy – be both gentle and honest
 - Discuss preferences about how times of sexual intimacy are initiated. Some people prefer spontaneity while others prefer a particular day of the week. Of course it can be a mix of both
 - Agree what you will do when one of you wants a time of sexual intimacy and the other does not
4. Tenderness and anticipation
- Anticipation can be a delightful part of sexual intimacy. It is said by some people that the best times of sexual intimacy start at breakfast with gentle flirting and then during the day using your spouse's preferred expressions of love (see module 3). In short, be romantic!
5. Variety
- Some married couples enjoy one way of sexual intimacy together. This is good. Others prefer variety. This is also good. Variety could include the time of day, who initiates time of sexual intimacy or agreement on who will enjoy the time of sexual intimacy most on a particular occasion.
6. Laugh and have fun
- Sexual intimacy is not a performance. It is what it says – a beautiful time of intimacy. It does take practice and sometimes you simply have to laugh as you practice.

People ask what the Bible allows in terms of sexual practice within marriage. The Bible is not specific on this. What is really important is that you mutually agree about what you are comfortable with and show respect for one another's dignity.

'Every physical union should be a contest to see which partner pleases the other most'
– Dr Ed Wheat – author of *Intended for Pleasure*

Important note for men

Until their menopause, women have a monthly menstrual cycle. Men need to be sensitive to this cycle. Some women's moods can fluctuate and at sometimes in the month they may not feel like sexual intimacy. At other times in the month, they are more responsive to sexual intimacy. Men need to be sensitive to this cycle. Never joke about your wife being moody because it is that time of the month. Simply be thankful that you do not live with a menstrual cycle. Rather than joking, support your wife at these times. Do not be provocative and remember your wife's preferred expression of love.

If you have enjoyed sexual intimacy before the menopause, there is no reason why this should not continue into older life. It will be different (especially as the menopause

causes physical change in women) but it can be equally pleasurable. (Proverbs 5:18-19)

Procreation

In Genesis 1:28, God set in motion a process that has produced a current world-wide population of over seven billion people. Without doubt God gave us our incredible sex drive to propagate the human race as well as for our pleasure. Most, though not all couples, are able to have children and they are a great blessing. (Psalm 127:3-5)

Couples need to discuss and agree together how many children they wish to have. Many children can be a blessing, but they can also be the cause of poverty or hinder people from fulfilling what God wishes for their lives.

Physical difficulties

Some couples have physical difficulties when it comes to sexual intimacy. The difficulty could be with the husband or with the wife or with both. These issues are outside the scope of this manual but they are important issues. You may need help with such issues. It is not easy to ask for help. You need to pray about where you get this help from recognising that the resolution of the problem may involve medical attention. Ideally it should be a Christian with relevant qualifications who is respected and you trust to keep things discussed confidential. You need to decide if it is best to seek advice from someone you already know and see regularly in daily life or someone of good repute who you would not normally relate to.

Notes for trainers

It is of paramount importance that couples can talk in total confidence during these exercises. If this is totally impossible at the venue of the training course, then these exercises should be done as homework.

Couples exercise (Marriage enrichment course only)

Talking about sex may be hard at first but Genesis 2:25 says *'The man and the woman were both naked and they felt no shame'*. There is no shame in discussing sex with your partner. Invite couples to talk confidentially with each other about the following:

- Talk together about the qualities of good lovers taught in this module – communication, tenderness, anticipation and variety. Share with one another which ones you are succeeding in and which you need to work at together.
- Are there any particular problem areas which trouble either of you? How can you help each other?
- Share what you most enjoy in lovemaking. Discuss together anything new you would like to include in your lovemaking

Couples exercise (Marriage preparation course only)

As a couple, you are probably anticipating sexual intimacy within marriage. This is healthy. Invite couples to talk confidentially with each other about the following:

- Share with your partner about your anticipation feelings regarding sexual intimacy. Do you have any concerns?
- In a previous module, you were taught

Courtship is a mutual commitment to meet regularly for the purpose of knowing each other better with the aim of marriage one day. How the two of you handle the issue of intimacy during courtship will help you discern if your partner is the right person for you to marry. You have to mutually agree what is appropriate at different stages of your relationship. As they say, it starts with a kiss but you must agree in advance where it will end before marriage.

Are you both happy with the boundaries you have given yourselves for pre marriage physical affection? Does anything need to change?

- Share together what have been the most romantic moments in your relationship to date

Notes for trainers

Birth control

The Bible does not condemn birth control; in fact it makes no comment about it at all*. Couples may wish to seek advice on this issue. Such advice is outside the scope of this manual except to say that the deliberate termination of a pregnancy from the moment of conception is unacceptable to Christians. This includes some forms of contraception recommended by some clinics. Again, couples may wish to seek advice on this. A respected Christian with medical qualifications would be the ideal.

*It is true that God struck Onan dead. However, this was not for using birth control but for disobeying the Lord for selfish motives. (Genesis 38:9–10)

MODULE SIX

Enriching your marriage: Steps to resolving conflict

Paul Tournier, probably the twentieth century's most famous Christian physician, says in his book about marriage difficulties, *'Disagreements are entirely normal. As a matter of fact, they are a good thing. Those who make a success of their marriage are those who tackle their problems together and overcome them'*. You will have conflict even in an excellent Christian marriage.

In marriage, if you say you do not argue, it means:

- You are lying
- You think of arguing as something violent like two lions are fighting
- You are not speaking to each other

Conflict is part of life. *'In this world you will have trouble'* (John 16:33). Conflict is one way that God uses for the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) to grow in us as we are moulded to be more like Jesus.

Most arguments in marriage are about money, personal habits (especially untidiness), children, housework, sexual intimacy, family and friends.

These can be caused by:

Genuine misunderstandings

It may simply be a genuine misunderstanding, probably because the married couple did not listen carefully to each other. See James 1:19

Genuine differences of opinion

We are allowed to have our own opinions in marriage and they may differ from our spouses. Each person has a unique way of viewing the world and though we may have similar beliefs, we may have a different approach to the outworking of these. For example, we may both believe that education is vital for our children but not agree on the best way to educate them.

