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## **SPECIAL ISSUES IN PREMARITAL COUNSELING**

Over the last decades, marriage preparation, or premarital counseling has become an ordinary discipline throughout several countries of the world. Since the 1970s, religious communities and empirical workshops both made the issue of marriage preparation the object of serious examinations. Since then numerous persuasive follow-up examinations were made in this topic. In the present thesis I will deal with the issues of marriage preparation which require special care.

### **Mixed marriage of denomination and nationality**

The issue of mixed marriages is judged differently by several religious communities. There are some communities in which it is not regarded as an issue. Within the framework of premarital counseling only the responsibilities of the pastors of the different denominations during the wedding ceremony need to be clarified. However there are communities which seclude themselves from the possibility of their members marrying a member of a different denomination and they even anticipate church discipline if someone do so.

Even though the churches treat mixed marriages as a dogmatic question, from the point of the couple to be wedded, it is primarily the issue of relationship dynamics and just secondarily a dogmatic one:

“In my opinion, denominational differences should be thematized in the case when at least one of the parties has strong roots in its own denomination. Even though belief and spirituality are much more than the issue of denominational affiliations, but at the same time denominational affiliations do define them. For the religious person, his own congregation and church – even if he talks about them or behaves towards them critically – are always a bit of home, culture and lifestyle. Thus this topic is more than ‘just’ a dogmatic difference.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Bochmann, *Praxisbuch Ehevorbereitung: Anregungen für Seelsorger und Berater* (Giessen, Basel: Brunnen, 2004), 141-142. p.

This very argument appears in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church Manual:

“Unity of husband and wife in ideals and purposes is a requisite to a happy and successful home. The Scriptures counsel, ‘Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers’ (2 Cor. 6:14). Differences regarding religion are likely to mar the happiness of a home where partners hold different beliefs, and lead to confusion, perplexity and failure in the rearing of children. [...] Worship of God, Sabbathkeeping, recreation, association, use of financial resources, and training of children are responsible components of happy family relationships. [...] An adequate preparation for marriage should include premarital pastoral counselling in these areas.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus from the point of the relationship of the couple, the living, expressing and the effect of their belief in their everyday life is primarily significant. These are the questions that need to be clarified during wedding preparation. According to a research of Larson and Olson conducted in 2000, the most important feature for the parties – concerning the issue of faith – is to agree in the way of practical expression of the religious values and beliefs. In the representative examination involving 21,501 couples, 89% of the couples living in happy marriage showed high correspondence in this category.<sup>3</sup> Olson’s analysis also deals with that only 5% of the couples with low spiritual agreement (who live their beliefs differently) belongs to the most satisfied relationship type (vital couples) as opposed to the 36% of the religiously compatible couples. The success of the 5% is explained by Olson as the couples learned how to manage their differences so good that they can apply it to their religious life as well.<sup>4</sup>

The same applies to the differences in nationality. Bochmann (who also lives in a mixed marriage of nationalities himself) worded the following principle on lingual and cultural differences:

“It signals richness if these are recognised and acknowledged as such, but become a great danger if they try to pretend that love covers all differences.”<sup>5</sup>

Bochmann places special emphasis on the issues of language and culture in the case of marriages of mixed nationalities. The issue of language is important, because it can hinder communication between the members, which automatically brings along the depravation of the relationship. Since it is harder for one to open up on an emotional level in another language, this difference may hinder the formation of intimacy.

<sup>2</sup> Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2005) pp. 182-183.

<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Larson, David H. Olson, „Spiritual Beliefs and Marriage: A National Survey Based on ENRICH.” Source: [www.prepare-enrich.com](http://www.prepare-enrich.com) (3/10/2008)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Bochmann, 144. p.

Of cultural differences it is profitable to mention the following ones during the preparation discussion:

“What role does the woman play in the given culture? How strong is the family cohesion? Is the small family, or the big family including more than two generations accepted? Who is the head of the family? What demands exist regarding visiting each other’s acquaintances? What extent of closeness is accepted in the given culture? [...] Which is the dominant religion in the partner’s culture? What religion does she/he follow? What political and ethical norms dominate in that culture? What is the characteristic way of clothing?”<sup>6</sup>

In the case that the mixed marriage of nationality is established with one of the parties being an immigrant, there is another factor that needs to be considered during the process of preparation: the phenomenon of culture loss.

“Culture loss is a part of socialisation, which involves both conscious and unconscious learning processes. During this the person adopts the cultural traditions (e.g. language, value system, role models) of a society (or sub-society) and becomes a member of the new society.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus the immigrant gives up on his own culture, which will be manifested especially in the upbringing of children. Namely the children born in mixed families will meet the culture of the immigrant parent’s culture only in an indirect manner, thus his behaviour, thinking and value system will predominantly be defined by the context of the culture he is living in.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, in the case of mixed marriages formed through immigration, we have to keep in mind that the immigrant member in some sense becomes dependent of its partner. His language knowledge, social bonding, and cultural embedding are defective, thus often he can only connect to his new culture through his partner.

