

Biwul, JKT 2023, 'Twenty-First Century Challenges for Sustainable Christian Marital Relationships in the Nigerian Context: Post-Marital Counselling as a Pastoral Care Recipe', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 171-199

Twenty-First Century Challenges for Sustainable Christian Marital Relationships in the Nigerian Context: Post-Marital Counselling as a Pastoral Care Recipe

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Abstract

This article asks why a hitherto perceived sweet, glowing, and romantic marital relationship between a Christian husband and a Christian wife can suddenly turn sour or bitter. Sometimes such an expected sweet and romantic relationship goes into limbo and ends up in dissatisfaction, disappointment, disenfranchisement, physical and emotional abuse, and, in a worse scenario, separation and, sometimes, divorce because of the activities of certain intruders. This article contends that certain intruders are encroaching on the sustainability of the Christian marital relationship. It argues that many of these intruders will be greatly minimised where pastoral caregivers provide space by placing a great premium on effective premarital counselling, and more importantly, post-marital counselling within at least the first two years of marriage. It concludes that when this missing gap is appropriately filled in, it will facilitate the commitment of the couple to each other and motivate a progressive dedication to faith by both partners. In this way, a sustainable and harmonious Christian marital relationship can be achieved, which will enhance the quality of the spiritual health of the Christian community with a spill-over to the general society.

Introduction

Readers of the Bible encounter the historical narrative of marriage as the first established human institution (Gen 2:18–24). The further expansion that would later follow in the biblical narratives regarding familial relationships, whether of the nuclear or extended family, presupposes a primordial functional, sustainable type of a knitted relationship such as existing between husband-wife, parents-children, and couple-in-laws relationships (Chuwang 2019:5). Marriage and familial relationships are fundamental to a functional and cohesive society. Thus, they deserve meticulous academic research into their ancient context (Balch and Osiek 2003; Dumitraşcu 2015).

According to its original purpose and goal, the marital relationship is meant to be a consistently suitable, supporting type of relationship that supplies specific needs to remove loneliness and boredom (Gen. 2:18, 20b). In the divine economy, husband and wife became interchangeably fused; they become one whole as partnering helpers. A helper within a marital context designates someone who comes alongside another to render support in a manner that both strengthens and adds value to the person being supported. Such a relationship is one of giving of oneself for the sake of the other by contributing to making the other more productive and beneficial to the church and society.

The family, as the minutest unit of the larger human society, is “the cornerstone of any society” (Ajayi, Olakunle, Ahmed, and Abegunrin 2021:1) and intrinsically “the backbone of every society” (Chuwang 2019:4), serving as the foundation upon which a cohesive society rests. Butler and Lee (2015:2) assert: “The family, although very complex, is the most fundamental unit of society. The family functions as the carrier of tradition and the stability of community”. The family lays the foundation for a cohesive, functional human sociology; good morality; religious traditions; proper management of one’s personal and corporate economy; care for ecology; the value of the dignity of labour; adherence to the principles of truth, honesty, equity, fairness, and justice; care for human life; and upholding the dignity of human beings. Other societal institutions can only be expected to reinforce what the family has instilled and codified in their progenies.

Functional, sustainable familial relationships have a bearing on the expression of religion. The spiritual strength and the missiological success of Christianity fall back on the merits of strong and sustainable Christian families. In this regard, Kasper (1983:1) is right: “There is no area of human life on which most people today are so dependent for personal happiness and fulfilment as that of love between man and woman, a love that is made lasting in marriage and family life. There is also no other sphere in which faith and life are so intimately in contact with each other as in marriage”. This is rooted in godly parental care and modelling that instils the character of godliness and good morals in their progenies who perpetuate the faith even after the demise of their parents. Since all progenies learn lessons regarding morality and social etiquette at home from an early age, their progenitors stand as their paradigm in this respect, particularly because the latter mimic the values modelled by their progenitors.

Unfortunately, marriages—Christian and non-Christian alike—are constantly coming under various assaults such as dishonesty, infidelity, separation, and divorce. The prevalence of moral vices in society is a picture of what obtains in most twenty-first-century families. The children of separated or divorced marriages are exposed to unnecessary hardship and trauma. Couples who resist marital separation and divorce for fear of societal shame, disrepute, and stigmatisation live in perpetual dissatisfaction, agony, and unfulfillment. Yet the divine purpose of the marriage relationship was enjoyable, lifelong companionship. This notwithstanding, marriages today—even Christian marriages—are crumbling because “people no longer take marriage as a serious commitment for life” (Paul 2019:247). This is the likely reason why both Jesus and Paul re-echoed the original purpose for marriage (Matt. 19:3-12; Eph. 5:31). One fears that the disturbing ideology of “open marriage” may sooner or later become normative in Nigerian society.

This research sought to resolve a pastoral care and counselling issue. Pastors who exercise oversight over congregations as pastoral caregivers and as under-shepherds, representing Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd, must live up to the Christological demand placed upon them: “Feed my lambs”, “Take care of my sheep”, and “Feed my sheep” (Jn. 21:15–17). Paul echoed this demand in his instruction to the elders of the congregation at Ephesus: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

Be shepherds of the church of God. . . . So be on your guard!” (Acts 16:28, 31). Paul further affirmed this imperative to Timothy:“ Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season” (2 Tim. 4:2).“ Endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry” (2 Tim. 4:5). One of the pastoral care and counselling challenges that pastors face almost daily is in the area of marriage and familial relationships.

Why is there increasing abuse, separation, and divorce in marriages today—even Christian marriages—when the divine norm is the union of one man and one women for better or for worse; till death do us part? (Gen. 2:18, 24; Mat. 19:3-6, 8). Why is it that couples who had benefited from premarital counselling prior to their marriage also experience marital challenges to the extent that some either end in separation or divorce? What is missing that Christian marriages and homes that are expected to be a model to society also suffer from crippling disasters in their familial relationships? Failure in marital relationships leaves its detriments on the partners as well as children and members of society. How, then, can such familial abnormality be resolved for a reversal of the unfortunate trend? To respond to these queries vis-à-vis the research problem, the research applied a discursive-investigative approach in search of a remedy by using both primary and secondary sources of data. After discussing the triggers and effects of this relational abnormality, it proposes post-marital counselling and continuous periodic marital management counselling as an antidote.