Lost trust

Lost trust comes from broken promises, feeling betrayed, being lied to and lack of integrity. Lost trust invariably leads to conflict.

His needs, her needs

Meeting your needs becomes more important within marriage than you meeting your spouse's needs. This is selfishness within the marriage.

Personality clashes

Each one of us is 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:14) and each of us is unique.

Over the years, people have tried to categorise general personality types, and this can be helpful though simplistic as most of us are a mix of two or more of these types though usually one type does dominate. In my book 'The Essentials of Excellent Christian Leadership', I write about four basic personality types with each type driven by different dominant motivations

- ⇒ Power (What matters is getting things done)
- ⇒ Popularity (What matters is being liked and admired)
- ⇒ Perfection (What matters is getting things right)
- ⇒ Peaceful (What matters is peace in all things)

In the leadership book, I include a chart of different preferred ways to behave

Some spouses are	Other spouses are
Outgoing and talkative	Serious and quiet
Spontaneous and instinctive	Reflective and thoughtful
Emotional and passionate	Logical and analytical
Concerned for people	Concerned about planning

Sinful attitudes and habits

See James 4:1-2 and Galatians 5:19-21

Satan promotes conflict

Satan loves to destroy a Christian marriage

See 2 Timothy 2:26 and 1 Peter 5:8

Approaches to handling conflict

Some people use the '**avoidance/denial approach**'. This includes pretending there is no conflict or running away from a conflict situation.

Other people use the '**attack approach**'. This can include harsh words, manipulation and in extreme cases even physical threats.

The Christian approach should be the '**peace-making approach**'. This approach seeks to find a way forward that listens to, respects and where possible accommodates your spouse's views whilst recognising that there will always be differences and rarely does everyone end up with all they wish for. In recognising that conflict exists and avoiding aggression, this approach is hugely different to the 'avoidance/denial' and 'attack' approach.

Nine basic principles when in disagreement with your spouse

1. Lose some battles

Count to 10 and ask yourself: does the issue really matter? Is it worth an argument? A few battles may be necessary but most are not – even though they feel important at the time.

By nature I am untidy. My wife could harass me about this but chooses not to. Likewise my wife is usually late for meetings, but I try not to harass her about this. (To be honest I am an impatient person by nature and I do not always succeed in not harassing her!) We live with each other's weaknesses and more importantly we value much more each other's strengths.

'A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offence.'
(Prov. 19:11)

Many disputes can be resolved by quietly overlooking things that really do not matter (see Prov. 12:16; 17:14; 1 Pet. 4:8). If you do not overlook something that really is not important in the morning, it can ruin the rest of the day as it infects the atmosphere of the day. Better to leave it until one of those times you have set aside to discuss such issues (see module 4).

2. Let go of the past

There are few things more draining in a marriage than constantly returning to old hurts. These can be weapons you bring out every time you are arguing about anything (Ephesians 4:31 and I Corinthians 13:5). A small issue like a meal being late can escalate into a full-blown argument about everything that is wrong.

3. Do not say things in an accusing manner

This puts your spouse on the defensive.

'You never listen to me' brings response 'yes, I do but I hate you always nagging'.
Proverbs 16:24

When exchanging views with your spouse, try and avoid the words 'Never' and 'Always'.

4. Never fight in public

Screaming matches in the presence of others are humiliating. Wait until you are home by which time you may see the issue in better perspective.

Small criticisms even in jest in public are almost as bad as arguing in public. England's most famous playwright William Shakespeare wrote ***'Many a true word has been spoken in jest'***.

Make a habit of honouring your spouse in public, by talking about them positively.
Romans 12:10

5. Try to understand not only what the other person is *saying* but also what they are *feeling*

Saying '*I am tired*' can mean '*I feel you are not helping enough*'.

6. Never let the sun go down on your anger (Ephesians 4:26)

You may not solve the problem that night but affirm that you love each other and agree a time tomorrow when you can discuss further. I cannot stress enough the importance of this teaching.

7. Do not let problems fester

Problems do not go away –if left, they only get worse. See Ephesians 4:26 and Nehemiah 5:6–13

8. Apologise

Practice apologising and asking for forgiveness if appropriate. 'I regret having done that. I will really try not do it again'. This is such a powerful thing to do.

9. Practice the power of forgiveness

Forgiveness is a choice and decision

What true forgiveness is

- Being aware of what someone has done and still forgiving them.
- It is a choice to keep no record of wrong (1 Corinthians 13:5)
- Refusing to punish. Not wishing vengeance. (Romans 12:9).
- Not telling others what they did.
- Absence of bitterness.

What true forgiveness is not

- Approval of what they did. Forgiving people does not mean approval of what they did.
- Excusing what they did. A forgiven wrong action is still a wrong action.
- Forgetting. God can forget (Isaiah 43:25) but for most of us forgetting is unrealistic. Forgiveness does not always erase our memory.
- Pretending we are not hurt. A forgiven hurtful action is still a hurtful action.

Forgiveness is at the heart of our faith and it is a wonderful releasing blessing. With no forgiveness, there is bitterness. Bitterness both grieves the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30) and is no basis for establishing an excellent Christian marriage.

How to raise difficult issues with your spouse

In module 4, we taught about the importance of making times to communicate with other. We shared that communication is different from conversation. But how should you raise difficult issues with your spouse within these special communication times?

In *The Essentials of Excellent Christian Leadership* I shared some teaching about the ‘sandwich method’ with the bread both sides being the kind words and in the middle the meat which is the issue to be addressed. Saint Paul used this method with Philemon:

- Compliments (Philemon verses 1–3 and 7)
- Requests – not demands (v 9–10 and 14)
- Expresses confidence in Philemon to deal with the issue (v 21)

However this method is probably too blunt an instrument to use within marriage. So how should you approach the ‘must have conversations’ that are required from time to time in any marriage?

