

ABSTRACT

PREMARITAL EDUCATION: A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH
FOR SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST PASTORS
IN THE ITALIAN UNION

by

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ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

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Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: **PREMARITAL EDUCATION: A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH
FOR SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST PASTORS
IN THE ITALIAN UNION**

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Problem

Although the Adventist Church upholds the importance of a Christlike and stable marriage, the Italian Union historically never developed a systematic and comprehensive approach to both premarital counseling and enrichment programs for married couples, whose preparation is aleatory and depends on both/either the pastor's approach and/or the couple's request. The results could be a weakening of both marital stability and marital satisfaction. We assume that the root problem is a naïve understanding of marriage which causes couples to put more effort into preparing for the wedding day rather than for the marital journey.

Method

An action research intervention was designed and applied in the Italian Union between the summer and autumn of 2022, according to the model suggested by Stringer and Aragón (2021). Several groups of stakeholders—church administrators, pastors, and psychologists certified in Prepare/Enrich, and couples who took the Prepare/Enrich assessment—totaling 30 participants, were involved in a participative construction of new knowledge and practice. Data was evaluated using qualitative methods.

Data came from reflective journals written by ten pastors, as co-researchers in the intervention; interview transcriptions from all stakeholders participants; and focus groups with the abovementioned co-researchers pastors. Based on close readings and analysis of the journals and interview transcripts, the data were arranged and examined using the NVivo 1.0 software program. For the first coding cycle (Saldaña 2021), I used values, emotion, and process coding (Saldaña 2014).

Results

Data analysis and data reflection identified some key issues, as reported in the Participated Written Report, which is the conjoint elaboration for planning future actions (see Appendix G). The co-researchers pastors—as primary stakeholders—became aware of several vulnerabilities in the premarital education approach in the Italian Union and suggested some specific strategic actions. The co-researchers expressed appreciation for the Prepare/Enrich assessment tool but considered it paramount to create a pastoral culture of premarital education where all the involved stakeholders should be more effective: the Seminary should take to heart the urgency of training the new generations of pastors in the premarital education field; the Italian Union is invited to develop more effective protocols

for continuous education in premarital education and certification as Prepare/Enrich facilitators of new pastors; pastors are invited to create a network with other professionals to share challenges encountered in premarital education, and learn from each other; couples who took the Prepare/Enrich assessment are welcomed to provide testimonials to other young couples, according to the practice of *peer-education* intervention.

Conclusions

The action research methodology allowed us to train pastors while they were also co-researching with the lead researcher. For the lead researcher, this approach had the advantage of being seen as one member among others, and all together in agreement towards a collective journey to produce transformative knowledge. Consequently, the results of this project—as defined in the Statement of the Task—and its relative plans were disseminated as a collective project—because of its local-centered approach—rather than as a top-down institutional program.

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

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DEDICATION

This dissertation work is dedicated:

To my wife, Anna, for helping me to be a better *husband*—and

who always believed I could have arrived at this end;

To my sons, Gianluca and Daniele, for helping me to be a better *father*—and

who have been patient with my shortcomings;

To my daughter-in-law, Alessia, for helping me to be a better *father-in-law*—and

who has added the missing female nuances to my experience as a parent;

To my sister, Ivana, for helping me to be a better *brother*—and

who shared with me so much of the ups and downs of life;

To my mother, Michela, for helping me to be a better *son*—and

who always prayed intensively for my spiritual and personal life;

To my Heavenly Father, my God, for helping me to be a better *pastor* and *man*—and

Who always fathered myself.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Description of the Ministry Context

This project took place in the Italian Union of Seventh-day Adventist Churches. Although Adventists have been present in Italy since 1864, the Church's formal organization took place in 1928 (Ferrara 2018). Then, in 1988, the Italian Adventist Church took a fundamental step in establishing itself in Italy, signing an agreement with the Italian government (Rimoldi 2004). As of 2022, the membership was 9,460, with 110 churches and 19 companies (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2023), with an increasing rate of immigration from Eastern Europe, South America, and Africa.

I serve the Italian Union as the director of the Department of Family Ministry. The department's major focus is on primary and secondary prevention for engaged and married couples. Primary and secondary prevention in family context aims to strengthen protective factors, reduce the likelihood of a distressful event before it occurs, and train couples to reduce severe dysfunctional relational patterns (American Psychological Association 2014). Two of the Family Ministry's major initiatives are the Prepare/Enrich program—to prepare couples for married life and enrich married couples in their conjugal relationship—and the Worldwide Marriage Encounter weekends—an experiential enrichment program for married couples.

Italy has a population of 58.9 million (Istat 2018), of which 91% are indigenous, while the remaining population comes in great majority from Eastern Europe and Africa. Italian demographic statistics (Istat 2022) show that, in the 2010s, marriages have decreased: from 217,700 marriages in 2010 to 184,088 in 2019. At the same time, marital instability has increased from 54,160 divorces in 2010 to 85,349 in 2019.

Religious weddings are still common: taking into account only the first marriages—not remarriages or mixed marriages—religious ceremony is still the most common way of marrying.¹ As of 2019, those who chose to have a religious ceremony accounted for 78% compared to 22% who opted for a non-religious one (Istat 2021). Data shows that religious marriages have a lower level of separation and are more stable in time (Istat 2016). As to premarital counseling, the principal agency is the Catholic Church with local parish training programs, which are required for a couple to marry.

Statement of the Problem

Although the Adventist Church upholds the importance of a Christlike and stable marriage, the Italian Union historically never developed a systematic and comprehensive approach to premarital counseling and enrichment programs for married couples. While the Catholic Church requires a “marriage preparation” for couples to be married (Pope John Paul II 1981), in the Italian Adventist Church, this preparation is aleatory and depends on both/either the pastor’s approach and/or the couple’s request. The results of

¹ It is important to make this distinction because, as the great majority of religious marriages are Catholic, second marriages involving Catholic are almost always civil ones—because this religion does not accept divorce, but only annulment—and similarly for mixed marriages. This means that many of these second/mixed marriages are civil not because of an ideological choice but because of circumstances. As a result, only a comparison between first marriages—either religious or civil—reflect the real bearing of religion on the type of ceremony.

adopting this haphazard approach could be a weakening of both marital stability and marital satisfaction. It is assumed that the root problem is a naïve understanding of marriage which causes couples to put more effort into preparing for the wedding day rather than for the marital journey.

Statement of the Task

The task of this project is to develop, implement, and evaluate a comprehensive, systematic, theologically based, and evidence-based approach to marriage life, based on premarital education, for the Italian Adventist pastors. This project seeks to evoke in those pastors a higher awareness and understanding of the importance of a “prevention rather than cure” approach in marital preparation. For the purpose of this study, this project will include the assessment of pastors’ use of Prepare/Enrich, a scientifically based tool used by the Italian Union Family Ministries Department, and their evaluation of its effectiveness in the work with couples, as well as on their own relationships with their partners.

Delimitations of the Project

This project was implemented in the Italian Union of Seventh-day Adventist Churches. The process involved mainly pastors trained—and certified— with Prepare/Enrich.

Description of the Project Process

The project process included building a framework for thinking theologically about premarital education, reviewing current literature, developing, and implementing the project, and then evaluating the results.

Theological Reflection

To develop a theology of premarital education, it is essential to pose some epistemological questions in work with couples, highlighting its biblical and theological foundations. These reflections led to the following perspectives: (1) a *diachronic* approach—with its concentration on the developmental aspects of a couple; (2) a *providentialist* and *preventionalist* approach—with its concentration on the continuous and preventive care of a couple. These epistemological principles led to building a specific theology of premarital education and postulating the legitimacy of premarital education in a Christian context.

Review of Literature

Current literature was reviewed and included research on premarital counseling, with a particular focus on the religious setting, published between 2009 and 2019, although there were some exceptions for those works deemed essential for this research—either because they were landmarks or because they were helpful for understanding its historical development. First of all, I devoted a terminological section on how premarital education has been referred to over the years. Second, I traced the historical development of premarital education, with a special emphasis on the last decades. Third, I described the major issues involved in the work for premarital couples. Finally, I made a brief historical analysis of how Adventism has incorporated—and implemented—the state of the art in premarital education, with a special emphasis on the Italian Union.

Development of the Intervention

This intervention evolved directly from the theological reflection and literature review, which shaped its successive elaborations. As stated before, Italian Adventist pastors

never received systematic training on premarital education. Then, when I took over the direction of the department of Family Ministry, I felt the need to give pastors an overall and comprehensive approach to premarital education—not limiting it just to certify them as Prepare/Enrich facilitators. The Doctor of Ministry program offered me the opportunity to study this topic more in depth and work—theoretically and practically—toward this goal.

Implementation of the Intervention

The intervention adopted the action research approach, a qualitative methodology where the researcher is more involved with participants. This approach allowed me to combine scholarly research and practical ministry—as the Doctor of Ministry program hoped for. Moreover, it appeared more suitable for my dual role being, at the same time, both the researcher and one of the *potential* participants as a certified Prepare/Enrich pastor.

The intervention was developed according to the model suggested by Stringer and Aragón (2021), who proposed a protocol for action research intervention described as a three-phase framework: the “Look, Think, Act” cycle. First of all, stakeholders—those who, at various levels, were related to this intervention—were identified, involving not only pastors but also administrators, couples who had benefitted from the Prepare/Enrich program, and Seventh-day practitioners in the helping relationship. A multi-stakeholder dialogue was initiated with all these stakeholders, with the key objectives of sharing information, creating new knowledge, and generating good practices (Singh 2014, 543).

As a result of new knowledge generated in the previous phases, a premise was set for action and transformation regarding the research problem. The primary stakeholders—actually, the pastors themselves—agreed to integrate the new knowledge into their practice. Moreover, they perceived my further assistance in supporting all

pastors in their premarital education not as an institutional and top-down intrusion, but as a response to their felt needs (Onyenemezu and Olumati 2013).

Evaluation of the Intervention

A qualitative methodology was used to analyze data following the coding method outlined by Gibbs (2018), using an inductive technique (Bingham and Witkowsky 2021). I used the NVivo 1.0 software program to find codes and categories for the coding process. Word clouds were used for the visual representation of findings.

Chapter 5 provides the narrative of the intervention’s data collection. Chapter 6 contains the conclusions and recommendations from the data analysis.

Definitions of Terms

In literature, as well as in more popular books, we find several labels to identify programs aiming at preparing couples for marriage, including premarital counseling, premarital education, premarital prevention, marriage preparation (Carroll and Doherty 2003), or, more recently, relationship and marriage education (Ponzetti 2016a).

Generally, these terms are synonymous—and all refer to a preventive approach—although a slight shift toward the word “education” or “preparation” can be observed. In this work, the preferred term will be “premarital education.”