A sample of 35 respondents, including 18 pastoral caregivers and 17 male and female spouses, were randomly selected in Jos, Nigeria for the research after obtaining their consent. The pastoral caregivers were selected from four denominations. The ministry experience of these pastoral caregivers ranged from 6 to over 21 years. The majority had pastored at least four, some even more than five, different congregations. The 17 spouses including 10 husbands and 7 wives from ten different Nigerian tribes. They also maintain membership in five different denominations. They had been married from two to over twenty-one years. In addition to this survey, at a couples ’seminar, facilitated by the researcher in one local congregation in Jos, Nigeria, on 18 June 2022, the participants were grouped into two groups for discussion on the research concern to generate additional data. One group consisted of 53 wives; the other, of 47 husbands. Because this research was conducted in the field of

practical theology, the researcher applied practical-empirical and theological-contextual methods to analyse the data obtained. These methods of analysis encapsulate current observable phenomena being manifested in practice rather than theory and the interrelated religious conditions in which such existential reality occurs.

The factors triggering distorted Christian marital relationships as a burden for pastoral caregivers

The world is quickly becoming a devourer of its inhabitants. Almost every society is experiencing a downward spiral as the universal law of fairness, equity, justice, and love for humanity are being adhered to less and less by nations and citizens. Flagrant human abuses and disrespect for the dignity of the same appear to be on the increase with rising global crises.

Families are also disintegrating at an alarming rate today. It is normal that people who are preparing to marry look forward to it with great anxiety and excitement. But ironically, soon after the occasion, sometimes even during the honeymoon period, some of them become already disenfranchised, loathing the marriage. When this happens, the vows, the marriage, the crown, the merry-making, the dignity and the honour of the “D Day” are easily forgotten (Paul 2019:247).

The research findings indicated that all people who are married or who have previously been married admit the presence of challenges in the relationship. There is nothing like a “problem-free” life. So it is with the marriage relationship. As an experienced pastor contends: “No marriage is free from real life challenges” (Chuwang 2019:113). Admittedly, “there is no husband and wife relationship which is devoid of disputes and conflicts” (Onyekachi et al 2020:1). What, then, could be the cause of these disputes in what was expected to become a loving, caring, romantic, and a lifelong relationship? A few factors are considered below.

Conjugal issues involving coital deprivation

From the beginning, coital consummation was put in place primarily for the expression of the true love each spouse has for the other, and thereby, to nurture a blissful and romantic marriage experience. But coitus becomes

problematic when deprivation intrudes. A total of 46% of both the pastoral and spousal respondents admitted that the absence of a satisfying sexual experience in marriage causes multiple problems. They recommended that imbibing biblical principles would establish the right foundation for healthy attitudes toward sex in marriage, which scholarship suggests can lead to wholeness in that area (Wheat and Wheat 2012; Köstenberger and Jones 2004).

Several factors account for this coital abnormality (Kore 1995:26–27, 31–32). A wife might deprive her husband of sex because of its lack of satisfaction. In this regard, a wife respondent said, “Most women suffer in silence so as not to hurt their husband’s egos while the men would rather not talk about it and feel they’re good at it when in truth, the woman probably just endures.” Husbands must admit that sometimes they are unable to give their wives coital satisfaction because of inexperience, fatigue, premature seminal ejaculation, or certain health conditions. Such failure can become quite frustrating for the wife.

In the Nigerian context, women generally love to wear new fabrics to exhibit their public status. When a husband is unable to procure some for his wife, she might deprive him of sex in reaction. Such deprivation could equally occur when the husband fails to keep up with the responsibilities of catering to the economic, social and security needs of the family.

Conversely, a husband might deprive his wife of sex as a means of punishing her for some misdeeds or because he keeps a mistress. Couples also sometimes resort to sexual deprivation as vengeance to settle scores when the relationship becomes sour. Promiscuity by either partner can also lead to a lack of interest in coitus by their spouse.

Infidelity in a marital relationship

John Arierhi Ottuh’s (2019) research indicated that the idea of infidelity is generally highly abhorred by Nigerian tribes because it stands as an object of disgrace to the family and clan of the offender. The act of infidelity fundamentally erodes integrity, dignity, and respect, and demeans the personhood of the person involved. Christian spouses are bound by vows that were pledged publicly. A vow is a solemn promise by which one is bound

by its provisions. It is the act of committing to do something according to its specifications and to unreservedly adhere to the terms of the vow. Ogidi Joshua Dickson (2019:99-102) correctly describes it as a contract of the life of sacrifice.

One of the purposes of the marital union is to compensate for the weakness a man or a woman has in being alone and to establish a faithful, monogamous relationship, which is essential for the successful survival of society (Paul 2019:248). Thus, Christian marriage vows are a solemn commitment to marital fidelity in mind, soul, spirit, and body. This explains why God undertakes to judge any party that defaults in such a relationship (Heb. 13:4). Infidelity causes marriage disharmony and sometimes leads dissolution—against the primordial purpose for marriage.

Thirty-one percent of respondents admitted to the existence of infidelity in Christian marriages. One of the reasons given for infidelity is spouses living apart, mostly because of vocation. When Jesus told his tired and sleeping disciples to “watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (Matt 26:41), when Paul asked Timothy to flee evil desires (2 Tim. 2:22), and when Peter called on their audiences to resist the devil— an enemy described by Peter as “a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:9)—they recognized not only the presence of temptations but also the possibility falling into them. Danfulani Kore asserts that infidelity is a grave sin in the sight of the One who created sex fundamentally because it is sacrilegious of the “dignity and sacredness” of marriage (Kore 1995:28).