- Do not put off the conversation but do choose a good time to have it
In the UK we have a saying that goes ‘A stitch in time saves nine’. Do not let the issue fester. It is better to get the issue out in the open than be miserable. But do choose a good time to raise the issue when you and your spouse are free from any distractions and able to give the conversation full attention. Timing is so important.
- Start gently
Try not to sound confrontational. Starting with ‘Can we talk’ or ‘we must talk’ can immediately make your spouse anxious. The spouse needs to know they are loved and appreciated. Maybe use phrases like ‘What do you think about’ or ‘I want to have a better understanding...’ etc.
- Show respect
Do not assume that your spouse sees things from your viewpoint. Do not speak down to your spouse. Do not interrupt when your spouse is speaking. Be determined to keep the right tone. Avoid ‘you always’ type statements. Importantly try to focus on your feelings which is what is important and not on accusations. Stay calm and above all avoid a screaming match. Give your spouse the opportunity to explain the reasons for their action or attitude that offended you.
- Stick to one point
Try to avoid the conversation drifting quickly into a confrontation about every frustration in your marriage. This is not easy when a number of resentments have been allowed to build up over a period of time. Try to steer the conversation back to how you are feeling about the issue you wish to address. I saw a film once when the issue of a spouse not helping to wash up dishes after an enjoyable meal escalated within 10 minutes to talk about divorce.

- Be prepared to put the discussion on hold

It is better to stop the conversation than saying hurtful things that can damage your relationship. Nothing gets resolved with insults and criticisms. If you cannot even agree a how to continue the conversation at a later time, the two of you may need to consider marriage counselling.

- The desired conclusion

Often your spouse can guess the reasons why you are upset/hurt and often they did not mean deliberate harm. However, sometimes they may be totally ignorant of what they have done.

After the conversation, one of or both of you may need to apologise (Ruth and I sometimes end up trying to compete on who can give the bigger apology!) Then, agree on what needs to change – in good discussion, it may be that both of you need to change.

Guidelines on handing some specific issues which can cause conflict

Money

Though never poor, my first wife Susan and I could relate to what Saint Paul writes in Philippians 4:12 *'I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty.'* During the 1970's, I was working as a businessman and I was financially prosperous. Then in the 1980's, after becoming involved in Christian ministry, our income struggled to meet our basic needs. So Susan and I had to make a decision. We decided that monthly expenditure would never be more than monthly income. One outcome of this decision was that for 10 years we did not do many of the enjoyable things that other married couples were doing in our community at that time. That was fine. God blessed us as a family in other ways.

Money is an issue that can either cause conflict in a marriage or can draw us closer to each other as we work together on money issues. Marriages can be transformed from bitterness to harmony through discussion and agreement on money. Sometimes married couples work on the basis of 'Mine is mine and yours is ours'. That is not right. It all belongs to both of you – the issue is how you agree to manage the money you have as a married couple.

Here are 3 steps to managing your finances together in a wise way:

1. Pray

Prayer is always a good place to start. Pray that God gives you a new attitude and a new commitment to managing the money you have more wisely. Pray for honesty as you discuss these matters with each other.

2. Total everything up

Total up any savings you may have and any debts you owe. Be honest, hiding nothing from each other. No secrets.

Now total up expected monthly income and essential monthly expenditure.

3. Agree on a plan

As a general principle, agree to live within your means. Also following biblical principles agree to give to your church and if possible save as well – even if this is a small amount. See section on saving below.

If monthly income is less than monthly expenditure, agree what your expenditure priorities are and how you can cut back on other spending. This can be painful but be realistic – what are the other options you have apart from building up more debt.

Your long-term plan may involve considering ways to increase your income over the next few months if that is required. It is essential you are realistic about this and do not start spending money on the basis of ‘hoped-for’ additional income. Live within the financial limits of what you can afford now. If you find at some point you can generate additional income, then you can review your plan at some later date in the light of this additional income.

A great way to reduce expenditure on food is to grow your own vegetables. You may wish to consider this if you have a small patch of land attached to your house.

‘Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen pounds, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds and a few pence, result misery.’ (Quote adapted from a novel by Charles Dickens)

Personal testimony

In the 1980’s when my income was low working for a Christian charity, I cut wires for 6 years in the evenings for a local manufacturing company in addition to my charity work. When Mission Possible was founded 25 years later, I worked for 6 years as a part-time driver. (See Acts 18:1–4)

Savings

Some Christians believe that saving to meet future needs or to have funds to help others in need is a failure to trust in God. This is not true. Not every Christian is able to save because they are struggling to meet their basic needs. Yet it is important to understand that sometimes God supplies more than we need to prepare us to meet future needs. See Proverbs 6:6–8 and Genesis 41. Note that the Bible does warn against **excessive** accumulation of wealth (Luke 12:16–21), and trusting in accumulated wealth (1 Timothy 6:17).

Get rich quick schemes

The Bible warns about trying to get rich through 'get rich quick' schemes including gambling (Proverbs 13:11).

I recall giving some leadership training in Africa. The course lasted until lunchtime on the third day. Then after lunch on the third day someone came into the conference at the invitation of a senior pastor to share with the pastors who attended the conference how they could earn additional money. It was selling cosmetics. I thought it slightly surprising that pastors were being encouraged to sell cosmetics but I was even more surprised by the selling technique. It was what we call pyramid selling which is an unsustainable and a discredited form of selling. Christians need to seek Godly wisdom to avoid falling into these traps

Parents and in-laws

After you marry, your first loyalty must now be to each other and you must leave behind your emotional dependence on your parents. Look at Genesis 2:24 again. But this change of loyalty does not mean cutting ourselves off from our families. Our aim should be to develop a mutually supportive and enjoyable relationship with our parents, parents-in-law and extended family. This starts when planning the wedding. The wedding day is your day, but it normally also involves your parents. A friend who grew up in Asia has told me '***the wedding preparations and associated dramas caught me off guard. I had to learn very quickly that for others the wedding day was not about me or my future spouse!***' Compromise and conceding on some things are usually required to keep the peace.