Prevention entails an approach where intervention is done before a couple gets married (L'Abate 1990).

Remedial, on the contrary, refers to any action done when the couple has already experienced a relationship problem (Berger and Hannah (1999).

Primary, *secondary*, and *tertiary* prevention are different levels of intervention: (1) when we teach skills to normal functional people; (2) when we work with people who

may face some distress; (3) when people are already experiencing significant relational problems or distress (L'Abate 1990).

Stakeholder is a term designed for addressing “any identifiable group or individual on which the organization is dependent for its continued survival” (Freeman and Reed 1983, 98). When used as an adjective, it can be found in literature both as *stakeholding group* and *stakeholder groups* (Gregory 2007). For other definitions, see (Benn, Abratt, and O'Leary 2016; McGrath and Whitty 2017).

Summary

This synthetic introduction has presented the challenge of developing an integrated approach to premarital education within Adventism. This intervention addressed the specific needs of the Italian pastors, although it is believed that many insights would be helpful—and relevant—to other cultural contexts. The action research approach allowed me to involve pastors already in the research phase rather than later when results must be disseminated. The hope is that this model of action will empower pastors in their ministry to couples and enhance the educative approach to premarital education—which includes special attention not only to the premarital phase of a couple but also in the aftermath of the wedding. From this perspective, marriage preparation is just one of the phases in our ministering to couples. Marriage preparation should include not only formal premarital education programs but also any enrichment programs to sustain the couple in its evolution.

CHAPTER 2

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF PREMARITAL EDUCATION

Introduction

Premarital education has been done—until the present—mainly in a religious context, and primarily by clergy (Halley et al. 2011; Stahmann and Hiebert 1997; Wilmoth and Smyser 2012). The ecclesiastical pivotal role is also acknowledged in the natural outcome of premarital education: “Marriage is also performed both within the Church and by the Church” (Kis and Mueller 2015, 258).

As a result, it is paramount to wonder about the legitimacy of such practice within an ecclesiastical context, as well as its theological foundations.

Eyrich (2005), reflecting on his theology of premarital counseling, stressed the importance of such reflection—even hoping for a supplementary in-depth analysis—and encouraged pastors to verify if they had well understood this divine-appointed responsibility: “Many pastors have been slow to develop a program of premarital counseling, either because they did not consider such a practice theologically sound or because they had not thought through the theological implications and, therefore, their responsibility” (17).

Eyrich had already started his reflection—in the late 1970s—on the importance of a theology of premarital education when he pursued his DMin degree. His dissertation (Eyrich 1976)—and specifically, his theology of premarital education—inspired many of

the succeeding generations of doctoral dissertations (Buikema 2001; Cassimy 1994; Ipes 1982; Stevens 1986; Zhigankova 2008).²

Such a theological reflection is more than just adding the word “Christian” to any premarital education, also because this adjective may mean several—and radically different—things: (1) done by Christian (pastors); (2) quoting biblical verses *here and there* to corroborate the counseling advice; (3) including Christian concepts into the secular curriculum; (4) having a Christian theological framework as a rationale for doing premarital education.

This chapter will try to build a framework for thinking theologically about premarital education, whose—*one of its*—ultimate goal is, in Eyrich’s (2005) words, “to demonstrate the theological responsibility of the pastor for premarital counseling” (25).

This chapter includes, first, a general introduction on how this topic has been dealt with within Adventism, and Christianity at large; second, some epistemological premises on a theology of premarital education; third, a description of the major theological issues involved in the pastoral work for premarital couples.

A Theology of Premarital Education in Adventism

There are plenty of works on the theology of family, both within Adventism (Lehmann 2007; 2010; Mueller and de Souza 2015; Rock 2000) and in the larger Christian world (Campbell 2003; Gary 2000; Girardet 2003; Köstenberger and Jones 2010; Rocchetta 2011; Scott and Warren 2007), but very few of them devoted some sections to a theology of premarital education. Even the latest DMin dissertations at Andrews University

² Eyrich’s dissertation became a well-known book in 1991, now at its third edition (Eyrich 2005).

Seminary (Liversidge 2019; Opoku-Adjei 2018; Tuffour 2017) deal more with the content of Christian premarital education, rather than the rationale for the program itself.³

Although premarital education should be considered a “specific ministry of the church” (Kis and Mueller 2015, 262), there seems to be little if any mention about marriage preparation as an ecclesiastical—and theological—praxis.

For instance, the “Evangelical Dictionary of Theology” (Treier and Elwell 2017) gives little space to this specific reflection. Under the entry “marriage”, there is a related section on the ecclesiological aspects where the church’s role is mentioned as a nurturing agent for marriages: “The church is a setting in which (...) practices that sustain Christian marriages are cultivated” (Eilers 2017, 526). The authors point out the church’s role in counterbalancing society’s model of marriage—such as cohabitation, or divorce—and “sustaining Christian marriages” (Eilers 2017, 526). No other responsibility is mentioned, least of all any premarital educative effort in order to instruct the couples to reach *that* desirable status of being in “Christian marriages.”

In Adventism, Miroslav Kis was one of the few theologians who attempted to develop an ecclesiology of premarital education, in a co-authored chapter with Ekkehardt Mueller (Kis and Mueller 2015).⁴ Kis was the one who contributed the most to that chapter, as it can be deduced from a comparison with a paper written on the same subject

³ As to the older DMin dissertations at Andrews University’s Seminary (Cassimy 1994; Zhigankova 2008), there were some hints of theological reflection, based essentially on Eyrich (1976; 1978). Zhigankova, however, did not add anything new to Cassimy’s reflection, as it was almost a verbatim quotation—often, even without giving credit—of his work.

⁴ This chapter was a new contribution in a volume on marriage published by the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. It was a partial reprint of an original series of books on marriage, sexuality, and family, published by the Inter-European Division (formerly known as Euro-Africa Division) (Lehmann 2007; 2010).

as a single author and published in the Biblical Research Institute’s website, two decades earlier (Kis 1990). Kis also wrote a chapter in the “Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology” (Kis 2000), where he devoted a section to premarital education, which he defined as being of “crucial importance” (693), although, in the rest of that section, Kis concentrated more on the married couple—and the preventive factors for success—rather than on the premarital period as well.

Adrian Bocaneanu, another Adventist author, devoted a large section of his chapter on the pastoral role in premarital education (Bocaneanu 2010) to a theology and ecclesiology of premarital education.

Apart from these authors, no other Adventist scholars seem to have attempted to make a sound reflection on the theological foundations of premarital education, as if it was an ecclesiastical duty arising more from pragmatic reasons—such as the rising rate of divorce—rather than from the Bible itself.

This lack of theological reflection on—and status for—premarital education can be traced back to Ipes’s (1982) understanding of premarital programs. In his view, they did not have their own theological status: “The importance of formulating a theology of Christian marriage *and* [emphasis added] a program of premarital counseling is rooted in the belief that marriage is a divine institution, divinely established” (22). In his view, a premarital counseling program is *just* a factor—even though “important and necessary” (68)—to be taken into account in “formulating and utilizing a theology for Christian marriage” (68).

It seems that Adventist theology has in mind the couple *as is*—and ready to replicate God’s ideal in their life—rather than the couple *in the making*—and, thus, in need

of a mentoring process inspired by biblical principles. As a result, we haven't reflected theologically enough on the educative and dynamic role in this journey;⁵ after all, the couple is never a snapshot of itself, rather it evolves through ongoing transitions—sometimes, even backwards. And theology *should* have to say something in this respect.

Furthermore, it can be argued that this attitude may be a consequence of centuries of the Christian Church's understanding of marriage as a rite/sacrament as well as of the priest's role at a wedding. In their book, Stahmann and Hiebert (1997) traced a short history of clergy's involvement in premarital counseling and explained that, through the Middle Ages, the clergy's involvement in the ceremony of marriage developed parallel to "other initiatory sacraments" (8);⁶ that is, it followed the educative pattern of other initiatory rites—such as baptism or Communion—putting emphasis "on the nature and meaning of the rite itself" (8). With the entrance of religion in the field of psychology—and the birth of pastoral counseling—the clergy added an educational dimension applied to the relationship (Stahmann and Hiebert 1997). It is very probable that this shift from sacrament to "instructional counseling" (Klassen 1981) enlarged the distance between a theology of marriage—with its emphasis on rite/sacrament—and premarital programs—with their emphasis on psychological principles—as well as reinforced the antithesis between theological *theory* and psychological *practice*.

⁵ As to the educative dimension of premarital education, see the valuable work of Monder (2011) and her proposal for a new conceptual understanding of premarital education from an educative perspective: "Therefore, in order to adopt for leaders and church members a broader concept of marriage preparation there is a need for a more holistic and developmental vision of marriage preparation. This concept presents itself as a principle—a principle of education—rather than as a specific step" (60).

⁶ For a full and detailed history of the Christian Church's involvement in preparation for marriage, see Gavin's (2004) work. Complementarily, for a history of the Christian Church's involvement in the rite of marriage, see Aliotta (2011).

Epistemological Premises

To develop a theology of premarital education, it is important to pose some epistemological questions.

“Epistemology” is “the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge” (Martinich and Stroll 2020). This means that its accent is more on the *process* of knowing, rather than on the *content* of the known.

The nature of our knowledge is not merely a philosophical quest, but rather a spiritual and existential imperative, as Cone (2014) pointed out: “The fact that Satan chose epistemology [contradicting God’s design for knowledge] as an early battleground underscores the strategic significance of epistemology in God’s design” (Cone 2014).

As a result, even theology should have—and has—its own epistemology, that is “a critical inquiry of appropriate epistemic concepts and theories in or related to theology” (Abraham and Aquino 2017, 2).⁷

The present work will try to examine some epistemological perspectives in the work with couples, trying to highlight its biblical and theological foundations.

It will be a sort of conversation that takes place, using the words of Abraham and Aquino (2017), in “the intersection of theology and epistemology” (2) and whose goal is to become aware of “the role of epistemological assumptions in (our) own work” (2). In practice, it is as if we are having to check our sails—the size, shape, condition, and even the brand or color—before leaving the harbor and sailing with our ship, with the belief

⁷ The debate over the relationship between theology and epistemology will not be addressed. See, for example, Griffiths (1999) and his quest on “how they ought to be related” (3).

that the journey will depend not only on the “objective” aspect of our sails but also upon all the characteristics—even those “subjective”—of our sails.

Below are some epistemological antinomies—related to a theology of premarital education—which, somehow, are juxtaposed and functionally linked to one another.

Synchronic vs. Diachronic

The terms “synchronic” and “diachronic” were used by Ferdinand de Saussure—the father of modern language studies—and point to two different perspectives on reading a text (Duignan 2020). The “synchronic” approach looks at the text as “it is at a given time”—an appropriate adjective would be “static” or “descriptive”—while “diachronic” looks at its “historical development”—an appropriate adjective would be “evolutionary.”