Related financial issues

The quest or insatiable drive for financial and material acquisition by Christian marriage partners can also become a problem. The writer of Ecclesiastes cautioned against a senseless materialistic behavioural psychology: “Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income” (Eccl. 5:10). Similarly Paul knew the destructive effects of the insatiable quest for money and material possessions when he warned Timothy against it (1 Tim. 6:9-11; 2 Tim. 4:10).

Sixty-five percent of the respondents indicated that a dysfunctional attitude towards the acquisition of tangible things can stand in the way of a blissful

marital relationship. When a Christian spouse becomes greedy, self-centred, and dishonest in financial matters, this serves as fertile soil for conflict, strife, distrust, and dishonesty. Rather, being vulnerable to one's spouse in all financial matters is the height of openness and honesty regarding finances (Dickson 2021:115). Accordingly, Christian couples should make money a servant to meet their family needs rather than a master that controls their home (Chuwang 2019:116).

Poverty and greed can become real challenges for a family. In the Nigerian context it has become normal that rich people are celebrated while the poor are disdained and marginalised, even in larger family decisions, no matter how beneficial the poor person's opinion may be. This distorted psychological ideology has been carried into familial relationships where Christian spouses compete over mundane matters.

Communication gap

Verbal and non-verbal communication are means of self-expression and of the expressing of one's love for another. In the research sample, 40% of respondents indicated that unstable communication destroys the joy of marriage. According to scholars, although "men tend not to have as great a need for conversation as women", one thing a wife cannot do without is intimate conversation with her husband (Harley 2011:n.p.). Effective communication and the management of information in marriage place each spouse on the same page. A communication gap suffocates either or both partners because it stands in the way of a romantic, marital relationship (Chuwang 2019:115).

This challenge exposes the familial relationship to vulnerability by creating grounds for distrust, doubts, misconceptions, and drawing conclusions based on wrong assumptions. Silence from one spouse is an expression of the lack of proper communication; making independent decisions affecting the family is another. A female respondent said that when deep honest conversations about issues such as the number of children to bear, how a spouse feels about issues, what to buy or not to buy, how to save money, how to discipline children, and more are lacking in a spousal relationship problems easily crop into the marriage relationship. Here, husbands in the Nigerian context appear

to be more at fault, because the culture considers it normal not to tell women all secrets.

Another way of blocking the flow of effective communication is a lack of openness. Forty-three percent of the research respondents indicated that a spouse can become secretive with information when there is a lack of trust in the relationship. This scenario becomes more pronounced when a feeling of insecurity exists in the spouse who distrusts the other, thereby resulting in their not being open to sharing their true feelings with the other, and in their living in pretence regarding the true state of their emotions and challenges. Acting against the prevailing cultural paradigm, transformed Nigerian Christian husbands should create an environment in which their wives are encouraged to share ideas that could be helpful to the family (Kore 1995:39).

Temperamental personality and behavioural intolerance

Psychologists have identified four personality temperaments (LaHaye 2002:1–63). A person's dominant temperament characterises their behavioural response to internal and external stimuli. While some temperaments are expressive, others are reserved; while some others are egocentric and self-sufficient, others are calm and considerate. Crisis ensues when the weaknesses of the one temperament steps on those of the other (LaHaye 2002:75–88) or when a spouse is insensitive or adamant to the feelings of the other.

Findings from the research revealed that personality differences influence spousal behavioural disposition in marriage. When a spouse is not psychologically, sociologically, emotionally, and spiritually mature, personality differences will stand in the way of their communication and relationship. This will become the case when the spouses are ignorant of the influence of their temperamental differences. Familial crisis can occur when differences in personality traits such as expressed anger, impatience, and intolerance through irrational behaviour are poorly managed. An untransformed strong-willed personality possesses a high tendency of self-ego, which causes a lack of teachability, refusal to adjust to the other personality in marriage, refusal to apologise for a wrong, and an expressed attitude of malice and unforgiveness.

But, when properly harnessed, personality differences can be an asset, not a deficit. Spouses should complement each other by ensuring that the strengths

of the one make up for the weaknesses of the other. It is the failure to understand the composition of individual personalities and the ability and maturity to properly manage them that create many enemies, divisions, contentions, and strife in the family, in society and in the church (Chuwang 2019:83).

An abusive, disrespectful, and unromantic marriage

Every human person possesses inherent human dignity. Within a marital relationship, each spouse wants to be noticed, respected, valued, and appreciated so they can enjoy the good life in marriage. But marital and familial relationships often become abusive, disrespectful, and impoverished of bliss where inadequate knowledge about the essence of marriage exists or where a spouse intentionally resorts to inhumanity. Only a few spouses can endure an abusive, disrespectful, and romantically impoverished marriage. Wrong assumptions about the nature of marriage and how couples are to relate can generate some misgivings. For instance, many people go into marriage with the assumption that they will enjoy a life devoid of pain. As nice as this assumption is, it is quite erroneous. Marriage is like a business: one first invests in it before reaping the benefits or profits. People who have this misconception about marriage go into it only to benefit from the profit without any investment.

The main purpose of the marital relationship is that of complementarity, that is, filling in the gaps to make the other person complete (Gen. 2:18b). It is rendering support to each other so that together the couple becomes strong (Eccl. 4:9–12). Marriage is to build a “home.” In a home, family members stand together and find peace and calm, support, comfort, and encouragement, thereby drawing strength from one another. In a home, there is comfort and security. In a home one finds a shoulder on which to lean. In a home, there is understanding, acceptance, patience, and tolerance.