Here are some guidelines for the married couples in relation to their parents and extended family:

- Explain to your parents God's teaching in Genesis 2:24 and Ephesians 5:31 if this is necessary
- Assure your parents and in-laws of your continual love to them (Deuteronomy 5:16)
- Spend quality time with them
- Allow parents and in-laws to spend enough time with your children. Involve parents and in-laws with your family occasions.
- Do not criticise your partner in front of your parents, in-laws or any family member
- Be financially independent, if possible (Romans 13:8)
- Care for your relatives (1 Timothy 5:8)

Extended families

In some cultures there is an expectation that wage earners financially support their extended families – from young cousins to elderly aunts and uncles. To help others including the extended family is a praiseworthy custom but biblical teaching should be noted. 1 Timothy 5:8 indicates that those in your household have precedence over those who are not.

The important thing about support to the extended family is that the husband and wife are in agreement about what is appropriate. Otherwise it can be the cause of marital tension.

Summary

When we get angry, some of us become like rhinos and go on the attack. That is my tendency. Others are more like tortoises and withdraw into themselves. That is my wife's tendency (though she is an exceptionally beautiful tortoise!) Neither is right.

The general principle is 'be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you' (Ephesians 4:32).

Remember the golden rule:

'Treat others as you would wish them to treat you.'

Couples exercise (Marriage enrichment course only)

Ask the couples the following. Think about words, phrases or actions that you may have used to hurt your partner. Then think of any words, phrases or actions your partner may have used that hurt you. Then share these thoughts and talk together about how you can help each other to express how you feel without hurting the one you love

Forgive each other and then pray together.

Allow 10 minutes for this exercise

Couples exercise (Marriage preparation course only)

Ask the couples the following. Discuss how you plan to help each other to manage your anger when you are married.

Pray together for peace and harmony in your future marriage

Allow 10 minutes for this exercise

Notes for trainers

Rebuilding trust after infidelity

The discovery or the confession of infidelity is totally devastating. A spouse's unfaithfulness is the most painful experience that can be inflicted on a marriage. The feelings of deep hurt, guilt, anguish and resentment that result from infidelity are very real and can never be dismissed lightly.

Following an act or period of unfaithfulness, the marriage relationship based on love and trust will have been severely fractured. God's will is always that every

effort should be made to restore the relationship. This can be a long difficult journey. The NIV translates Proverbs 13:15 as *'The way of the unfaithful is hard'*.

You need to trust that God is suffering with you when you suffer. He feels your pain and is going to redeem this. Jerry Bridges in his book *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts* writes:

'Trust is not a passive state of mind. It is a vigorous act of the soul by which we choose to lay hold on the promises of God and cling to them despite the adversity that at times seeks to overwhelm us'.

Here are a few guidelines:

- **Repentance and forgiveness**

Repentance involves a change the heart and mind of the person who committed adultery. He or she should immediately act to remove any unnecessary temptation from their life.

The necessity of forgiveness by the other partner is taught in Matthew 6:14–15, Ephesians 4:32 and elsewhere. This may not be easy, but God never commands us to do what He will not enable us to do.

- **Recognise that things may never be the same**

Acknowledge that your future relationship may not be exactly the same. All might be forgiven but we cannot completely forget. Trust can take an exceedingly long time to restore. God willing, in time, your new relationship may be better than the days before infidelity.

- **Pray for a fresh beginning**

Commit to never going back to your old ways. Sometimes couples ask a pastor to bless their marriage again in a private ceremony. Move forward using the teachings of this manual.

- **Consider Christian marriage counselling**

If the above does not move the couple into a better place in their marriage and for example the couple are both constantly blaming each other for the past, then marriage counselling should be considered to rescue the marriage. Christian counselling is a carefully arranged opportunity for people to confidentially talk through issues that are affecting their life, with a Christian specifically trained to help.

LESSON FOR YOUTH GROUPS AND STUDENTS

Personal Testimony

I was sent to an all-boys boarding school at the age of 7 until I was 18. My father was a pastor who lived in a remote property in a rural part of England where I used to play with my brother when at home on holiday. The truth is that by the time I went to university, I knew almost nothing about women. The day before I went to university, my father took me for a walk and gave me the only advice that I can recall. He simply said, 'respect women'. This was wise advice which I have always tried to follow. Looking back, I realise how immature I was when I went to university and my first attempts at dating would make you laugh and laugh and laugh. But the truth is that there are few things in life that are more exhilarating than a first date. Exhilaration is a most wonderful feeling but can cause you to be unable to think clearly. That is why Christians need guidelines to avoid making mistakes.

Dating: Finding the right boyfriend/girlfriend

The overriding requirement is that your boyfriend or girlfriend must be Christian. Emotional feelings are strong feelings and you never know where these emotions will take you. In time, you may both genuinely fall in love. This will lead to problems if one of you is not a Christian. The Bible warns in 2 Corinthians 6:14 against being unequally yoked. God gives us this command for our own protection and joy. He knows that we cannot have a Godly relationship if we have different beliefs, values, and priorities from each other.

Some Christians may say 'I am only dating an unbeliever, not marrying them'. But this is like playing with fire. Sooner or later, someone is going to get hurt. You may argue 'But I am sure this person will become a Christian.' It is possible that God may at some point bring a person to faith in Christ. However 2 Corinthians 6:14 does not say, 'Do not be unequally yoked ... unless you think or feel you have the faith that the person will become a Christian.'

Even if both of you are Christians, it does not guarantee a wonderful boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. Here is a checklist to help you recognise if your boyfriend/girlfriend is the right kind of person.