In contemporary biblical interpretation, “synchrony” and “diachrony” are used by scholars to mean, respectively: the methods that “concentrate on the literature as such” (Hong 2013, 527), and those concerned “with the relationship of the biblical materials to history” (527).

This dichotomic dyad can be useful to categorize the way we reflect theologically on marriage: while the “synchronic approach” would tend to define the biblical and theological principles applied to marriage *as is*, the diachronic approach would tend to find the theological principles that underline the couple *in the making*.

This latter approach has an educative perspective and focuses on God’s way of relating to the people of Israel—and human beings, at large. From this perspective, we see God not only as the One who gave us laws and principles on marriage—as the synchronic approach would explain—but also as the One who took the responsibility of teaching those principles, according to times and situations—as the diachronic approach

would point out. It can be concluded that we may see God both in a static way—when He proclaims the biblical principles—as well as in a dynamic way—when He presents Himself as an educator/teacher to lead His people, step by step, toward *that* goal.⁸

An illustration of God’s perspective—not only defining truth but also developing an educative environment—is found in Ellen G. White’s statements on how God revealed—and taught—the law to human beings: “When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of” (White 1896, 109); “If man had kept the law of God, as given to Adam after his fall, preserved by Noah, and observed by Abraham, there would have been no necessity for the ordinance of circumcision (...) And if the descendants of Abraham had kept the covenant, of which circumcision was a sign (...) they would have kept God’s law in mind, and there would have been no necessity for it to be proclaimed from Sinai or engraved upon the tables of stone. And had the people practiced the principles of the Ten Commandments, there would have been no need of the additional directions given to Moses!” (White 1890, 364). It is marvelous to admire this progression on revelation, having in mind an educative—and redemptive—goal.⁹

⁸ “This dynamic—rather than static—perception of God’s activity with the world has been more fully theorized by Alfred N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, whose positions are widely known as Process Theology (Cobb and Griffin 1976). According to process theology, God is more immanent—and in relation with the world—than transcendent—and above the world. Without going into debate over the transcendent vs. immanent aspect of God, it is worth stressing that “He is immanent in the sense that he is one with reality, and growing and processing with it” (Erickson 2013, 280). As a result, God may be seen as the “relational God” (Barcelona 2007, 101), the one who makes relationship—in the educative process—as important as commands—in the prescribing reality. This premise leads to a relationship based not only on a prescribing role, but on a God who, in his relatedness, is “affectionate and loving, devotedly interested and intimately concerned about humans, affected by the world in feeling joy and delight in goodness” (Peckham 2015, 189).

⁹ For a further deepening of the pedagogy of God, see: Cantinat (1964); Casotti (1953).

Could this be applied to our theological reflection on marriage and the couple? Is it enough just to discover what a marriage, and couples, ought to be in order to fulfill God's plan for them—this would be the *synchronic* approach—or rather—from a *diachronic* perspective—can we reflect, biblically and theologically, on our responsibility to minister to them in their development, from the premarital stage?

In our theology of marriage, is the synchronic perspective sufficient—that is, the definition of “what ought to be”, like a theological snapshot—or does it rather demand the diachronic approach—that is, the concentration on “how it evolves” and “how we intend to reach that ideal”?

These questions can lead to another epistemological antinomy, as they raise the complex question on how God interacts in history: does He act *once in a while*—and perhaps miraculously—or does He have a systematic and planned—even pedagogical—attitude toward mankind?

Deism vs. Providentialism

Deism understood God's role in the universe as a watchmaker who created “a mechanism, running by itself” (Jüngel 2014, 58)—namely, by the laws He put in it—and with no other interference from Him. God not only created the universe, but He also established some patterns of actions “so that whatever is needed by each member of the creation will be automatically provided” (Erickson 2013, 362).

Providentialism, on the contrary, believes that God, after his originating work in this universe, is in a “continuing relationship to it (...) by which he preserves in existence (...) and guides” (Erickson 2013, 359). From this latter perspective, “there is no place (...) for the absentee landlord of deism” (Rice 1997, 78).

These different perspectives pose the question regarding what a couple needs in order to comply with God's ideals. Does a good marriage simply need a blessed start—the religious ceremony—and then everything will keep going smoothly, as a Deistic perspective would imply? Or, does a couple need a constant—and deliberate—request for God's daily intervention, as implied in God's providence?

This should not only be a theological question but also an ecclesiological one. Does our theology of marriage leave room for a thoughtful reflection on premarital education—with its search for theological foundation—or is it sufficient *by itself* for a blessed and successful marriage? Moreover, if a theology of premarital education should find its own plausibility, should it be under the theology of marriage's umbrella, or stand beside it?

These questions can lead to another epistemological antinomy, namely the timing of God's intervention; does He usually act *after* a problem occurs—to remediate the normality—or does He prefer to intervene *before*—to prevent abnormality?

Remedialism (Miraculism) vs. Preventionalism (Ordinarilism)

Once God's providence on behalf of creation and mankind is accepted, one has to deal with the debate on whether God's involvement with human beings is mainly extraordinary—identified with miracles—or ordinary—that is, His customary way of acting (Craig 1998).

The Reformers referred to this distinction, as it is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith's chapter "Of Providence": "God, in His ordinary providence, maketh use of means, (1) yet is free to work without, (2) above, (3) and against them, (4) at His pleasure" (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 5.2).

Karl Barth (1960) summarized these two interpretations with the following words: “By *providentia ordinaria* is meant the divine government as it occurs within the framework of what we can recognize as the laws which underlie the cosmic events of nature and history and by *providentia extraordinaria* the divine government in so far as it takes the form of miracles” (185). (See also: Berkhof 2018)

As the word “extraordinary” suggests, it seems that, for God, a miracle is just an exception, not the ordinary way of helping human beings. He, rather, prefers to train them—as He did for 40 years with Israel, in the desert, before entering the Promised Land—so that they may grow in His image. This same approach can be also seen in Jesus’ answer—and criterium—at the request for “more miracles”: “but none [sign/miracle] will be given it except the sign of Jonah” (Matt 16:4).¹⁰

Of the same opinion is Erickson (2013) who, examining the nature of miracles, defined them: “the *unusual* workings by God [emphasis added]” (379).

From a psychological perspective, this contrast arises from the difference between a remedial approach—based on repairing a problem—and a preventive approach—based on working at the relationship while it is still healthy (Berger and Hannah 1999).

We may perceive an analogy in the different ways God deals with human beings: either He performs a miracle to correct our trespasses—remedial approach—or He trains and educates the world to grow—preventive approach.

The two interpretations pose a fundamental question, which is both theological and psychological: Is it more theologically sound—and psychologically functional—to

¹⁰ On the educative perspective in the Bible, it is worth reading Estes (2000) and his interpretation of Proverbs’ first nine chapters through a systematic theory of education.

rely on God solely when a couple gets in trouble and needs a specific remedy—with a special emphasis on miracles—or rather, to work with, and under, God to prevent any troubles—that is, expecting from Him to act more in an ordinary way?

Keeping in mind these epistemological premises, we may enter the theological field and listen to what the Word of God may tell us regarding premarital education.

Some Major Theological Issues on Premarital Education

The Theological Content for Premarital Education – the *What*

This paragraph is rooted in the synchronic approach. It has to do with *what* is said in the Bible about marriage—as well as premarital education. In other words, it is related to “doctrine”—that is, the state of affairs.

The Ontological Status

There is no doubt that marriage is one of the main focuses of the Bible.

Marriage is *at the beginning*, in Genesis—with the first couple married by God Himself: “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen 2:24).

Marriage is *along the way* with the Prophets—with God being depicted as a lover, and Israel as His young fiancée and soon-to-be wife: “Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine” (Ezek 16:8).

Marriage is *reappearing* in the Gospels—with Jesus performing His first miracle at a wedding: “On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee... and Jesus and

his disciples had also been invited to the wedding... What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory” (John 2:1,2,11).

Marriage is *reinforced* by Jesus’ statements—especially the one bringing marriage back to its origins: “‘Haven’t you read,’ he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female?’ ... Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt 19:4,6).

Marriage is *reoccurring* again in the Epistles—with Paul stressing the parallel between human marriage and the marriage between Christ and the Church: “‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Eph 5:31,32).

Marriage is *at the end*, in Revelation—with the final and everlasting encounter between Christ and the saved church: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Rev 21:2).

Rock (2000) agrees with this special regard that the Bible has for marriage, especially referring to Jesus: “An additional evidence of divine regard for marriage and family concerns is seen in the fact that Christ... utilized the marriage ceremony as the setting for His inaugural miracle” (724).

Moreover, Rock stressed that God used the marriage analogy for describing—in the Old Testament—the relationship with His people, as well as—in the New Testament—the relationship between Christ and the Church: “Marriage serves as a symbol of the intimate relationship between God and his people... In the New Testament... between Christ and the church” (726).

Lastly—and above all—Rock pointed out that marriage shares with the Sabbath—the iconic Adventist identifying doctrine—the same ontological lineage: “Marriage, along with the Sabbath, was instituted in Eden” (725).

The Seventh-day Adventist “Church Manual” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2015), in order to enforce marriage’s status, felt the need to use a redundant and sanctionary wording: “Marriage is a *divine* institution established by *God Himself* [emphasis added]” (154).

Köstenberger and Jones (2010), summarizing the first three chapters of Genesis, state: “Marriage is shown to be rooted in God’s creative act of making humanity in his image as male and female” (22).

Zhigankova (2008) added the relational element to marriage: “Marriage, then, is not a peripheral issue in the Christian life... Marriage is pictured in the Bible as the single most important relationship in this life other than the relationship with God” (75).

The Pastoral Model

The synchronic approach to premarital education in the Bible can help us to discover not only its ontological importance but also its pastoral model.

In the Bible, God is depicted as a shepherd/pastor (Ps 23) who takes care of his flock and is directly involved in nurturing them (Eyrich 2005).¹¹

God—the pastor—provides for Israel, as well as for each couple that is part of that people. God—in this pastoral image—prepares the first couple on how to mirror the

¹¹ The “shepherd/pastor” theme, and its implication for premarital education, will be developed more in the paragraph “The Shepherd and the Steward Theme”, p. 19.

Trinitarian oneness in their own relationship, as Zhigankova (2008) pointed out: “The Bible reveals that God Himself provided the very first ‘premarital counseling session’” (68).

Even the first words addressed to Adam and Eve were about premarital education: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground’” (Gen 1:28).

Zhigankova further developed her reflection upon God’s involvement in premarital education: “In a similar way, chapter 2 describes the directions given immediately upon the creation of the woman... (v. 24)” (68) and she concludes with this clear—and at the same time, demanding—statement for pastors: “up to these days, those words remain foundational for every premarital counseling session” (69).