### **Age of the parties**

In the case of age, the counselor can expect three problematic situation groups: (1) a couple younger than average, (2) a couple with big age difference, and (3) a couple of mature-age. In this subsection we will take a look at the challenges of these situations.

According to the literature, marriage age under 20 counts as a special risk factor.<sup>9</sup> This statement has reasons in developmental psychology. If we

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<sup>6</sup> Bochmann, 145-146.. p.

<sup>7</sup> Katharina Zoll, *Stabile Gemeinschaften: Transnationale Familien in der Weltgesellschaft* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2007), 207. p.

<sup>8</sup> Zoll, 207. p.

<sup>9</sup> Cf.: David H. Olson, John DeFrain, Amy K. Olson, *Building Relationships: Developing Skills for Life* (Minneapolis: Life Innovations, 1999), 48. p.

place the issue in Erikson's developmental psychology model, than this age is the border line between adolescence and young adulthood. The psychosocial crisis one has to struggle in adolescence is the "identity, or role confusion." If the young person fights this crisis with success, he will be able to think about himself as a unique person in a homogeneous picture. After this, psychosocial crisis of the young adulthood is the "intimacy or isolation." After having fought this, the young person will be ready and able to form close and abiding relationships.<sup>10</sup> If this order reverses, namely the young person first chooses a partner and then fights his own identity, it can even wedge the relationship:

"[...] those adolescents who did not yet establish a fulfilling identity will have difficulties in participating in an intimate and mutually fulfilling relationship because their deepening in themselves makes it difficult to pay attention to the needs of the other."<sup>11</sup>

The biggest challenge for couples with big age difference is that the life cycles of the parties are not in harmony. They both are in different stages of developmental psychology, they have different crises to be solved, thus they live their relationship differently.

"Here is the point where the relevance of synchrony and diachrony in life cycles in regard to the relationship become apparent. The big age difference can cause a strangeness between the parties that is unbridgeable on the relationship level, and which is too easily ignored in the phase of being in love."<sup>12</sup>

The absence of harmony can make the relationship especially vulnerable for the "outside interlopers." If the misstep of the younger spouse happens with a person of his/her age, than it is especially hurtful and humiliating for the elder spouse.

Hans-Joachim Thilo draws our attention to the risks of these choices in 1978.<sup>13</sup> According to Thilo in the case of couples with big age difference the younger party wants to substitute something he did not get from his parents as a child with the older one. Such marriages may seem harmonic in the beginning, but after 10-12 years, serious conflicts may appear, when the party who was damaged in his childhood "grows up" next to the partner giving him the feeling of security and starts to act like an adult, while the party fulfilling parenting functions sticks in his role and is not able to handle his partner as an equal party. It is worth dealing with this issue during marriage preparation, and it is

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<sup>10</sup> Rita L. Atkinson, Richard C. Atkinson, Edward E. Smith, Daryl J. Bem, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, *Psychology* (Budapest: Osiris, 1999), 2nd ed., 99-101. p.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Hans Jellouschek, *Warum hast du mir das angetan? Untreue als Chance* (München: Piper, 2010), 10. ed., 69. p.

<sup>13</sup> Hans-Joachim Thilo, *Ehe ohne Norm? Eine evangelische Eheethik in Theorie und Praxis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 168-169. p.

important for the couple as well to see the future challenges of the relationship (the decrease of the attractivity, vitality, sexual efficiency of the elder party, etc.)

Mature-age couples, besides their relationships, have to face other issues as well during marriage preparation, which come from the stage of their lives, or health conditions and will influence their future marriage. These topics appear as separate categories in Olson's marriage preparation and marriage enrichment test pack developed for mature-age couples (MATE), as well. Such topics may group around the change of life-stages (pensioning, empty nest, etc.), transgenerational issues (the mature-aged couple is in a "sandwich" situation between the adult-age children from a possible previous marriage, and the aged, own parents who need to be taken care of), and health.<sup>14</sup>

### Blended Family

We talk about blended families (in some literature, stepfamily or patchwork family) when at least one of the parties have children from a previous relationship. These family constellations show structural differences as compared to traditional family structures:

"In stepfamilies at least one of the important connecting person for the children does not live in the family community.

Every member, or almost every member experienced the loss of an important connecting person (or a significant relationship form).

The stepparent (and in given situation its children) has to find his place in a group living in existent, solid relationship patterns, and the two family parts need to grow together.

The children are part of more than one family community, they are members of the first, and the stepfamily, but in given situation also have bonds to the family of the parent living in a different household who established a new family.