- You are mutually attracted to each other's character. And yes, physical attraction is important too!
- There is evidence that the fruit of the Spirit is growing in the life of your boyfriend/girlfriend. (Galatians 5:22)

Helpfully, the Bible also lists specific characteristics of the kind of people to avoid. Read the following verses

- Proverbs 6:17 – people who lie
- Proverbs 14:16 – the foolish and reckless
- Proverbs 19:15 – lazy people
- Proverbs 25:28 – the quarrelsome

- Galatians 5:1 – those whose lifestyle include one or more of the following: sexual immorality, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, envy, drunkenness and more

These characteristics will certainly destroy any long-term relationship.

Warning

'The heart is deceitful above all things' (Jeremiah 17:9). Unbelievers are quite capable of making an apparent commitment to Christ in order to win the Godly person they want to date. The fruit of the Spirit clearly seen in the believer's character (Galatians 5:22) can be incredibly attractive to an unbeliever. Very soon they may make a profession of faith. However, such apparent conversions need to be tested. This will take time, much wisdom and the discernment of other Christians who you trust. For some, dating can be like a game and people can play act being a Christian in order to win the prize of a Godly spouse.

How far can we go physically when dating?

The first question many people ask is 'How far can we go physically when dating.' It is a good question but let us address some other issues first.

Dating often isolates us from other Christians in our lives. The closer we become with a boyfriend or girlfriend, the more removed we can be from other important relationships. Fight the impulse to date in a corner by yourselves, and instead draw one another into other important relationships in your life. The golden rule of dating is to listen to people who know you best, love you most, and will tell you if you are wrong. As young people we can be confused by our emotions and need to be ready to hear truth, wisdom and sometimes correction. See 1 Thessalonians 5:14 and Colossians 3:16. God has sent experienced, Godly men and women into your life for your good. In summary, when it comes to dating remember to combine **friendship** between each other with **fellowship** with other Godly people.

So how far can one go physically when dating? The Bible is clear that fornication is not permitted (for example see 1 Corinthians 6:18 and 1 Corinthians 10:8). Apart from this, the Bible says little specifically about how far you can go but Matthew 26:41 does teach that the 'spirit is willing but the body is weak'. This is so true when it comes to dating. I am not going to teach for or against holding hands, cuddling or kissing. This is partly because cultures differ and partly because people differ. For example for some a kiss is simply a sign of affection while for others it is a signal of deep sexual desire. The same is true of cuddling. What we do need to understand is that for most people the body is weak and as a song goes 'it started with a kiss, I never thought it would come to this'. It is so easy for physical affection to take you to a place beyond where either of you would wish to be.

5 Signs of a healthy Christian Boyfriend/Girlfriend relationship

- They have Jesus as the most important person in their lives
- They have a network of loving relationships with family and friends
- They speak the truth in love to each other (Ephesians 4:15)
- They do not hold grudges (1Corinthians 13:5)
- They have fun together

13 foundations for healthy Christian Boyfriend/Girlfriend Relationships

Rely on God's word and share God's word with each other

Encourage and build each other up

Live one day at a time

Always be patient

Trust God and each other

Include family and friends in your relationship

Overcome temptation

Never lead each other astray

Share the real you with each other (be vulnerable)

Have fun together

Impose ground rules for your relationship

Pray for each other

Seek to forgive and do not hold grudges

4 blessings of a healthy Christian Boyfriend/Girlfriend Relationship

- The blessing of a special friendship
Simply a special friendship is very special! And it helps us build up our self-esteem. This is so important as we are told in the Bible to love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:39). We cannot learn to love others until we learn to love ourselves.
- The blessing that comes from commitment
Dating is a good school in which to learn about commitment to another person which is an important part of you maturing as a person and growing more Christlike.
- The blessing of someone who really knows you
It is such a blessing to have a special friendship with someone you can be honest with. Healthy dating is not about acting. It is about sharing your dreams and fears together, being honest and encouraging each other
- The blessing of team ministry
As boyfriend/girlfriend, there are ministry activities such as evangelism, youth work and more that you can do together. Serving in these things together can strengthen your friendship as well as prepare you for future ministry

Disengaging from the person you are dating?

There are a number of reasons you may wish to end dating someone. If you know that this relationship will not grow into engagement and eventually marriage, then at some point the relationship will need to come to an end. The relationship can end because you have drifted apart or because one of you feels they have met someone they are more suited to.

Other reasons include:

- Trust has been broken – one of you has cheated on the other
- You realise the person you are dating is not a Christian
- You have no feelings of affection for the person you are dating
- You feel uncomfortable about the relationship
- You believe God is calling you to end the relationship
- Those who know and love you have advised you to end the relationship
- There has been or there is ongoing physical violence in the relationship
- One of you has made inappropriate sexual advances

Breaking up is emotionally exhausting. Here are some guidelines if you decide to break up a relationship

- Pray about the situation
- Discuss the breakup confidentially with close family and/or friends who you trust.
- Be honest with the other person, but speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15)
- Do not delay what you have decided to do
- Make a clean break – no negotiating or turning back
- Learn from the experience and try to get it right next time
- Keep praying

The ending of a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship does not mean the relationship was a waste of time. Such relationships are learning times and part of growing up and maturing as people. It is possible to remain friends with people you have dated with though sometimes the hurt is too great to make this possible.

Feeling rejected

The immediate reaction of being ‘dropped’ by your boyfriend/girlfriend can be the utterly devastating feeling of rejection. I know that feeling as it happened to me several times when I was single in the 1960s!