A decade earlier, Cassimy (1994) affirmed: “preparation is an obvious theme in Scripture. The pastor/shepherd must follow this motif as he/she prepares couples for a lifelong covenant” (abstract).

If marriage finds its foundational legitimacy—as well as its pastoral model—in Scripture, this argument puts pastors on the front burner, as will be discussed more in-depth in the next paragraph.

The Theological Rationale for Premarital Education – the *Why*

This paragraph is rooted in the “in-between” that links a synchronic approach to a diachronic approach.¹² It has to do with *why* there is an importance for premarital education

¹² For a study of “in-between” category, see Asenjo (1988), whose work tried to theorize the legitimacy of a “third area (which) emerges, a middle one previously unnoticed” (44). Contrary to Hegel’s dialect, in which the synthesis “absorbs the contradictory terms into a new synthesis” (44), here, with the *in-between*, the “terms are open doors, paths crisscrossed by countless other paths.” (45)

from a biblical perspective. In other words, it is related to “justification”—that is, the reason why it should be done also in a religious context.

Marriage, Religion, and Society

If marriage is a matter of religion, everything concerned with it—including marriage preparation—should be of interest for pastors, especially in a time where the traditional understanding of marriage is being challenged.

Although marriage has traditionally been long understood as a divine institution—or at least, as ahistorical and universal, not strictly depending on time or culture—nowadays, there is increasing literature with a social constructionist methodology, that regards marriage as a social construct.¹³

The social constructivist argument is well expressed by Frew (2010), who believes that marriage has a “socially constructed nature” (78), with no natural laws nor defining scriptures, and that it is a “purely social arrangement” (79). Frew cited the earlier work of Eskridge (1993) who holds the “undisputed” view that “marriage is an institution that is constructed, not discovered, by societies” (1485), and that it is not a “naturally generated institution with certain essential elements. Instead, it is a construction that is linked with other cultural and social institutions” (1434).

Berger and Luckmann (1966), according to their perspective, theorized marriage’s social nature as follows:

¹³ “Social constructionism” is “a general term sometimes applied to theories that emphasize the socially created nature of social life” (Scott and Marshall 2009, s.v. “Social constructionism”). It is “a theory of knowledge of sociology and communication that examines the development jointly constructed understanding of the world” (Galbin 2014, 82). This term goes back to “the publication of Berger and Luckmann’s influential work in 1966” (86), titled “The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge” (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

the basic ‘recipe’ for the reification of institutions is to bestow on them an ontological status independent of human activity and signification... Marriage, for instance, may be reified as an imitation of divine acts of creativity, as a universal mandate of natural law, as the necessary consequence of biological or psychological forces, or, for that matter, as a functional imperative of the social system. What all these reifications have in common is their obfuscation of marriage as an ongoing human production. (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 90)

More traditional scholars and apologetics have counteracted this perspective with several arguments, mainly contending that marriage, although influenced by culture and society, is not merely a social construct.

Girgis, Anderson, and George (2010) stress that: “marriage isn’t a pure construct, any more than human rights are mere constructs. Both are moral realities that the State has good reasons to recognize and support”.¹⁴

The Christian apologist Greg Koukl¹⁵ argues that “it is not culture that constructs marriages or the families that marriages begin. Rather, it is the other way around: Marriage and family construct culture” (Koukl 2013). He backed up his argument by highlighting the true cause-effect relationship between marriage and society: “As the building blocks of civilization, families are logically prior to society as the parts are prior to the whole. Bricks aren’t the result of the building because the building is made up of bricks” (Koukl 2013).

¹⁴ This was a response—published in the online journal of the Witherspoon Institute, the conservative think tank in Princeton, New Jersey—to Andrew (Koppelman 2010), within a long debate between the two sets of authors. The dialogue started with a paper by Girgis, George, and Anderson (2010) on the philosophical arguments on the nature of marriage and opposing the “constructionist” and “revisionist” interpretation. For a list of all the authors involved in this important debate so far, see: Franck (2011) and (Darling 2013). Later developments, from both sides, are found in: (Koppelman 2014) and (Girgis, Anderson, and George 2012).

¹⁵ Greg Koukl is the founder of “Stand for Reason”—a Christian apologetic organization—as well as an adjunct professor in Christian apologetics at Biola University (<https://www.str.org/home>).

From a theological perspective, the main argument can be found in the “order of creation.”

The Westminster Theological Seminary apologist William Edgar argues that: “While marriage is regarded as a public, contractual arrangement, its foundations are in the order of creation. The ordinance of marriage is not simply a social contract, nor can it be called merely a civil right” (Edgar 2011, 543).

Along the same line are Kis and Mueller (2015) who define marriage as “an order of creation” (250).

These are, in synthesis, the arguments in favor of, or against, an ontological understanding of marriage. The goal of this research is not to evaluate the thoroughness of both arguments but, rather, to point out the urgency for pastors to be involved in them. Pastors have the opportunity not only to deepen their understanding of marriage but also to share it with couples during their preparation for marital life.

From this perspective, Kis and Mueller (2015) stress that marriage is, indeed, a “ministry of the Church” (262).

A similar position was expressed by Eyrich (2005) in his search for a *theological* rationale for premarital counseling: “Nothing lends more credence to the theology of premarital counseling than the fact that marriage is a divine institution, divinely delineated” (Eyrich 2005, 17).

In summary, the founding theological premise for marriage as a Christian institution is also the founding theological premise for premarital education. From this perspective, premarital education is needed not only for *marital quality*—that is, the improving of the couple’s wellbeing—but also for *marital stability*—that is, the

accomplishment of its theological characteristics, including “permanence” and “sacredness of marriage” (Kis and Mueller 2015).¹⁶

Nature of Love

The Bible calls for—and even commands—us to follow Jesus’ mandate to love one another, spouses included: “As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). The apostle Paul even makes an ode to love, writing one of the utmost definitions:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. (1 Cor 13:4-8)

This command—as well as exhortation—elevates love to a spiritual and mystical dimension. More than that, “this command is best understood as a call to a covenant, to mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships, and to follow the example of Christ” (Mabry 2015, 5). Mabry reinforced the concept of the relationship between love and covenant—in a Christian context—by citing Chennattu (2006): “A covenant relationship is implied by both the covenant command and the covenant sign: love for one another (13:34-35)” (83).¹⁷

This is a self-sacrificing love, where—paradoxically—husbands are expected to do more than their wives, as they have to follow Jesus’ example: “Husbands, love your

¹⁶ Along the same lines, it is the reason given by the Catholic Church (*Code of Canon Law* 1983) for marriage preparation: “Pastors of souls are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful the assistance by which the *matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection* [emphasis added]” (c. 1063).

¹⁷ For a further deepening of the “covenant” motif in the Bible, see: LaRondelle (2005).

wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25)
(Baltensweiler 1981).¹⁸

In order to experience—and to bequeath—this spiritual love, an educative action can be planned with the candidate couple for marriage. Premarital counseling, in a Christian context, has the opportunity to help couples understand—and prepare for—this specific aspect of love. It cannot be learned in a secular book, nor in everyday life. They need to be exposed to Scripture, where this love is testified and taught.

The Shepherd and the Steward Theme

As has already been presented, the Bible uses the image—theme—of the pastor/shepherd to illustrate the educative aspect of God.¹⁹

Eyrich (2005) referred to the biblical image of the pastor (Isa 40:11; Ezek 34:14-15) and applied it to the pastoral role in premarital education: “Does not such shepherding require the pastor to be involved in premarital counseling? Is this not a theological basis for his engaging the prospective couple in the exploration of the practical applications of the biblical principles which relate to marriage?” (22).

Cassimy (1994) emphasized the same theme: “The shepherd’s duty is to equip all the saints, including those desirous of marriage, so that the body of Christ can be healthy, firm, and strong” (51).

¹⁸ In this regard, see Block (2003) where he deals with the special call husbands have in taking care of their wives. Although the family unit is defined as *bêit ‘āb*—the father’s house—the husband’s role has less to do with power and more with “confidence, trust, and service” (43). This is also depicted, for instance, in Psa 68:5,6 where God is portrayed as a father who is “the protector of orphans, defender of widows, host for the homeless and savior of the prisoner.” (43)

¹⁹ See paragraph: “The Pastoral Model”, p. 14.

Zhigankova (2008) pointed out that: “The Bible is clear that one of the pastor’s responsibilities is the caring and nurturing of the sheep, especially the young sheep” (Zhigankova 2008, 70).

Eyrich (2005) used another biblical image, the steward, quoting the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30), and making a parallel between the talents given to the servants and the couples given to their pastor: “Premarital counseling provides the pastor with an excellent opportunity to act as a steward of God’s children” (22).

Both the “Shepherd” and the “Steward” themes introduce another factor involved in premarital education: the bonding factor.

Time for Bonding

Zhigankova (2008) affirms that “premarital education is a time when bonding can occur between the shepherd and two special sheep” (70). She also cited a well-known Christian author, Norman Wright, who listed the “bonding” theme among the goals of premarital education: “Premarital counseling is a choice opportunity for the pastor... to build an in-depth relationship with the couple that could lead to a continuing ministry in the future” (Wright 1992, 76).

More recently, Bocaneanu (2010) related the “bonding” factor not only to pastors but also to church: “The marriage preparation is a special opportunity for guiding the future spouses—both lovingly and firmly—so that they may make the church the foundation of their personal life and, as a result, of their marriage” (106). Along with the same principle, Klassen (1981), several decades ago, stressed out the necessity of “assuring the couple of the church’s interest in their relationship both before and after the wedding” (39).

Kis and Mueller (2015) linked the “bonding” factor to God himself: “Marriage is not only an answer to our needs but also and especially an object lesson of God’s understanding, care, and saving love, a wonderful gift” (267).

From Creation to Re-creation

Christian premarital education can also help couples to bring together two different realities, as Eyrich (2005) pointed out: “(To) face realistically human nature and the nature of marriage” (21).

Christian premarital education should parallel the first couple’s creation sequence: from “not good” (Gen 2:18) to “very good” (Gen 1:31). The single Adam did not reach his goodness until he found—actually, he received—an equally mutual companion. God Himself led man from his un-goodness to goodness through a divine premarital educative program—the “first premarital counseling session” (Zhigankova 2008, 68).²⁰

Zhigankova (2008) found in this progression the rationale for premarital education: “Since even the perfect couple needed some pre-nuptial nurturing, every imperfect couple needs counseling even more” (69). Moreover, she humorously reminded pastors of this responsibility, as “we are not to expect God to instruct every couple the way he instructed Adam and Eve” (69).