Misconceptions regarding the nature and expected relational expressions in marriage can become detrimental and abusive. Thirty-nine percent of respondents agreed that the presence of certain marital abnormalities can tear a marriage apart. The absence of romance is indicative for a couple’s lack of spending quality time together either because of distant vocation, giving more attention to social media, or spending time with friends to the detriment of

one's spouse. Furthermore, the research revealed that some husbands mistreat their wives through verbal abuse by using derogatory and humiliating comments on them or making certain threats. Others disrespect their wives by shouting at them or talking them down in public. Some also display their lack of appreciation and disregard for their wife's contributions or opinions on family matters.

Conversely, some wives abuse and disrespect their husbands, particularly those husbands who have a calm, quiet, and tolerant personality. Respondents indicated that wives exhibit such attitudes when they abuse their husbands verbally and refuse to submit to them through flagrant rebellion and disobedience. Highly opinionated wives have a tendency to become irrational and impulsive with their words and actions. Equally, some wives are overbearing and domineering because of their quest for control. Ironically, some of these women use the Bible and what is preached in the church to force their views on their spouses. These exhibited tendencies from a Christian marriage are disastrously unfortunate, and they signal the presence of carnality and disregard for the divine essence of the marriage life.

Prioritising cultural values over biblical ones

There are many tribes in Nigeria with traditional practices and customary beliefs and values. Within this context, intercultural marriage can become a source of conflict when the one insists that the other obliges to their traditional norms and practices in the relationship. Our findings revealed that many spouses—both husbands and wives—in the Nigerian context are so intrinsically so to these practices that they fail to detach themselves from them. Some Christian spouses, whether by their embedded individual cultural volition or those forced upon them by their parents and clans, readily subordinate biblical worldviews and principles to allow their traditional, cultural beliefs and practices to become operative in their marital relationship.

The majority of those who subject their spouse to adhering unreservedly to their traditional, cultural, tribal values contrary to those of their spouse are husbands. When Christian couples hold on to detrimental cultural beliefs and practices that are inimical to their marriage, their relationship will always be problematic and constantly in jeopardy. African beliefs that a woman's place is in the kitchen, that she should only be seen and not heard, or that her

presence in the marriage is merely to bear children and to sexually satisfy the man and keep him happy, are culturally conditioned; they lack clear biblical support or value (Kore 1995:7–8, 26–27).

Another traditional African belief that the man is the sole provider and financier of the family, regardless of whether or not the woman has employment or a business that earns more than the husband, is purely a culturally created phenomenon. Some have appealed to the claim of the Bible which instructs the man to provide for his family lest he become worse than an infidel (2 Tim 6). The textual context suggests that this was effective only to the extent that women in biblical times neither went to farms nor were office workers. Such cultural intrusion can weigh heavily on the marriage by creating distance between spouses. However, obliging oneself to the divine prescriptions for marriage actualises and maximises the benefits of abundant married life (Kore 1995:9).

Childlessness in marriage or a particular sex of children

Traditional African society looks with disdain on a childless couple but ironically fails to raise an eyebrow at irresponsible parenting. Infertility can become a major cause of marital conflict and conflict with in-laws. According to Ademiluka (2021;2, 8), it is “an uphill task to make Africans accept any proposition of a child-free life, given their passion for children”. Childless women often feel forced to seek help from any available means including traditional healing homes and the so-called spiritual churches (Arugu 2014:376). The agony of infertility in Africa is common knowledge to empirical observation and common sense.

To save Christian couples from this traumatic sociological embarrassment, pastoral caregivers should educate prospective Christian couples during premarital counselling about two basic truths concerning children. First, marriage is complete without children. Children are only a gift from God. Nowhere has he promised to give them to all married couples (Gen. 2:18, 22–24; Ps. 127:2). Second, it is better not to bear children than to bring innocent children into the world as truants and threats to society because of parental negligence and irresponsibility. This amounts not only to a catastrophic act but also to an apparent sinful act against the Giver of life. Is it not better to remain childless and be justified before the divine than to have children but stand

condemned in God’s judgement for lack of their proper training, upbringing, care, and social and theological protection? Marriage is complete without children in it. Ademiluka (2021:1) is correct in proposing a pastoral care remedy:“

The church [in Nigeria] has to develop a theological reconstruction with regard to procreation in marriage, in a manner that will assure Christians that a childless marriage is not lacking in any way ... [because] the belief that the Old Testament views barrenness as caused by sin and a punishment from God [is not only] erroneous. ... [but because] infertility is a natural phenomenon, and God gives children as a blessing but not necessarily to every individual”.

Another angle to this problem is the sex of children. African sociology presupposes that a married woman who bears only female children does not know how to give birth properly. This is because the culture values male children over female children because of the belief that when a daughter is married, she disappears from the family record. This explains why some cultures and families place high bride prices on their daughters. This is fallacious, not factual. Although God designed the male and female physiological outlook and psychological expression as well as their intellectual perception differently, both sexes have the same human blood, human emotions and feelings, human life and dignity, and both sexes experience death as their destiny.

Miscellaneous causations

Other causes of marital conflict and crisis are extant. First, thirty-seven percent of the research respondents indicated that third-party interference in a marital relationship can be disastrous, especially when confidentiality is not kept. This includes interference by in-laws, friends, and neighbours (Chuwang 2019:115). An aggrieved and angry spouse may report their marital issues to a third party, even discussing their spouse’s weaknesses, with the hope of seeking justice or finding succour. Our research indicated that some spouses do this in an attempt to impress or please a coercive, nagging mother- or father-in-law. This can cause further challenges that negatively impact the marital relationship.

Second, the absence of trust, which is a critical pillar for a sustainable marital relationship, can become an issue in marriage. Christian couples can become intimate in the relationship only when there is trust and mutual respect.

Third, a spouse's previous promiscuous life, whether with or without a child out of wedlock, or previous experience of abortion, can cause suspicion and distrust in marriage. Survey respondents admitted that these situations can become serious, particularly when the couple did not have premarital counselling prior to marriage.