You cannot belittle these feelings. But if you are a Christian, you may find these guidelines helpful:

- Acknowledge God’s love for You
- Keep trusting Him. Remember God has a plan for your life
- Remain connected with a local church
- Embrace lessons learnt from the ‘school of dating’ – in time, it should be a maturing experience

Being single

Let us be honest. For most people being single is tough. You can be lonely and feel rejected. So let us not pretend it is easy. But note the following

- Being in no relationship is a considerably better place to be in than being in the wrong relationship
- Singleness can provide great opportunities for serving the church – Saint Paul was one such person.
- Eventually, you may need to come to a place where you are at peace that you may remain single. But of course, even when you come to that place, God can surprise us. This was the excellent advice given to a friend of mine ‘You need to stop looking for a spouse. One may appear when you are not looking’

A true story

A woman was raised in a Christian family and made a personal commitment to Christ while at college. In her early twenties she went out with an unbeliever but soon realised this was wrong and terminated the relationship. A member of her church on hearing this said ‘That is good. God will bless you soon for this’. She assumed this meant she would soon be dating a Christian boyfriend. She waited and waited but there was no Christian boyfriend for her. So she got involved with a ministry while not at work and in this way became a blessing to many other people. By 40 she had concluded that she would never get married. In the midst of this, she never became bitter despite wishing to be a wife and mother. Importantly, she maintained her appealing personality and kept herself looking attractive. It was a long wait of over 20 years but eventually aged 47 she married a Christian man and at 60 is still happily married.

Of course, not all stories have a happy ending like this but with God the seemingly impossible can happen.

Notes for trainers

There are no couple exercises with this lesson as some of the people who attend may not have a boyfriend/girlfriend. We would suggest a question and an answer session. This often ends in a discussion in which many people are involved.

Various issues may be raised during this discussion time and it is worth familiarising yourself with all the teaching in this manual. This teaching may help you respond to some of the questions you are asked.

WHAT OTHERS SAY ABOUT MARRIAGE

When we claim to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and then wilfully choose to unite ourselves with an unbeliever in the most intimate personal union on earth we profane the holiness of God. We act as though our emotional drive for human intimacy is more important than affirming the preciousness of God's holiness and nearness.

John Piper

*Truly, God initiated marriage that produced the family
The husband's headship is not lordship
The wife's submission is not slavery
Marriage is not a part-time job but a lifetime responsibility
It takes the man and the woman to make the marriage a success.*

Dr. John Ugbeshi

Let the wife make the husband glad to come home and let him make her sorry to see him leave.

Martin Luther

A good marriage is the union of two good forgivers.

Ruth Bell Graham

God created marriage. No government subcommittee envisioned it. No social organization developed it. Marriage was conceived and born in the mind of God.

Max Lucado

Try praising your wife

Billy Sunday

Jesus' teaching in general [implies] that happy and fulfilling sexual relations in marriage depend on each partner aiming to give satisfaction to the other.

John Piper

The Bible teaches that the essence of marriage is a sacrificial commitment to the good of the other. That means that love is more fundamentally action than emotion. But in talking this way, there is a danger of falling into the opposite error that characterized many ancient and traditional societies. It is possible to see marriage as merely a social transaction, a way of doing your duty to family, tribe and society. Traditional societies made the family the ultimate value in life, and so marriage was a mere transaction that helped your family's interest. By contrast, Western societies make the individual's happiness the ultimate value, and so marriage becomes primarily an experience of romantic fulfilment. But the Bible sees GOD as the supreme good – not the individual or the family – and that gives us a view of marriage that intimately unites feelings AND duty, passion AND promise. That is because at the heart of the Biblical idea of marriage is the covenant.

Tim Keller

WORKSHEETS AND HANDOUTS

Photocopiable worksheets and handouts

Worksheets

The worksheets are for module one (Marriage preparation only) and Module two. They are also available for download from the ibtr.org.uk website.
<https://ibtr.org.uk/index.php?id=76&s=>

Handouts

How much of the teaching given by you will be remembered by people who have attended your course? The answer is different for different people but for certain some of it will be forgotten by all.

These handouts are designed to assist couples to review the training they have received together not only soon after the training has been delivered but also in the years ahead.

It is suggested that these handouts are given out after each module. If you are able to provide a low-cost file/folder in which the set of handouts can be kept for the long term, this could help keep them in a safe place for future reference.

Note

Consider translating the worksheets and handouts into your first language before photocopying if this will be easier for the couples to understand.

WORKSHEET 1 – KNOWING ME, KNOWING YOU

Instruction: Take turns as you share your answers to each of these questions with your partner

Things about you

What is your first memory in life? What did you respect most about your parents/guardians and what did you struggle with as a child regarding family life?

- What do you enjoy most?
- What do you fear most?
- What is the best thing about your relationship?
- What do you most dislike about yourself?

Things about your partner

- Where was your partner born?
- What does your partner fear most?
- What would your partner want to be doing in 5 years' time?
- What makes your partner most annoyed?

What would your partner say is the best thing about your relationship?

Remember: When listening, make eye contact, do not interrupt and reflect back to your partner what you have heard.

WORKSHEET 2 – RECOGNISING OUR DIFFERENCES

Instruction: Take turns as you share your answers to each of these questions with your partner

As a couple discuss the following. There are no right and wrong answers. The point of this exercise is to understand one another better – not to correct or blame each other.

- How do you normally respond to disagreements? Is your preference to keep the peace and avoid any conflict, seek to work it out together or be more controlling and seek to have your own way?
- Do you prefer to plan things or be spontaneous?
- Are you normally early, late or on time?
- Do you enjoy time with other people or time on your own?
- Are you an owl (enjoy staying up late) or a hornbill (enjoying being up and active early in morning chattering away)?
- Are you normally tidy or messy?
- Regarding money, if you ever have any spare cash, do you prefer to spend it now or save it for later day?

Remembering that we are all different and the aim of this exercise is to recognise these differences and not to blame one other, do any of these differences cause unnecessary daily conflict in your relationship?

Remember: When listening, make eye contact, do not interrupt and reflect back to your partner what you have heard.