As introduced earlier in this paragraph, the “in-between” category that links a synchronic approach to a diachronic approach has allowed us to see marriage from an evolutionary perspective. If marriage is something we *build up*—instead of just *adhere*

²⁰ Orten (2003) has depicted this scene from a different perspective, as if all premarital education sessions have been completed and the wedding is about to start: “as a father who takes his beloved daughter’s hand and leads her down the aisle to her husband, God took the woman whom he had made and ‘brought her unto the man.’” Orten (2003, ch. 4)

to—then pastoral guidance is needed so that the underlining Christian principles are taught to—or even, shared with—the prospective couple.

Moreover, it can be stated that within premarital education sessions, while the pastor is helping couples to prepare for marriage, the pastor is helping himself/herself to mirror God’s never-ending mentoring role for couples. It can be a growing environment for both parties in this process: that is, for couples and pastors.

The Theological Effectiveness of Premarital Education – the *How*

This paragraph is rooted in the diachronic approach. It has to do with *how* to reach the biblical ideal of marriage through premarital education. In other words, it is related to “ethics”—that is, how it should be done in a religious context.

Providentialism and Prevention

Kis and Mueller (2015), talking about the ministry of the church to marriage, pointed out that the responsibility for marriages is a natural extension of the church’s general attitude to support, admonish, and nurture its members and families: “The responsibilities of the church to its members in general also apply to the married” (261). Furthermore, the church is invited to follow Jesus’ example, who, as He was attending a wedding, displayed His intention to “take care of the need of the newlywed couple” (261).

If we asked Kis and Mueller how much in advance we should take care of marriages, they would affirm that it should start from the “premarital period... long before the wedding date” (262). This time span would serve to provide: a) a safe context for friendship; b) general counseling for mate selection; c) specific premarital counseling, as long as: “such ministry of the church to prospective couples is a responsibility, not simply an option” (262).

As described earlier, a more dynamic acceptance of the term “marriage” entails special regard to the temporal dimension. This includes terms such as: *in advance*, *long before*, *planned*, *intention*, and so on. This semantic group seems to fit better with a providentialist idea of God, rather than with a deistic one. It refers to an ongoing activity in favor of someone—in this case, the couple—rather than to a sporadic and remote action. It includes “intentionality”, as God’s providence assumes.

Moreover, as God’s providence can be seen either in the *ordinary* or *extraordinary* way,²¹ it can be argued that a preventive approach—based on planned and systematic actions taken since the couple’s formation—fits better with a theology of God’s providence based primarily on *ordinarilism* rather than on *miraculism*. Of course, there is a time when pastors have to intervene immediately, when couples are facing a crisis, although this intervention risks being more of a “marital funeral”—acknowledging the death of a love—rather than a decisive pastoral intervention.

Premarital education can be seen as a way of being integrated into God’s ordinary way of providing for human beings—couples included. It does rely on educative steps and developmental stages, rather than performing a rite—the wedding—and hoping that the couple will always walk in the for-better side of their marital path.

Premarital education takes, seriously, into consideration the temporal and developmental dimensions of marriage. Marriage, as a theological institution, starts long before a couple is formed, as every human being unconsciously creates the characteristics of his/her future marriage through his/her background of past family experiences, education, and personality.

²¹ See the paragraph “Remedialism (Miraculism) vs. Preventionalism (Ordinarilism)”, p. 10.

The “making” of a *marriage*, then, should be more than the “making” of a *wedding*, as well as continuous and intentional “human providence” that cooperates with the divine providence.

Providentialism: Individualism vs. Corporativism

The issue of individualism vs. corporativism is particularly relevant today, as society is increasingly shifting towards an emphasis on individualism (Santos, Varnum, and Grossmann 2017; Triandis and Gelfand 2012).

As premarital education involves an “intrusion” in someone else’s life, according to Bocaneanu (2010), it should find a balanced approach: “A sound biblical theology in pastoral ministry rejects two extremes: an illegitimate authority over the church’s members as well as indifferent and not involved irresponsibility” (100).

Premarital education, while preserving the final choice on marital matters, should take into account the ecclesiastical dimension, as Kis and Mueller (2015) pointed out: “While the Bible supports individuality, it also stresses the corporate aspect of our existence” (260).

Badenas (1995), too, remembered this “horizontal” dimension: “The mission of the Church is teamwork... To claim to live an entirely vertical religion is an illusion” (23).

From this perspective, premarital education can represent, for the Church, a discreet opportunity to become courageously involved in the most important moments of its church members—premarital period included. Bocaneanu (2010) depicted this time as “a rare window of opportunity” (102).

Providentialism: Self-determination vs. Directiveness

God's providence can raise the theological issue as to whether God's involvement with history is general or specific. According to Erickson (2013), the *general providence* holds that "God has general goals... with considerable variance, allowing for human choices" (369), while the *specific providence* holds the view that "God ultimately decides even the details of his plan and ensures that they eventuate as he intends" (369).

From a general sovereignty perspective, theologians cite those biblical texts where people either make choices or are faced with them. To name but a few, we have Joshua's invitation to Israel to follow God: "If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve" (Josh 24:15); or Jesus' invitation to the apostles to follow Him: "You do not want to leave too, do you?" (John 6:67).

From this perspective, the Seventh-day Adventist "Church Manual" (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2015) has a "general" approach, for instance, with regard to mate selection: "The Church recognizes that it is the prerogative of each individual member to make the final decision relative to the choice of a marriage partner" (154).

Bocaneanu (2010) remembers that premarital education has to be done without taking decisions for the couple; rather, as a respectful help. He even suggested a balanced introduction—to be said by the minister to the couple at the beginning of the counseling—that affirms respect for their self-determination as well as his responsibility toward them: "I consider [it] a privilege to be able to participate in the birth of your marriage. I'm here to help, not to preach at you. You do not need to convince me of anything" (101).

This balanced pastoral role in the process of premarital education—between self-determination and directiveness—finds its parallel in Kis and Mueller (2015) when they pointed out: “While it is the responsibility of the church to counsel its members, it is the responsibility of church members to seek the will of God regarding their future spouse” (“or other important issues.” Author’s note) (262).²²

Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter has tried to postulate the legitimacy of premarital education in a Christian context, as well as to present some epistemological and theological principles in order to build a theology of premarital education.

This objective has emerged from the necessity of progressing from a *need* for premarital education—because of pragmatic reasons, such as a “high rate of divorce” or “teaching relationship skills”—to a *value* for premarital education—with its theological ontology.

Moreover, one of the main challenges for thinking, designing, and implementing Christian premarital education programs is to associate—theologically and consistently—these programs to God’s way of relating to humankind.

As far as epistemology is concerned, the value of clarifying one’s premises has been demonstrated. In this regard, the view of Providence—and, more specifically, the ordinary providence—can be a valuable premise in a theology of premarital education, as

²² This cited sentence was an addition, compared to the original version found in literature by Kis (1990). In the first version, there was only the reference to the authority of the Church and a quotation by Ellen G. White: “The church is God’s delegated authority upon earth... The eyes of the church may be able to discern in its individual members that which the erring may not see” (White 1889, 107). It is not possible, however, to find out whether this “balancing shift” was due to a possible development in Kis’ approach, or to the co-author, Mueller, who may have added his own perspective.

it stresses the importance of planned and *ordinary* educative actions rather than a tendency to rely on discontinuous emergency pastoral actions.

These epistemological premises led this study to deepen those aspects of God where He acts as an educator; where He takes time to teach and lead; where He not only gives commands but also progressively leads people to conform to them.

A theology of premarital education, as a result, should be based on a preventive approach—as will be discussed more in-depth in chapter 3—and should incorporate the awareness of being called to be a shepherd to all church members—engaged couples included.

As the importance of premarital education is paramount for pastors, some recommendations are suggested:

1. Pastors are encouraged to develop a personal theology of premarital education;
2. Pastors are invited to be aware of their own responsibility in performing a wedding ceremony where spouses have little understanding of it, as Eyrich (2005) affirmed: “Does not God hold him responsible for a covenant executed ignorantly?” (19-20);
3. Pastors are urged to discover their own responsibility in premarital education as Eyrich (2005) pointed out: “If marriage is instituted by God, should not the pastor (...) be extremely careful and reasonably certain that the couple whom he joins understands the nature and responsibility of marriage?” (19);
4. Adventist theological institutions are strongly invited to include a dedicated section on premarital education in their own curriculum, as The Clinebell Institute suggested: “Clergy are in a unique position to make significant contributions for their

parishioners... yet educating clergy to teach premarital education is often neglected in theological education” (The Clinebell Institute 2016).²³

To conclude, if premarital education has a theological and ecclesiological status, pastors are—consequently—brought into play. Pastors’ involvement in premarital education cannot be a marginalized—or elective—pastoral duty.

This is, at least, not less than their involvement in affirming the Sabbath, as well as in educating church members to experience its joy and obedience, as the “Minister’s Handbook” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1997) contemplates for one of the pastor’s goals in preparing new members: “Surely this (visible) fruit should include Sabbathkeeping” (135).

To tell the truth, the “Minister’s Handbook” already stresses—and requires—premarital counseling: “Before marrying a couple, Adventist pastors should insist on intensive premarital counseling” (264). However, it is never enough to underline that these two ministries—premarital and pre-baptism education—should be, and can be, the pastors’ most valuable mission.

From this perspective, even premarital education—as it is for pre-baptism education—is related to pastoral care as the “Minister’s Handbook” seems to suggest: “having established a friendship with and faith in you, the couple will turn to you when problems come after the marriage” (264).

The most daunting challenge is giving premarital education the same ecclesiological status that Bible studies have in Adventism, as Cassimy (1994) already

²³ The Clinebell Institute is the service center for the Claremont School of Theology’s graduate program in pastoral counseling (Bidwell and Marshall 2006).

suggested, more than a decade ago, and never implemented, as far as we know: “The preparation of young people for marriage should be as thoroughly undertaken as the preparation for baptism” (11).²⁴

Pastors have received the mandate to work at—and with—a privileged and divinely ordained type of relationship, the marital relationship: since its earliest formation.

The challenge is to understand it.

And to enjoy it.

²⁴ Actually, Cassimy quoted an unpublished manuscript “The Pastor and Premarital Counseling” by Standish, and this impeded from verifying the original source. He also mentioned Standish’s article, having the same title and having been published in *Ministry* (Standish 1976), although that quotation was not in it.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW ON PREMARITAL EDUCATION

Introduction

Ellen G. White (1905), one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, talked about premarital education—even though she did not use this expression—penning these words:

A relation so important as marriage and so far-reaching in its results should not be entered upon hastily, without sufficient preparation... And it is a blessing wherever the marriage covenant is entered into intelligently, in the fear of God, and with due consideration for its responsibilities. (358, 356)

Scholarly works have gone far beyond this parenetical exhortation and developed theories and practices useful both for secular and religious setting (Ponzetti 2016a).