One of the parents do not have parental rights towards one or more children, however – for the outside observer – he is a part of the parental subsystem."<sup>15</sup>

These differences have to be treated consciously by the members of the families in the process of formation. The most frequent mistake is when the new family supports the expectation toward its members that in this constellation everything needs to work like in a "normal" family. The stepparent takes over the role of the biological parent which is often the basis of conflicts. Instead, it is better, if the stepparent does not try to be a supplementary parent, but puts on

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<sup>14</sup> Cf.: David H. Olson, *Handbuch für Berater: PREPARE, PREPARE MK, ENRICH, MATE* (Neuenhagen: CAB-Service, 2006), 3. ed., 16. p.

<sup>15</sup> Manfred Cierpka, *Handbuch der Familiendiagnostik* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2008), 3. ed., 216. p.

the role of a kind relative (uncle, aunt position). In average a blended family needs five years for settling a nicely working balance.<sup>16</sup>

### **Cohabiting couples preparing for marriage**

According to the representative research of Pongrácz and Spéder, 67.9% of the Hungarian citizens between the age of 19 and 39 think that the best way to prepare for a marriage is living together before marriage.<sup>17</sup> Opposing to public belief the truth is exactly the opposite: living together before marriage greatens the risk of divorce.

“Paradoxically, living together before marriage, which in some circles has almost become a norm referring to the fact that the parties can get to know each other the most thoroughly before marriage increases the likeliness that such relationship will end with a divorce.”<sup>18</sup>

Respectively, we often meet couples who already live together during marriage preparation. In the case of such relationships we need to have special attention to some aspects that rise from the dynamical differences between cohabitation and marriage. All of the aspects corrupting these relationships can be traced back to the fact that the level of commitment is lower in cohabitation than in marriage relationships, and the former cohabitants take this low level commitment in the marriage with them. This issue rises to surface especially at two points: in the fields of (1) conflict management and (2) sexual fidelity.

Many examinations pointed out that in a couple relationship, those conflict resolution patterns that the couple will more likely to practise throughout the whole time of their relationship stabilize in the first two years of cohabitation.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, it is very important for the couple – in terms of future conflict resolution – to be committed to each other from the beginning of their cohabitation. Billingham pursued a study closely related to this in which he showed that the lower the level of commitment is in a relationship, the more

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<sup>16</sup> Doris Martin, *Love Talk: Der neue Knigge für zwei* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2007), 183. p.

<sup>17</sup> Pongrácz Tiborné, Spéder Zsolt, „Élettársi kapcsolat és házasság – Hasonlóságok és különbségek az ezredfordulón.” [Cohabitation and marriage - Similarities and differences on the milenium] *Szociológiai Szemle*, 2003/4, 55-75. p.

<sup>18</sup> Gödri Irén, „A házasságok és az élettársi kapcsolatok minőségének és stabilitásának néhány metszete.” [Some segments of the quality and stability of marriages and cohabitation relationships] In: Pongrácz Tiborné, Spéder Zsolt (Szerk.), *Népesség – értékek – vélemények [Population - Values - Opinions]* (Budapest: KSH NKI Kutatási jelentések, 2002), 73. p.

<sup>19</sup> Cf.: Mark A. Fine, John H. Harvey, *Handbook of divorce and relationship dissolution* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006), 205. p.

inclined parties are to use verbal and physical violence in resolving conflicts.<sup>20</sup> This can be the reason for that – in some subcultures – between couples being in a cohabitation relationship, it is three times more likely that physical violence occurs, than amongst couples living in marriage.<sup>21</sup>

A curious attitude can be observed in connection to sexual fidelity in cohabitation relationships, as well: in cohabitation relationships the parties expect sexual fidelity from each other, but at the same time demand a greater personal freedom for themselves than it is accepted in a marriage.<sup>22</sup>

Since marriage changes the legal status of the parties, but does not reform their way of thinking, marriage preparation needs to include these topics.

### Summary

With listing the risk factors influencing the success of a marriage we did not want to discourage, but to encourage to be cautious. The success of a marriage depends on the good preparation and the conscious living of the relationship, thus couples and professionals helping in the preparation of them both can profit from the detailed elaboration on the listed factors.

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<sup>20</sup> Robert E. Billingham, „Courtship Violence: The Patterns of Conflict Resolution Strategies Across Seven Levels of Emotional Commitment.” *Family Relations*, 1987/36, 283-289. p.

<sup>21</sup> Allan W. Horwitz, Helene R, White, „The relationship of cohabitation and mental health: A study of a young adult cohort.” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 1998/60, 505-514. p.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Domanyi, „Eheähnliche Lebensgemeinschaften im Lichte der biblischen Ethik.” *Dialog*, 2007/11, 2-5. p.

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**Key words:** marriage, counseling, conflict management, sexual fidelity.