'Accept one another just as Christ has accepted you'. (Romans 15:7)

Handout module one

What the Bible says about marriage

What is love

- **Love** is patient and kind
- **Love** does not envy
- **Love** does not boast
- **Love** is not self-seeking. It is directed at others and not meeting your needs
- **Love** is not easily angered or rude
- **Love** keeps no record of wrongs
- **Love** protects the self-worth of the spouse
- **Love** perseveres – however difficult the circumstances
- **Love** trusts – is not suspicious

What the Bible says about Marriage

- Genesis 2:18, 21–24 Marriage is God’s idea for both companionship and intimacy
- Exodus 20:14 Husbands and wives are to be sexually faithful to each other in marriage
- Proverbs 31:10 A strong marriage is precious
- Ecclesiastes 9:9 Marriage is a lifelong commitment
- Malachi 2:13–14 Marriage is not an agreement which can be terminated but a lifelong covenant designed by God in which the husband and wife are bonded together forever
- 1 Corinthians 7:1–2 This verse indicates that it is better to marry than to be sexually immoral
- 2 Corinthians 6:14 You should not marry an unbeliever
- Ephesians 5: 22, 25 and 31–32 Wives should be willing to submit while husbands are urged to lay down their lives in sacrificial love and protection.
- 1 Peter 3:7 Husbands and wives are different but equal partners

In summary, the Bible teaches that:

- ***‘A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh’.*** (Genesis 2:24), This is a covenant until death separates you
- Marriage is the closest possible human relationship making a new family unit
- God uses marriage to teach us about unconditional love, forgiveness and patience, faithfulness, gentleness..... in short to mould us into becoming more like Christ

Handout module two

Why is everything not perfect in any marriage

A Men and women are different

These are generalisations and not all of these things are true of all men or all women. But the truth is that men and women are different.

Most Men	Most Women
Enjoy tasks	Enjoy relationships
Need time to think	Need to talk
Need to be admired by their wife	Need to trust their husband
Are concerned about facts	Are concerned about feelings
Gain self-esteem from being respected	Gain self-esteem from being loved
Need domestic support	Need financial support
Need sexual fulfilment	Need affection
Say 'I love you' to get sex	Give sex to hear 'I love you'
Are stimulated by sight of wife	Are stimulated by personality of husband

Most women

- Have low self-esteem – even the most beautiful women often feel unattractive
- Suffer from fatigue – from caring for children, looking after their home and more
- Feel absence of tender romantic love
- Live with moods relating to their monthly bodily cycle

Most men

- Feel they need more sexual fulfilment
- Need to solve everyone's problems including their wife's
- Desire constant admiration
- Have a wandering eye for other attractive women – even when happily married

B We can come into marriage with different expectations

Various things influence our expectations from marriage – including differences of the culture of the community we were raised in, how our parents modelled family and our personalities.

C Money issues

There are three ways couples handle money. Mine, Yours or Ours.

D Not equally yoked spiritually

You can have a married couple who are both Christians but have different expectations about their Christian life. This can lead to huge tensions within a marriage.

E Satan

We can blame Satan for too much in our lives. But it is true that the devil wants to destroy Christian marriages. A failed Christian marriage is a great weapon for Satan to use with unbelievers.

But there is hope! That is why all the next handouts are all about how to enrich your marriage.

Handout module three

Enriching your marriage – expressing your love

The Bible, without ignoring the importance of romance, puts greater emphasis on marriage as companionship. Marriage is being the very best of friends with some unique wonderful extras. Ecclesiastes 9:9 can be interpreted as reading '*Enjoy life with the person you married*'. Below are four ways through which we can actively show love to our husband and wife and enrich our marriage.

The Four Expressions of Love

Loving words

- Paying compliments
- Saying thanks
- Being encouraging
- Appreciate housework done
- Comforting words
- Making requests, not demands
- Saying 'I love you'

Read: Proverbs 16:23–24 and Proverbs 18:21a

Kind actions

- Giving small gifts to each other
- Do something special that delights your spouse
- Examine and change some domestic routines
- Be creative in surprising your spouse

Read: Galatians 6:9–10

Quality time

It is extraordinary that we find so much time for others but not our spouse.

Make time to talk **and** listen to each other with no interruptions.

- Eat together whenever possible (In our household, we thank God for the food together before we eat).
- Have fun together.
- Show an interest in the interests of your spouse.

Read: Amos 3:3

Physical touch

What is appropriate differs in different cultures but touch is important in all cultures

Not to be confused with sexual intimacy, physical touch includes:

- Kissing
- Embracing
- Holding hands
- Pat on the back or knee

Note: It is amazing how often Jesus ministered through touch.

See Matthew 8:3 and Mark 7:33

Handout module four

Enriching your marriage – improving communication

Genuine communication is to understand and to be understood. It is as much about listening as talking. Someone has described the process of a relationship in which genuine communication has died as 'creeping separateness'.

Making time

Like with most good things, you have a decision to make. You will never simply find the time for genuine communication. The urgent always will take priority unless you agree a regular time for genuine communication each week. Try and make that time relaxed and enjoyable.

What is good communication?

- Sharing exactly how you feel on things that matter to both of you
- Listening to what your partner says
- Acknowledging their opinions and feelings even if different than your own

Developing listening skills

- Letting your partner share an issue by paying attention (including most importantly with your eyes) and without interruption
- Allowing no distractions except in an emergency. Yes, switch your phone off!
- Keeping an open mind to what they are saying
- Clarifying anything you do not understand by asking questions. Do not offer an opinion
- Ask what they would like to be done about the situation

Praying together

As a Christian married couple, you should also be communicating together with God.

- **Be realistic.** For many an extended prayer time each day is unrealistic. Unless you are prayer warriors, it is better to start with even just 3 minutes a day than be ambitious and then end up not praying together at all after a few months
- **Realise that this is not a performance.** You are communicating together with God. Do not worry if you stumble in prayer or feel your prayers are simple. Jesus says come to me like little children.
- **Decide what time each day you will pray together.** Before or after breakfast or before going to sleep works for many. Do not feel guilty if you miss one day. It is Satan who condemns
- **Review and adapt.** If praying together is becoming a burden or boring, it is not time to give up but review and adapt. For example you may decide to shift the time or decide you should use a daily readings booklet. Here are two guidelines

Ensure your prayers are vertical. You are communicating with God. It is not an opportunity for the two of you to use these times to get at each other.

Start with thankfulness. That gets the focus right. (1 Thessalonians 5 :16–18)

Consider thanking God for your food before meals if this is something you do not do. Family devotions should also be part of Christian family life.