This literature review wants not only to briefly trace the historical development of these disciplines—and the current trends—but also to look at the way the Seventh-day Adventist Church has incorporated—and implemented—its cofounder’s appeal to working for any soon-to-be couple with “sufficient preparation.”

Although this literature review considers only those works published between 2009 and 2019, there will be exceptions for those works deemed essential for our research, either because they have been a landmark, or because they have been useful for the description of the historical development of theories and/or practices.

This chapter includes, first, a terminological section on how premarital education has been referred to over the years; second, the historical development of premarital education, with a special emphasis on the last decades; third, a description of the major issues involved in the work for premarital couples; four, a brief historical analysis of how Adventism has incorporated—and implemented—the state of the art on premarital education, with a special emphasis on the Italian Union.

Historical Development of the Definition

Prevention vs. Remedial

Premarital education programs are based on a preventive approach, as the prefix “pre” before “marital” would suggest. The prefix “pre” is defined as “preparatory or prerequisite to” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed., s.v. “pre-”), therefore, premarital education should be understood as any intervention done before a couple gets married to improve their interpersonal competences and strategies (L’Abate 1990).

Ponzetti (2016a) argued that the primary goals of premarital education are those educative activities such as: acquiring knowledge; exploration of attitudes, feelings, and values; development of relational skills. As such, it is something different than the remedial goal, which belongs to couple therapy.

According to Berger and Hannah (1999), these two different approaches—preventive and remedial—can be defined as follow: the *preventive approach* is “geared toward relatively functional couples who have not yet experienced significant relationship problems” (2), while *remedial intervention* is targeting couples “who have already experienced interactional problems that have comprised relationship satisfaction, relational stability, or both” (2).

This distinction—even juxtaposition —goes back to the 1980s, when scholars felt the need to define the concept of prevention as an alternative to the remedial approach (Guernsey, Stollak, and Guernsey 1971; L'Abate 1981; 1983; Mace 1983).

Ferris (1985), in his dissertation, summarized this evolution and explained the different approach to marital issues by means of a list of antinomic terms used by them. In addition to the traditional terms “education/therapy”, we could use also the following: “normal vs. abnormal”—that is, to assume to be working with average people rather than with pathological people, who have some dysfunction to be repaid; “training vs. treating”—that is, to focus on skills to be taught rather than on pathologies, which need to be assessed and treated; “growth vs. pathology”—that is, to concentrate on the positive potentials rather than on the illness; “educational vs. medical”—that is, working with a *learning couple* rather than with a *pathological couple*.

On the edge of the 1980s, Mace (1979) went along the same direction pointing out that the educative—preventive—approach had “the task of communicating knowledge... to family members in the hope that they will put it to use” (409), while the counseling—remedial—approach was “the process of using our knowledge in therapeutic interventions” (409).

This shift had to do not only with techniques but also with philosophical aspects, such as the nature of man or the nature of psychology. There were those who believed that human beings now were considered more as self-determined and autonomous in their growth, and the mental-health specialist now had less “power/authority”—as, for instance, in the medical professions—and was more like an educator (Vincent 1977).

Ferris (1985) commented this shift pointing out: “The educator uses modeling, shaping, and positive reinforcement in a context of facilitative relationship” (34).

The 1980s were also a watershed in the term used for referring to premarital programs. If up to the 1980s, the preferred definition was “premarital counseling” (Furgeson 1952; Mitman 1980; Stahmann and Hiebert 1980; Tingué 1958; Wood 1979), after this decade, the use of the term “counseling” decreased drastically in secular scholarly works—while remaining in religious context—and a new word, either “Preparation” or “Education”, became the more common term (see table 1).

Table 1. Use of the terms “counseling”, “preparation”, and “education” in the definition of premarital programs, after the 1980s

Terms	Journals		Dissertations		Books		TOT
	Religious	Secular	Religious	Secular	Religious	Secular	
Counseling	9	4	6	1	3	-	23
Preparation	2	10	1	-	5	1	19
Education	-	23	-	6	3	1	33

This shift may be understood as a result of two trends occurring just at that time. On the one hand, the word “counseling” began to entail an approach more similar to the remedial approach—from which the premarital movement wanted to differentiate—than to the educative approach. Just in that decade, in 1983, the American Counseling Association (ACA) adopted the term “counseling” in its official denomination, after more than 30 years of existence with the more generic term “guidance” (American Counseling Association 2019). Still today, in the definition of the practice of professional counseling, the ACA includes in its mission “strategies, that address wellness, personal growth, or

career development, as well as *pathology* [emphasis added]” (American Counseling Association 2004).

On the other hand, at the beginning of the same decade, in 1981, the professionals working in the premarital movement held an important national conference titled “Toward Family Wellness: Our Need for Effective Preventive Programs”—whose proceedings were published in a book edited by Mace (1983)—jointly organized by the Association of Couples for Marriage Enrichment (ACME) and the National Council of Family Relations (NCFR). As Mace himself wrote, in his prologue: “the purpose of the conference was to seek out people across the country who were experimenting with the new preventive approaches” (11). As a result, the premarital movement was ready to begin a new era, with its self-defining term.

Prevention’s Levels

Once premarital education determined its definition—by differentiating itself from other mental-health disciplines working for couples—it needed to differentiate better the term “prevention.”

Instead of looking at prevention as a single approach, L’Abate (1990) postulated a “continuum of preventive approaches” (21). He divided prevention into three different levels (L’Abate 1981; 1983; 1990), using the terms *primary*, *secondary*, and *tertiary* prevention, although it was Caplan (1964) who conceptualized them. L’Abate started from Caplan’s approach—developed in the psychiatric context and basically aimed at the reduction of the occurrence of any mental disorder—and applied it to the work with “normal” families.

L’Abate, in his most famous work on prevention, “*Building Family Competence. Primary and Secondary Prevention Strategies*” (1990), tried to classify and detail their

specific characteristics and goals: *primary prevention* is when we teach skills to couples and families with normal functional relationships; *secondary prevention* is when we work with those couples who are facing troubles or some distress; *tertiary prevention* is when the couple is already experiencing significant relational problems, crises, or distress.

It was evident that *tertiary prevention* could have lent itself to misunderstandings, as it overlapped both prevention—as traditionally understood—and therapy—as it also addressed assessed relationship problems and distresses.

In order to redefine the distinction between prevention and remediation, in the 1990s there were some works which tried to clarify this concept.

Doherty (1995) proposed a 5-level model which broadened the continuum between prevention and remediation and set clear boundaries “between education and therapy in work with families” (353).

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) proposed new categories of preventive interventions, namely *universal*, *selective*, and *indicated* interventions (Muñoz, Mrazek, and Haggerty 1996). The IOM’s committee proposed a clearer distinction between prevention and remediation, recommending the term *prevention* only to “those interventions that occur before the initial onset of a clinically diagnosable disorder” (1118); as a result, L’Abate’s *tertiary prevention* was understood as not belonging anymore to the “preventive” category.

Moreover, the Institute of Medicine’s study introduced another distinction on prevention. The question was about what kind of goals prevention should have, either the decreasing of risk or the promoting of mental health. The authors suggested that these goals are not “mutually exclusive” (Muñoz, Mrazek, and Haggerty 1996, 1121) and that

more attention should be given to the latter. According to their definition, “mental health promotion entails more than seeking freedom from disorders or ailments. It represents attempts to seek a sense of coherence, health, wellness, zest, resilience, self-efficacy, empowerment... harmony, and integrity” (1121).

More recently, Wiley and Bowers (2016) have followed the same line, citing the well-known World Health Organization’s definition of health: “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization 1946, 1), to which they have added a fourth dimension, “spirituality”, thus drawing a four-dimensional approach to wellbeing in relationship and marriage education: the physical, mental, social, and spiritual domains.²⁵

As a result of these studies, the preventive approach has become increasingly focused on well-being, and not only on reducing relational dysfunctions.

Historical Development of Premarital Education Programs

Premarital education programs have almost a century of history behind them. The study of the history of how these emerging programs developed in a scientific discipline can enable us to read—and understand—the contemporary theories, methods, and practices (Trevisani and Tuzzi 2018).

We identified four phases in the development of premarital education: the 1920s-1950s period, when premarital programs came into being in academic settings, especially universities; the 1960s-1970s period, when religious institutions began to implement

²⁵ On the history of WHO’s integrating spirituality in its definition of health, see (Larson 1996; Nagase 2012). Now, the WHO has definitely included this dimension in its definition of health (World Health Organization, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, and Melbourne 2005).

some of these principles in their marriage preparation and, at the same time, more secular programs developed as scientific disciplines; the 1980s-1990s period, when a great effort had been put on proving its effectiveness as well as on defining more accurately its preventive approach; the 2000s-2010s, when premarital education saw the rise of evidence-based approach in its literature.

What follows is a brief excursus of the aforementioned phases.

The “Marriage Education Movement” Phase: 1920s-1950s

The present attitude—and professions—on marriage education arose from several movements, among which the *Marriage-education* movement (Broderick and Schrader 1991), which flourished in America from the 1930s through the 1960s on both coasts of the country (Bailey 1987).

This movement was preceded by other movements, such as the *Home Economics* movement and the *Parent-education* movement (Broderick and Schrader 1991), both interested in families, although more from a domestic economic or parenting perspective (Darling and Cassidy 2014). Around the 1920s, these movements became increasingly widespread at a national level and, for instance, the Parent-education movement was so well established that “more than 75 major organizations were conducting parent education programs” (Darling and Cassidy 2014, 20-21).

Two major factors led to a shift from parenting and domestic economy to a broader approach to the family: the departure from the “traditional” view of marriage and the increasing marital instability.

Ponzetti (2016c) points out how Americans slowly began to depart from the “traditional” view of marriage—a mutual help for economic needs, with specific gender

roles and hierarchy power—and started to explore the companionship model based on mutual affection. This challenged the new generations and, in the late 1920s, marriage education entered the school system in order to train the younger generations.

Broderick and Schrader (1991) observed how increasing marital instability shifted the emphasis from parenting to family relations. For instance, an outcome of a 1938 conference on marriage and family, organized by the main associations working with families, was the creation of the National Conference on Family Relations (NCFR)—then renamed the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) in 1947—one of the most important and widespread American professional organizations working for families.²⁶

The marriage education movement arose from the milieu of these predecessors and started its mission in universities. The first “functional” course on marriage education was presented in 1927 by Ernest R. Groves at the University of North Carolina (Bailey 1987; Gurman and Kniskern 1991).²⁷ Groves, a sociologist and founder of the Sociology Department at Boston University, moved to the University of North Carolina to promote and teach marriage education (Ponzetti 2016c). At that time, he was the most preeminent professor willing to teach courses on marriage preparation at a college level. He later taught the first university-level course on the same subject at Duke University, in 1937,

²⁶ In 1985, NCFR approved the certified program for professionals family life educators: the Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) (Darling and Cassidy 2014).