Fourth, findings revealed that where a Christian couple maintain membership in different denominations, the contrary preaching and teaching that each receives can become a means of trouble in their relationship. Respondents also said that comparison causes problems in a marriage where spouses use the marital experience of their parents, friends, or other persons as a paradigm for theirs, especially when such comparison are used to provoke their spouse. Previous research also discovered that social incompatibility, sexual incompatibility in terms of extreme sexual orientation, extended family intrusion, lack of mutual respect between partners, dishonesty and moral decadence, negligent behaviour of spouses, and unwholesome social behaviour are some other causes of marital conflict (Ajayi, Olakunle, Ahmed, and Abegunrin 2021:3–4).

Although crises in Christian marital relationships can sometimes become almost insurmountable because of the behavioural disposition of either or both spouses, mature Christians are expected to always make their marriage work and grow with love. As Dickson (2012:13) correctly states, a Christlike character that displays the character traits of patience, tolerance, and the ability to forbear one's partner is a secret that has kept successful marriages going strong for several years. Quite obviously, without the maturity of possessing a good understanding of the psychology of one's spouse, without the capacity of patience in the face of troubling matters caused by one's spouse, and without the ability to tolerate the mistakes, expressed attitudes, failures, and recurring hurtful behaviours marriage can hardly survive and thrive, especially in this present permissive and individualistic society.

The effects of crises in Christian marital relationships as a burden for pastoral caregivers

The pastor who exercises oversight over a local congregation is described as a shepherd because the pastor is a caregiver, caring for the spiritual, physical, material, emotional, and sociological needs of the congregation. When a problem exists in a marital relationship, there are attendant effects as well. Marital conflicts have detrimental effects on the spouses and on innocent bystanders, including pastoral caregivers, children, extended family members, the church and the wider society.

Effects on pastors

Thirty-two percent of the pastoral caregivers sampled for this research agreed that marital conflicts can become quite frustrating, adding burdens to their ministry. They admitted that these conflicts can consume a lot of the time they would have otherwise deployed in other areas of church ministry. In my pastoral experience, some marital crises can defy therapy and pastoral counselling; they are endlessly unresolvable.

Couples who go through a relationship crisis easily resort to blaming the other spouse. The sampled pastors admitted that they usually suffer in the line of duty by becoming the target of false accusations of taking sides. Most often these accusations come from the husbands, some of whom will walk out on pastor. It is hazardous for innocent pastors who are endeavouring to save marriages to suffer such emotional trauma.

Perennial marital conflicts can also have negative effects on congregational membership. Some of the surveyed pastors indicated that spouses in marital conflict can change their church membership to where they are not known, resulting in a reduction to the church's membership. Our findings also indicated that lingering unresolved marital issues can become infectious in the spiritual life of the congregation.

Effects on the spouses

When marital and familial conflict becomes perennial, it soon becomes disastrous for the marriage and the family. As a part of Africa, Nigeria exists within a shame culture. Married people who have a hard time in their

relationships tend to avoid admitting it publicly to avoid social ridicule, stigmatisation, and marginalisation. Some parents encourage their children to remain in a marriage that is not working to save them from public shame and disgrace.

In this research, forty-nine percent of respondents admitted that a lingering unresolved marital conflict normally begins from mere disagreement, but that it escalates to disharmony, separation, and finally divorce. Another 47% of respondents affirmed that divorce can result where a prolonged marital conflict remains unresolved. Even prior to the dissolution of the marriage, respondents admitted that this unfortunate scenario can lead to infidelity. Scholars opines that “divorce will continue to be on the increase in Nigeria if its causes and effects are not properly identified and controlled” (Ajayi, Olakunle, Ahmed, and Abegunrin 2021:2).

Forty-nine percent of survey respondents agreed that a degenerated marital relationship caused by conflict can lead to distrust, suspicion, and a loss of confidence in one’s spouse. These respondents accepted that such issues deeply affect family unity, hereby thwarting any progress or growth in the family.

Perennial marital conflict can also impair one’s health. Among the surveyed spouses, 64% agreed that prolonged marital conflict can cause emotional stress and depression. It can sometimes result in the death through cardiac arrest. Forty-seven percent also revealed that such crises can also cause traumatic experiences that could likely result in hypertension.

Without a doubt, a lingering unresolved issue can affect one’s spiritual health. The research findings indicated that some in conflicted marriages experience difficulty in praying and reading the Bible. Some lose the desire to fellowship with other members of their Christian congregation. Some blame God for their plight because of his seeming inability to take them out of their traumatic condition.

Frustrated spouses in a Christian marriage where efforts at resolving nagging issues have failed can become aggressive and violent. Survey respondents also revealed that a sour marital relationship can lead to loneliness, thereby

resulting in emotional and physical abuse, bitterness, malice and unforgiveness.

More effects came to light during the couples' seminar group discussion. The group consisting of 53 wives admitted that marital challenges can cause poor communication, and intimidation and fear in the wife—especially when the husband frequently shouts at her. It can thwart holistic family growth mechanisms, and can affect the spouses' coital relationship. The result is disharmony and an absence of peace. The second group, consisting of 47 husbands, also agreed that challenges can cause disharmony and the absence of peace. Due to poor communication, disrespect, and a lack of trust in the relationship, resulting in the exhibition of pretence and falsehood. These challenges can also affect efficiency in one's productivity in life, and impair prudent and beneficial financial management for the family.

Effects on children and extended family members

One would only beg the question not to admit that conflicts in marriage weigh heavily on children in that marriage. Forty-nine percent of respondents admitted that an environment of marital conflict deeply affects the emotional, social, psychological, and spiritual well-being of children in the family. Findings also indicated that such a conflicted environment results in bad parenting and transferred aggression in the children. Additionally, it also causes psychological imbalance in children. As affirmed by Arugu (2014:382), divorce causes children lack parental love and affection, which can cause discontinuity in their emotional and intellectual development, causing a high rate of juvenile crime in society.