Handout module five

Enriching your marriage – intended for pleasure

What we need to understand first is that God intends sexual intimacy both for procreation and pleasure. Let us focus on pleasure. The Bible does not shy away from the reality of romantic love – nor even from the sensations of physical passion. The Song of Songs is a love song in the Bible describing sexual love between a husband and a wife. See Song of Songs 1:2–4 and Song of Songs 7:6–8. Genesis 1:31 says ‘God saw **all** he had made, and it was very good’ Note the ‘all’. It is for the pleasure of **both** husband and wife.

Some untruths about sex–life:

- The whole world is enjoying sexual intimacy except us – **not true**
- Sexual intimacy is always wonderful – **not true**
- Sexual intimacy is a measure of love – **not true**
- The time comes in life when our sexual intimacy will cease– **this would be sad**

Let us remind ourselves that *‘love seeks one thing only: the good of the one loved’*. With this in our minds we need to understand that men and women are different in the bedroom. To put it directly, most men like the physical act of sexual intimacy while most women prefer the gentler romantic aspects of sexual intimacy. Again this is a generalisation but broadly true.

Most men	Most women
Sex is a high priority	Other priorities such as family may be higher
Stimulated by sight and smell	Stimulated by touch and tenderness
Quick excitement	Slow excitement
Usually initiates	Usually responds
Difficult to distract during lovemaking	Easily distracted during lovemaking
Satisfied after climax	Needs to be cuddled after lovemaking

It is said that men are like a pot of water that comes quickly to the boil while women are more like charcoal which takes time to glow and then continues glowing for a long time.

These are some basic steps you need to take as to enrich your sexual life within the context of a Christian marriage:

- Agree that you want an enriched sex life.
- Share where you think things are in your sex life
- Discuss together the differences listed above about what men and women enjoy
- Discuss your approach to tenderness and anticipation
- Discuss together any mutually agreed variety you would like in your sex life
- Laugh and have fun

‘Every physical union should be a contest to see which partner pleases the other most’

Handout module six

Enriching your marriage – steps to resolve conflict

You will have conflict even in an excellent Christian marriage. Most arguments in marriage are about money, personal habits (especially untidiness), children, housework, sexual intimacy, family and friends. Such conflict can be caused by:

- Genuine misunderstandings
- Genuine differences of opinion
- Lost trust
- Selfishness within the marriage
- Personality clashes
- Sinful attitudes and habits
- Satan promoting conflict

Some people use the '**avoidance/denial approach**'. This includes pretending there is no conflict or running away from a conflict situation. Other people use the '**attack approach**'. This can include harsh words, manipulation and in extreme cases even physical threats. The Christian approach should be the '**peace making approach**'. This approach seeks to find a way forward that listens to, respects and where possible accommodates your spouse's views whilst recognising that there will always be differences and rarely does everyone end up with all they wish.

Nine basic principles when in disagreement with your spouse

- Lose some battles
- Let go of the past
- Do not say things in an accusing manner
- Never fight in public
- Try to understand not only what the other person is **saying** but also what they are **feeling**
- Never let the sun go down on your anger (Ephesians 4:26)
- Do not let problems fester
- Apologise
- Practice the power of forgiveness

How to raise difficult issues with your spouse

- Do not put off the conversation but do choose a good time to have it
- Start gently
- Show respect
- Remember your spouse did not mean to cause you hurt/upset
- Stick to one point/resentment in one conversation
- Be prepared to put the discussion on hold in a calm way (Ephesians 4:26 again!)

Remember the golden rule: 'Treat others as you would wish them to treat you.'

Handout special module for marriage preparation course only

Attributes of person who is a suitable lifelong partner

- You are both born again Christians
- You both have the attributes listed in module one recognising that no one is perfect
- You are mutually attracted to each other

Do not get married simply to resolve one of these issues in one or both of your lives

- lust
- escaping unhappy home
- seeking financial security
- overcoming loneliness
- following cultural customs
- becoming pregnant before marriage

The compatibility test

What is important is that you are agreed before marriage that your 'vision' for your marriage is compatible. You may both be Christians, both have wonderful characters and be physically attracted to each other but be incompatible.

To help in ensuring that you are compatible, you should consider the below together before you are married.

- **Parenting** Small or big family/attitude to birth control/issues relating to discipline ...
- **Family** Views about dowries/family traditions/attitude towards extended family...
- **Daily life** Splitting of household chores/doing your 'own thing' when relaxing.....
- **Money** Do you want a budget/ are you a saver or a spender/do you pool money or not/ attitude to debt...?
- **Sex** Are you both comfortable about your current level of sexual intimacy before you get married/ What are your expectations of your sexual relationship within marriage?
- **Spirituality** Your joint Christian walk together/ your hopes for future ministry (together or different)
- **Conflict** Are there any issues you are disagreeing about at the moment and you need to resolve before your wedding day?

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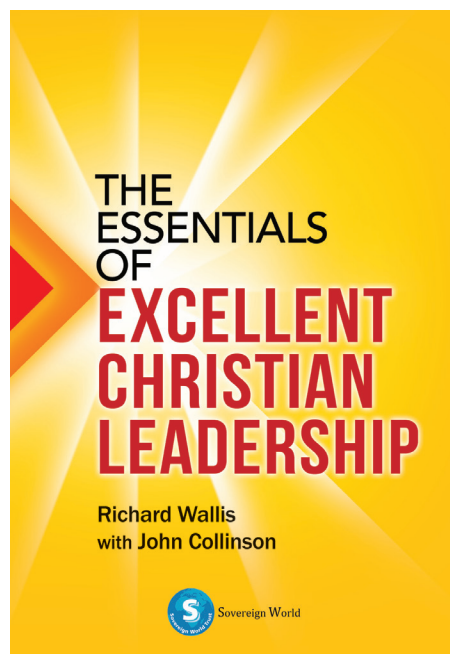
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