²⁷ Other sources refer a different date: both Ferris (1985) and Ipes (1982) date back to 1924. Indeed, Groves offered in 1924 a course on family relationship at the University of Boston, but the main topic was on preparation for parenthood, so we would not consider as a premarital course *tout court* (Gurman and Kniskern 1981).

and he was, perhaps, the “key figure in the founding of the American Association of Marriage Counselors in 1942” (Gurman and Kniskern 1991, 8).²⁸

It is worth noting that in its first steps, there was a functional cooperation between those working with families from an educative approach and those from a clinical one. Wetchler (2007) rightly points out the couple therapy developed from the same cultural environment of the marriage movement, because its founders were “clergy, lawyers, home economics” (xv).

In the 1930s, yet another leading pioneer appeared, Paul Popenoe, who worked on the West Coast, in Southern California, and offered all-day workshops both to university campus and churches. Just to give some numbers: in 1937, ten years after Groves gave his first lesson in marriage education, “over 200 of America’s 672 colleges and universities offered similar courses” (Bailey 1987, 715); the University of Michigan, in 1948, enrolled 2,000 students in courses related to marriage preparation; the University of California, Berkeley, between 1939 and 1946, “offered the course for students and non-students, and registered 12,000” (716). The author summed up the rise of the marriage education movement, saying: “by the 1950s, most states had instituted some form of marriage training in their high school curricula” (716). They also added that these programs, whose content and goals spread through national magazines’ columns, became so visible that they caught the “popular imagination.”

²⁸ This association evolved, in 1978, in what today is known as the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, the largest family therapy professional organization (Capuzzi and Stauffer 2015), representing more than 50,000 marriage and family therapists in the United States, Canada and abroad (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy 2019).

The “Institutional & Professional” Phase: 1960s-1970s

During the 1960s and 1970s, religious institutions began to give more attention to marriage and marriage preparation – most likely, due to the increasing number of divorces – as in the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. where, by the end of the 1960s, preparation for marriage became mandatory for couples who wanted to marry (Ponzetti 2016c).

In the same period, in 1962, Father Calvo, a Spanish priest, created the Marriage Encounter Movement, which arrived in North-America some years later (Sayers, Kohn, and Heavey 1998).

In 1962, David and Vera Mace started offering weekends for couples, thus leading their “first marriage enrichment program for married couples” (Berger and DeMaria 1999, 393). Berger and DeMaria could not help but point out the peculiar coincidence of these two programs’ year of birth: 1962.

In the 1970s, there was as well the birth of more secular programs, compared to those with religious traditions (Berger and DeMaria 1999). There was an increasing professionalization and many programs were developed in those years, such as Relationship Enhancement (RE), Practical Application of Relationship Skills (PAIRS), Couple Communication (CC), Prepare-Enrich (PE), Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP), Gottman’s Love Lab, among others (Ponzetti 2016c).

The “Preventive” Phase: 1980s-1990s

The 1980s and 1990s were years of evaluating the effectiveness of many programs, as well as the entry into commercial enterprise for many of these programs, which increased, even more, the quest for effectiveness (Ponzetti 2016c).

It was also in those years that professionals working in the field of premarital education felt the need to address some epistemological issues and to define its status as a legitimate, scientific, and necessary discipline.

At the 1981 conference on “Family Wellness”, many of the workshops tried to address these topics and all agreed that premarital preparation was indeed necessary—no doubts about it—and the main reason was epitomized in the word “prevention” (Mace 1983). David Olson, one of the presenters, theorized his rationale in favor of prevention: relational skills are more easily learned before a relationship becomes problematic and coping becomes almost impossible; developing healthful attitudes towards marriage may help a couple to start the marriage with greater awareness; evaluating a relationship before getting married may prevent future breakdowns by either delaying the marriage or even deciding against it (Olson 1983).

The preventive approach emerged from different contexts.

Berger and DeMaria (1999) summarized the development of the preventive approach, recalling that both behaviorism—in the 1950s and 1960s—and humanism—in the 1970s—were the “counterreaction to the dominant psychoanalytic model” and both shared “a rejection of the medical-disease model, advocating instead a more optimistic, growth-oriented model” (394). This perspective viewed human beings as not only conditioned by past experiences but also—and fundamentally— “capable of gaining self-control and changing their fates” (394). The preventive approach was deeply embedded in this understanding of human nature.

Berger and Hannah (1999) explain the increasing attention in the late 1980s and early 1990s to prevention on the work with families as being due to: 1) the decline of the

traditional American family and rising of failed marriages; 2) the Clinton administration's effort to develop a national health plan; 3) the "two ground-breaking reports on prevention" (xvii) by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).

In their literature review, Jacobson and Addis (1993) raised doubt about marital therapies' efficacy and were in favor of a more promising preventive approach, as they pointed out: "the success of these brief enrichment and prevention programs, combined with the somewhat equivocal results obtained from existing therapies for distressed couples, suggests that it may be easier to prevent relationship problems than to treat them once they emerge" (86).

Along the same argument went Muñoz, Mrazek, and Haggerty (1996), in their article which summarized the major ideas and recommendations of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) report on prevention, when they stated: "it is precisely because treatment approaches are far from perfect that we have such great need to develop effective preventive approaches" (1116-1117).

In those decades, some questioned why prevention had not attained such popularity as couple and marital therapy did. Berger and Hannah (1999) summarized the reasons in three different barriers: the psychological, sociocultural, and professional barriers. The "psychological barrier" had to do with the difficulty of motivating a functioning couple to invest time and energy in preventive programs when they do not see any reason. The "sociocultural barrier" depended on the cultural changes that occurred in the 1980s and in the 1990s with the "open-market ideology" that stressed "productivity via short-term gains": with this shift "it is hard to engender support for prevention, which is, by definition,

a long-term investment” (10). They also took into account two myths: the first myth (quoting Vincent 1973)²⁹ was the myth of “naturalism”,³⁰ which “suggests that marital happiness comes naturally and effortlessly” (Berger and Hannah 1999, 10); the second myth (quoting Mace 1983) was the myth of “intermarital taboo”, which “calls for couples to deal with their dirty laundry in private” (Berger and Hannah 1999, 10).³¹ The “professional barrier” deals with the real effectiveness of a preventive approach: “the lack of unequivocal empirical evidence could be viewed, therefore, as an additional barrier to the proliferation of preventive couples programs” (11).

L'Abate (1983) explained this trend, pointing out that the *remedial* approach had more chances because it came from the medical model where “we wait until families are in serious trouble before we offer any ‘intervention’” (49). He believed that there was a prejudice in the mental health professions about the preventive approach, for at least 4 reasons: (1) *prevention doesn't pay*, because it is unlikely that one would be hired for a preventive job; (2) *prevention is not glamorous enough*, unlike therapy which may be seductive for the therapist who will feel important in dealing with dysfunctions; (3) *prevention stifles creativity*, due to its structured approach, usually even tied to a specific period of time; (4) *prevention is too limited*, for therapists who want to be more active and free in their approach with patients. He concluded by saying—even though he himself was a therapist—that “we cannot rely on established mental health professions to

²⁹ American sociologist and educator. He was past president of AAMFT.

³⁰ This definition became so famous that was cited by many authors (Bowman 1983; Mace and Mace 1975).

³¹ This concept has been found also in other works (Mace 1975; Mace and Mace 1975).

become concerned with prevention. These prejudicial attitudes toward prevention even extend to the specialized field of marriage and family therapy” (55).

The “Evidence-Based” Phase: 2000s-2010s

The beginning of the 21st century marked the rise of studies on best practices in marriage preparation and evidence-based approaches (Ponzetti 2016c). These were also decades for a greater professionalism, which is evident, for instance, in the editing of several journals’ special issues on the future—and past—of marriage education (Hawkins 2009; Larson 2004).

According to Ponzetti (2016c)—who used the term “Relationship and Marriage Education” (RME) instead of premarital education—there were clear evidences that RME was increasing in the 2000s, and backed up its statement citing several known works (Carroll and Doherty 2003; Fawcett et al. 2010; Hawkins et al. 2008; Ooms 2005; Stanley et al. 2006).

The topic of best practices has raised several challenges, as Duncan (2016) pointed out in his article for best practices in RME: “having a theory, research, and evidence base tailored to the needs of an audience, involving higher-risk couples, being offered at change points, promoting early presentation of relationship problems, and widely accessible via a variety of venues and methods” (27), and stressed the need for practitioners to put in every effort at mastering and putting together these best practices.

Hawkins (2016) pointed out the need for RME evaluation which raises several issues: first of all, the accountability towards public and private institutions that provide funds and that require evidence of effectiveness; secondly, the problem of cost-benefit analysis by donors or institutions: “the biggest challenge facing relationship educators is to develop cost-effective interventions that can reach much larger proportions of

individuals and be effective” (16); finally, it is needed by practitioners who have to be able to identify who benefits most from the specific intervention as well as which aspect of the program is most effective.

The evidence-based phase in premarital education needs further developments and it will be challenged in the near future for several reasons: its stakeholders, policymakers, and funding agencies will be demanding proof of efficacy (Vera 2013); although most programs have built sound researches, they still lack sound theoretical support as well as the fact that “researcher[s] will reasonably continue to debate the effectiveness of premarital education regimens” (Ponzetti 2016c, 10).

Some Major Works on Premarital Education

This section will trace the development of premarital education through major works—one for each decade, starting from the 1980s—as well as some minor books, when deemed valuable for their contribution.

This section will review those handbooks which were comprehensive in their perspectives—a landmark and a milestone—summarizing the state of the art, rather than just presenting a specific—the author’s—approach.

The 1980s: The Moving Apart of Preventive/Remedial Approach

In the 1980s, the most comprehensive volume on the work with families was a handbook on family therapy by Gurman and Kniskern (1991). Although it did not focus on premarital programs—rather, on family and marital therapy, as such—it devoted an important chapter on the rise of the Family-Life Education Movement and its related premarital counseling approach.

The authors acknowledged that, since the beginning, there had been a close connection between the two different approaches, adding as evidence the fact that many Universities “offer(ed) degree programs in each area within a single department” (9).

Despite its beginning, over time, these two different approaches to family issues drifted apart as family therapy gained more recognition. This can be deduced even from the second edition of this book, released a decade later (Gurman and Kniskern 1991). Although in the first edition the authors included the mentioned chapter on marital and marriage enrichment (L'Abate 1981) because “the issue involved in enrichment... touch(es) virtually every practitioner of family and marital therapy” (Gurman and Kniskern 1981, xiv), in the 1991 second edition it was removed. In giving an explanation of those missing chapters—among them, probably the L'Abate's one in marriage enrichment—they disclosed that it was because they “have not greatly expanded their spheres of influence (for family therapists)” (Gurman and Kniskern 1991, xv).