Most African societies today, including the clans and tribes of Nigerian society, still boast about the benefit of extended family relationships. The extended families of both spouses—parents, siblings, uncles, aunts and nephews and nieces—are usually affected when a marriage is not working as initially thought. Thirty-one percent of respondents affirmed that marital conflict can cause constant strife and quarrels among the members of the extended family on both sides of the aisle. In such cases, extended family members take sides and become defensive and protective. In the Nigerian situation, every parent, even those whose children are already married, always want to defend their children, even when their child is in the wrong. One's siblings too normally rise

to one's defence. The tendency for either or both sets of the parents of the couple in a conflicted marriage to accuse the other of poor parenting, thereby causing problems for their own son or daughter, most certainly exists. Without a doubt, as Paul (2019:253) notes, the dissolution of marriage leaves infectious effects on emotions such as anxiety, guilt, fear, sadness, depression, anger, bitterness, and frustration on the children, family members, church, friends, and the couple themselves.

The antidotal action by pastoral caregivers at resolution

A healthy congregation is the joy of a truly called pastor. This health includes the well-being of all of the families in the congregation. Certain proposals for pastors are postulated from the findings of the research as the antidotes to the identified challenges to sustainable Christian familial relationships.

Thematic preaching and teaching on family life and seminars on the Christian home

Preaching and teaching are two aspects of the role of pastors exercising oversight over a congregation. Among the pastoral respondents, 23% proposed this antidote as a cure for the challenges to Christian familial relationships. This preaching can be sequenced under themes regarding the various aspects of marriage and family life, such as the husband-wife love relationship, becoming supporting ligaments for each other's weaknesses, and more.

Just as professionals attend conferences, seminars, and workshops to broaden their horizons in their professions, there is a similar need for Christian families to attend such events. Thirty-three percent of all respondents proposed this antidote. They also suggested the inclusion of periodic family and/or couples retreats and dinners as reinforcers of the familial relationship. Well-articulated sermons and teachings alongside seminars on issues that are relevant could facilitate the rekindling of a glowing happy marriage.

Effective premarital counselling

Premarital counselling has great benefits because of its significance in building a sustainable family. This preparatory foundational level in the marital journey provides additional church education specific to the motif of Christian marriage

and the methodology of building family life. All the pastoral respondents admitted to placing a high premium on premarital counselling programmes. Twenty-three percent proposed that pastors should intensify these programmes in a more creative and innovative way. In recently conducted research on the influence of biblical premarital counselling on Christian marriages, Akuson (2017:100–107) discovered that couples who receive substantial biblically-based premarital counselling stand a better chance of succeeding in their marriage. According to Akuson's findings, this foundation promotes a better understanding of God and of each other by the couples; it fosters a good relationship with in-laws; it promotes a good understanding of familial roles; it enhances good couple and familial communication skills and the ability at conflict resolution; and it fosters a good coital relationship.

Premarital counselling is to a marriage relationship as a good foundation is to a building. This interaction between a couple and a pastor is a theoretical, preparatory introduction to the married life. Although examples may be drawn from real-life experiences, they merely remain at the theoretical level for the inexperienced (not-yet-married) couple. Even so, this foundational level of education for marital life is crucial.

Premarital counselling educates the intending couple on the meaning and foundation of marriage from a Christian perspective, the role of communication in marriage, the use and management of finances, the influence of tradition and culture, the implication of one's vocation on the relationship, and the weighty implications of the marriage vows. It also handles the issue of conflict resolution in marriage or the family, and the duties and responsibilities of both parties to themselves, to their children, and to their extended family members. Furthermore, premarital counselling discusses the value of spirituality in a marital relationship.

Fundamentally, prospective Christian couples are taught during the premarital counselling sessions that marriage, from a biblical perspective, is a knitting type of relationship (Gen. 2:24). When two people become symbolically united into one flesh as originally prescribed by the designer of the marriage union, this is a type of assimilating or fusing relationship that should exist only in a one husband-one wife relationship.

Ensuring the centrality of Christ in the home

Among survey respondents, 33% of the spouses agitated for the centrality of Christ in the life of the Christian family. Christian couples should constantly seek, individually and corporately, to honour God over their personal honour, to seek to do his will rather than their own will, and to seek to offer to him alone acceptable worship. This is of paramount benefit to Christian couples. Christians are Christ's followers. This is their identity. They have an obligation to submit unreservedly to him and his dictates. They also have the responsibility to uphold and preserve the dignity and integrity due to his name and the glory of his kingdom. A divided Christian family fails in this regard, thereby becoming a dishonour to Christ.

In the Nigerian situation, people—both Christians and non-Christians—are prone to seeking blessings. Infertile families, students, employers and employees in every vocation, leaders and the led, members of congregations and even their pastors—everyone—seeks divine blessings. But the secret to such blessings lies in unreserved obedience to the divine command. The divine statement to Samuel regarding Eli and his children was: “Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained” (2 Sam. 2:30). Malachi took up issues with the post-exilic priests whose professional negligence caused the Yehud community to accuse Yahweh their deity of being an ingrate, blaming him for failing to accept their sacrifices. The prophet indicted them for their flagrant acts of dishonouring Israel's holy and righteous deity through profaned sacrifices (Mal. 1:2, 6–8).

The motif of obedience in the quest for divine blessings is crucial for the spiritual survival of Christian families in Nigeria and elsewhere. Paul presents the Christological model in his Philippian epistle when he says Christ was honoured by the Father because he had honoured him with his obedience (Phil. 2:5–11). One is crowned only after subjecting oneself to the rigours of competing favourably in a race or an Olympic event. A purposeful resolve by Christian couples to put God first in all things holds numerous benefits for their marriage.

Prioritise scriptural values over culture and tradition

African Christianity generally has its roots in the religious ideology of African Traditional Religion (ATR). Nigeria for example, is described as “The giant of

Africa” for several reasons, among which is its multiplicity of religions (ATR, Christianity, and Islam). More particularly, the country boasts of a multiplicity of tribes, each with its own traditions, cultures, and customs.

These contextual issues in Nigeria affect the people’s sociology, ethics, and religious expressions. Consequentially, the participating spouses in the research admitted that some Christian homes seem to subscribe more to their traditional cultural values to the detriment of biblical values. These respondents therefore agitated for a reversal of such ideological practices. They contended that any Christian and any Christian family that is guided by biblical principles would hardly submit to the demands and dictates of any other cultural practices. Couples invite trouble when, as Christian families, they allow the traditional cultural demands to coerce them against biblical ones.

Christianity follows the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Sinai discourse at the receipt of the Decalogue, God expressly told the Israelite community about his jealousy for them. Thus he instructed them not to have or worship any other god besides him (Exod. 20:1–7). In a similar way, Christian couples, as God’s redeemed possession, should rather submit to biblical prescriptions for life than to their cultures and traditions except those aspects that are not in conflict with the Scripture.

Cultivate transparency, sincerity, honesty, and effective family communication

The moral quality of transparency, sincerity, and honesty are obvious ethical principles that regulate a good society. The members of any family that imbibe these principles will always stand strong together. Thirty-two percent of respondents indicated that Christian spouses and families should uphold these moral values for a sustainable and functional familial relationship.

When we read the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments, we repeatedly encounter an emphasis on truth and truthfulness. The application of the principle of transparency, regulated by the grid of truth, is broad-based. It reflects in one’s thoughts, speech, relationships, approach to one’s vocation, and financial affairs. Research respondents agreed that financial transparency should be strengthened to help avoid doubts, distrust, and suspicion in the

marital relationship. An honest sharing of information by spouses in this regard is beneficial.

Facilitate mentoring and discipleship

Modern culture promotes mentoring, which reflects the concept of discipleship in both Judaism and Christianity. Both mentoring and discipleship concern the training of someone younger by a senior, either in a profession or a religious faith, to assume a position of responsibility. The trainer, discipler or mentor is usually a model to the disciple or mentee.

As stated earlier, maturation is crucial for both life and functional marital relationships. The core focus of discipleship or mentoring is to attain maturity. Some of the sampled pastors proposed that local Christian congregations should ensure proper discipleship of intending couples for their maturation in the faith before their marriage is contracted. They also suggested that younger couples be mentored by responsible older couples. No doubt, this will certainly reduce the pastoral burden of constantly resolving family problems.

Emphasise the maturation of spouses

According to 85% survey respondents, maturity is crucial to a sustainable marriage. This involves physiological, psychological, sociological, intellectual, emotional, economic, and spiritual maturation on the part of a couple. Where these are lacking in one or both of the spouses, problems are inevitable in their relationship. This is noticeable in certain areas of the marital relationship.

First, the participating spouses said that a mature couple will value the importance of appreciating and complementing each other.

Second, they said that mature individuals are cautious about becoming overfamiliar with each other to the extent that they fail to express true love to each other.

Third, they said that the family hierarchy should be respected, drawing the attention of the wives to their role of submission. A truly mature Christian husband should treat his submissive wife with value, and dignity, as a rare ruby and an indispensable treasure.

Fourth, mature persons behave responsibly, reasonably, and sensibly towards their spouse and towards other people. The spouses' responses indicated that such civility is demonstrated in one's openness and intimacy with one's spouse. The research also revealed that this civility will also be exhibited in the person's tolerance and forgiveness of the flaws of their partner. While one admits that it is difficult to forgive a partner who never admits their wrongs, spiritual maturation facilitates the exhibition of this virtue. One suspects that this is the reason Paul persuaded couples in Colossae to "bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13). The research indicated that sexual deprivation by an aggrieved spouse is one of the rising marital abnormalities acting as a cause of familial crises. An attitude of forgiveness can neutralise this poisonous agent in marriage.

Fifth, marriage is for adults, not children. Only a psychologically and spiritually mature person understands the value of respect for the marriage institution. The surveyed spouses also indicated that a mature person knows the importance of respect for one's spouse. The original conceptual designer of marriage and family is God, not humanity. Marital and familial relationships are gifts from him. As such, God did not intend for marriage to end in dissolution. Rather, marriage should be lifelong. Only a mature spouse seeks to resolve issues rather than let them stand in the way of refreshing, gluing, and rewarding coitus. Paul knew the implication when he exhorted the couples in the Corinthian church to avoid coital deprivation (1 Cor. 7:1-5).

It is obvious from the preceding that maturity positively affects the familial relationship just as immaturity negatively does. When, therefore, immature men and women come together as husbands and wives it is tantamount to expressing a relationship between boys and girls rather than a marriage relationship. Marriage is neither for boys and girls, nor is it even for teenagers; it is only for mature adults. It is the responsibility of the pastor to ensure that only mature people who are duly instructed in faith be joined together in marriage.

Post-marital counselling by pastoral caregivers as a major preventive antidote

The majority of pastors focus more on premarital counselling than on post-marital counselling and guidance. Post-marital counselling is the periodic professional guidance offered to a couple by a pastor or a trained marriage counsellor within the first two years of a couple's marriage. A new couple is usually under the aura of marital excitement and still enjoying the euphoria of the honeymoon phase for the first two years of marriage. But soon after this excitement, things begin to take turn when the partners enter the stage of practical married life and discover what married life really is. This period is therefore a critical one, as the couple at this stage goes through a period of adjustment and childbearing, which can often become frustrating and frictionally painful.

Reality is just what it is: Reality! It is only when a married couple live together under the same roof and in the same room that they can each discover the real person they are married to. Certain hitherto-hidden character traits, attitudinal exhibitions, mannerisms, behaviours, and lifestyles begin to manifest themselves in the marriage relationship. They can be quite shocking to the other partner, catch them off-guard, and throw them off-balance if not well-managed.

At this stage, each spouse tries to explore the other to discover what they had not known about the other during the period of their courtship. They begin to learn during this period how to live together, how to become responsible parents, how to relate well to each other through speech and conduct, how to discover and learn how to tolerate the weaknesses and excesses of each other, how to plan and think together as a couple, and more. Marriage takes a lot of understanding, patience, and tolerance to build. It is at this very stage in the marital journey that each partner decides what to sacrifice for the comfort of the other, how much a spouse is willing to give away for the sake of the other partner. Sometimes, some partners are not ready to let go of what they cherished in their premarital life. One of the immediate questions a serious and careful spouse may ask at this stage is: How do I live and relate to my marriage partner, given the way he or she is, in such a way that adds value to the marriage and familial relationship?

The survival of the marriage is put to a severe test at this stage. Although this is a very critical stage in the marital relationship, most pastors pay less attention to this stage than they do premarital counselling. Some of them assume that the foundational induction into the marriage life through premarital counselling is sufficient to sustain the relationship. However, they are often astonished at the negative turn of events in the marriage that can lead to separation or the dissolution of the relationship. This ugly situation occurs because of the gap created by the absence of the post-marital counselling services that should have been rendered to a new couple. Premarital counselling is merely foundational, laying down the building blocks to a marriage, acting only as planting a seed. But post-marital counselling is developmental to the growth of the marriage, functioning as caring and nurturing what is planted.

Premarital counselling is merely theoretical while post-marital counselling is practical. The crucial role of post-marital counselling is to hinder the development of anything that would destroy a blissful marital relationship. After the post-marital counselling phase, pastors should continue to provide marital maintenance counselling. In pursuit of post-marital counselling, the following are proposed.

Attend to their questions and concerns

This period of adjustment in one's marital life comes with enormous challenges. The first two years of a marriage relationship can either root the couple into their dreamed pleasurable relationship or it can mar them with seeds of sharp disagreements, discord, distrust, disenfranchisement, or the feeling of dissatisfaction in the relationship, which sometimes leads to sharp conflict situations that may lead to separation or divorce. Such an ugly scenario can raise questions in the couples' minds regarding what marriage really is and how harmonious the relationship should be. This is where the need for pastoral post-marital counselling is at its sharpest. Dickie (2021) proposes a reestablishment of corporate lament by the church to stand with and support suffering Christians and crushing marriages.

The pastor should plan to provide post-marital counselling services to a newly wedded couple for at least the first two critical foundation-laying and adjustment years of marriage with at least two counselling sessions per year.

The first biannual session should take place after the first six months, the second after another six months, the third after yet another six months, and the fourth also after another six months.

Encourage dedication to faith and motivate commitment to each other

Loyalty to Jesus Christ is just what it is: Loyalty to Jesus Christ! This is the point of unreserved dedication to one's expressed faith. People who profess faith in Jesus Christ and claim to be the children of God are required to observe the biblical prescriptions for life and service. Above all else is their obligation of obedience to God. This is unlikely to be attained without maturity and pastoral guidance, as the reality of life sometimes stands in the way. Constant pastoral presence is the antidote.

Commitment is essential to a sustainable Christian marital relationship. When prospective marriage partners say to each other, "I love you", they need to understand that the demands of love are all-encompassing. It includes the good, the bad, and even the ugly sides. It includes the sweet, the sour, and even the bitter aspects. When marriage is described as Christian, it means a lifelong commitment to the relationship. The marriage pledge states, "For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part." Accordingly, the pastoral counsellor should always emphasise and re-emphasise the fidelity of both partners to the essence of what Christian marriage is and to the necessity for them to individually obligate themselves to its commitment.

Conclusion

Christian couples need to constantly remember that God, who designed marriage and familial relationships, demands that they be the salt of a rotting earth and the light of a world now groping in the darkness of sin and wrong actions (Matt 5:13, 16). As a model of moral ethics and sociological relatedness, Christian spouses should behave towards their spouses the same way they would like their mother or father, sister or brother, and niece or nephew to be treated. Maturity demands that Christian couples become rational in terms of being reasonable, considerate, responsible, and compassionate in their relationships, because a successful Christian marriage takes much work and lots of patience to build. In his endorsement of Dickson's

book, Bala admits that a marriage that is solemnised by the most spiritual and experienced pastor does not guarantee its sustainability, enduringness, and exciting blissfulness. According to Bala (2021), “for any marriage to work, the couple need to WORK on it” because marriage, even between serious Christians, “needs earthly maintenance to make it succeed.”

The world is becoming more and more unfriendly, throwing just about every disturbing situation at its inhabitants. The world’s system is rapidly crumbling down on Christian families, some of whom are urgently crying for help. For instance, Arugu (2014:371) explains that “childlessness, adultery, quarrelling, alcoholism, socialization and technological advancement, financial difficulties, immaturity, mixed marriage, the adverse influence of in-laws, religious affiliation, and educational attainment” not only serve as some causes for the “loss of an intimate relationship that also brought security and support”, but worse, “divorce is a growing social ill in our societies”. Here, the modelling lifestyle expected of the pastor and the pastor’s family can serve as an encouragement to such troubled families. On the other hand, it should also serve as an indictment to members of the congregation who are perennially disobedient to the provisions of the Scripture to which they claim to subscribe. Apart from the emphasis placed on premarital counselling programmes and general preaching and teaching on the family and home life, pastoral caregivers should be precise on rendering a purposeful periodic post-marital counselling and marital management counselling services to serve as a check on couples.

Being aware of the difficulty present in the pastoral work, once having been a congregational pastor, one understands how frustrating it is to mend broken relationships and broken homes. The scenario is worst when one is dealing with a stubborn, rebellious, disobedient, and disrespectfully spouse. Congregational pastors are encouraged to intensify their oversight function by constantly praying for families and by periodic follow-up visits. They are also to engage in seeking out patiently the already dehumanised and bruised couples and families and provide pastoral counselling for their restoration.

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