It may be said that the consolidation of family therapy as a profession—distinct from others which, once, it was similar to—had its effects on widening the gulf between the preventive and remedial approaches.

In the 1980s, a second major work was Mace's (1983) book. This edited book reflected the shift that was taking place in the services offered to families, from a remedial to a preventive approach. Its contributors' chapters were basically the reproduction of the material presented at a national conference, held in 1981, under the title “Toward Family Wellness: Our Need for Effective Preventive Programs.” This conference was organized by two well-known associations working with families from a

preventive-educative perspective: Mace's Association of Couples for Marriage Enrichment (MACE) and the National Council on Family Relationships (NCFR).

The goal of this conference was to summon those people working at that moment with the new experimented preventive approach—shifting from the more established remedial approach—to exchange their respective experiences and views.

Its participants were so enthusiastic about the possibility of being the “new pioneers” on the work with family, that they even coined a new term for this approach: “family wellness.” An approach, as David Mace—the book's editor—reported from one of the participants, that was called “the wave of the future” (Mace 1983, 11).

Mace, in his epilogue to the book, summarizing the conference's participants expectations, hoped for a time where couples would shift from the remedial attitude—paying and curing when it is too late—to the preventive approach—in order to avoid greater disasters. He concluded, almost in an ironic—but gentle—way: “we have already done this for life insurance and for dental care. The time has now come to do it for family wellness” (253).

The 1990s: The Specialization of Preventive Approach

In the 1980s, the most comprehensive work on the preventive approach in the work with families was the handbook by Berger and Hannah (1999). This book was, somehow, the counterpart of Gurman and Kniskern (1991), and the most comprehensive resource book in the mental health field—within the work with couples and families—but having in mind the leading preventive approach instead of the remedial-therapeutic one.

The similarities between the two volumes were even more striking if we look at their structures, intentionally replicated by the authors: “we decided, therefore, to assemble the major contributors... in a structured format... similar to that used by

Gurman and Kniskern” (Berger and Hannah 1999, xviii). The authors acknowledge that there is a very fine line—or even a blurred one—between the preventive and remedial approaches, which is reflected even in their book’s title: “*Preventive Approaches in Couples Therapy*”, as the words “preventive” and “therapy” are paradoxically put together. They pointed out that “we could not avoid the blurring of preventive interventions with the remedial ones” (xviii).

In the 1990s, another important work on marital prevention was the book by L'Abate (1990), with its description of the three levels of prevention: primary, secondary, and tertiary. He also discussed some myths that inhibit a real culture of prevention among married people. One of them was related to the myth that academic and professional skills would allow having a satisfactory intimate relationship. L'Abate questioned these ideas, following—and, somehow, anticipating—a concept that, at the time, was gaining significant momentum, which established that: social and emotional skills are distinct skills from the intellectual ones and the two are not necessarily correlated (Gardner 1983; Goleman 1995).

L'Abate (1990) also pointed out that many preventing programs are for parenting skills, and that marital skills have not been yet fully considered as a main goal in the work with families. Interestingly enough, in Italy, even today, the courses taught at university-level in the area of family education are only related to parenting issues, and none of them on couple development, as if we take for granted that either the couple already exists by itself or that this goal belongs to some other discipline.

The 2000s: The Missing Decade

In the 2000s, there were not any comprehensive works on premarital programs, although it can be found some chapters in other similar works, such as those on couple

therapy or counseling. For example, Wetchler (2007), in his handbook on couple therapy, devoted two chapters to primary interventions—one of them only on premarital counseling—because, as he introduced, “couple work does not deal solely with helping troubled relationships, but also supports and strengthens healthy relationships” (2).

The 2010s: The Evidence-Based Practice Phase

Ever since the last most comprehensive work on premarital education on the 1990s (Berger and Hannah 1999), we have had to wait for two decades—until the 2010s—to have another comprehensive work on premarital education (Ponzetti 2016a). Ponzetti intended to provide a comprehensive outline of evidence-based relationship and marriage education (RME) programs (Ponzetti 2016c). The aim of the book was to offer a “more reliable approach” (x) to RME programs as compared to “loose, diffuse bodies of knowledge (which sometimes is) no more than folklore, custom, or clinical insights, with little, if any, valid scientific evidence” (x).

According to Ponzetti, the evidence-based practice (EBP) approach was the answer to this goal as it “involves complex and conscientious decision making which details best practices supported in empirical” (Ponzetti 2016c, xi). In his view, RME programs, after more than five decades of growth and expansion, were now ready to join other professions grounded in an evidence-based approach, although the challenge is great as the “investigation of how RME programs work and for whom has yet to be determined” (Ponzetti 2016b, 335).

In the 2010s, there was another important comprehensive work on prevention (Vera 2013), although, strangely enough, there is no mention of prevention on marital programs. Both in its “prevention” section—dealing with reducing the occurrence of at-risk behaviors—and in the “wellness” section—dealing with promoting health and

growth—no chapter dealt with premarital programs. Even the Index’s consultation for words such as *marriage*, or similar, did not produce anything about it.

This landmark publication was an important and authoritative book, written by leading figures on this discipline, as for instance the chapter of the guidelines on prevention (Hage, Schwartz, and Murray 2013) whose two, of the three authors, have been members of the American Psychological Association (APA)’s Prevention Guidelines Work Group (American Psychological Association 2014), which developed those guidelines. But, even in the guidelines itself, we do not find the word “marriage” or similar. It may be argued that for many professionals, the psychological unit we call “couple” is taken for granted, and that its development should be reserved little—if any—attention. Or, even, that as marriage in the western world is decreasing, couples are not interested anymore in “preparing” for it.

Even its chapter’s title, “Best Practice Guidelines on Prevention: Improving the Well-Being of Individuals, Families, and Communities” (Hage, Schwartz, and Murray 2013) seems to support this hypothesis, as one word seems to be missing: “couple.” Could not it be that in the mental-health prevention approach, there are professionals who tend to think more of the larger unit—the parental couple—without giving the due attention, as well, to the smallest unit—the dyadic couple?

Some Major Issues on Premarital Education

In this section, more recent issues on premarital education will be presented.

In giving the title to each sub-section, the style will be freely inspired to Berger and DeMaria (1999). In their conclusion about the main challenges in the future of premarital programs, Berger and DeMaria wrote: “the most pressing research issue is the need to identify *which* program [emphasis added], in *which* format [emphasis added], and delivered

in *which setting* [emphasis added] and *by whom* [emphasis added], works best *for which type of couple* [emphasis added] at which risk level” (423).

The Rationale for Premarital Education – the *Why*

Is it worth acquiring a premarital education? What should be the rationale behind it?

Stanley (2001), in his historic article “Making a Case for Premarital Education”, presented a combination of both rational arguments and empirical findings as a rationale for premarital education, although the rational arguments were more prominent, as they were enough to encourage practitioners and professionals to still trust premarital education.

Collins (2007) discussed at length several reasons why a couple should do premarital counseling, such as the high rate of divorce as well as the false ideas about marriages.

The frequent reasons for premarital education are marital quality—low level of distress— and marital stability—low risk of divorce—(Fawcett, et al. 2010; Green and Miller 2013; Hawkins and Erickson 2015).

More recently, Williamson et al. (2018) advocated the importance of premarital education for later relationship help-seeking, because these programs empower couples to do whatever is possible to maintain the relationship. Preventive education may work as a “gateway” toward counseling and make “help-seeking more likely later in their relationship” (Williamson et al. 2014, 116).

The Content for Premarital Education – the *What*

Premarital education involves traditional topics, clustered basically in three areas: *skills preparation*, such as problem solving, communication, especially in a time where problems are expected to be less serious than when the couple will be married; *ideas*,

such as the fundamental concept that marriage is a process—rather than an event—and that it takes time, energy and money to make it work; *attitudes*, such as unrealistic expectations which can destroy even the most committed couple (Olson 1983).

More recently, (Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach 2000) summarized the results of scientific study on marital satisfaction in the 1990s, and listed the key topics to be included in marriage education, among which: communication, social support, conflict resolution, children, stressors, and finance.

In a recent research, Scott et al. (2013) interviewed divorced couples, who had done premarital education with the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) while they were engaged. The study sought to understand the reasons which lead to divorce, to understand whether the preparation effectively addressed the traditional topics. Couples reported the following as major factors for divorce: “lack of commitment, infidelity, and conflict/arguing” (131). As the first two factors concern more human beings’ value systems rather than behavioral skills, it seems too crucial that any theoretical discussion on premarital education programs needs to focus on topics such as “values and beliefs.” This goes along with what Scott, et al. (2013) reported: “one barrier to increasing focus on the prevention of infidelity in premarital education is that *relationship commitment* [emphasis added] and satisfaction is highest right before marriage” (40, citing Rhoades and Stanley 2009).

The Effectiveness of Premarital Education – the *How*

Two decades have passed since Kelly and Finchman (1999) demonstrated, in their review of studies on the effectiveness of premarital programs, that both short and long-term efficacy of marriage preparation has shown some improvement. Particularly, they found

“more positive and fewer negative communication skills and higher marital satisfaction”—at a 1-year follow-up (364); and “higher sexual satisfaction, less intense marital problems, and higher relationship satisfaction than control couples”—at a 3-year follow-up (365).

More recently, other studies proved the effectiveness of premarital programs (Fawcett, et al. 2010; Hawkins, et al. 2008; Markman et al. 2013). At the same time, they pointed out that, as always in research, there is an open question about correlation and causation, and that we are not sure if these results come from the training skills or if these couples, regardless of attending the program, would have had the same results: “recent evidence suggests that the consumers of prevention programs may be couples who are likely to have successful marriages even without an early marital intervention” (366). The same point has been stated by Stanley (2001) who talked of “selection effect”: “those seeking such services may be more committed to begin with than those who do not” (276).

So, at the turn of the century, it seems we have two open questions: whether these programs are really effective in the long-term (Berger and DeMaria 1999) since, as Kelly and Finchman (1999) pointed out: “there is comparatively little data on how preparation programs affect long-term marital quality” (367); and whether there is any causation between premarital education programs and outcome, because “these couples may not be at risk of marital problems” (367). Berger and DeMaria (1999) concluded their work, pointing out: “the lack of longitudinal studies and of long-term follow-ups have been major barriers to demonstrating the usefulness of these services” (424).

In the following decade, Carroll and Doherty (2003) did an extended meta-analysis of literature on the effectiveness of premarital education programs, and concluded that premarital programs had substantial gains both in the immediate and

short-term—from 6 months up to 3 years—but that any “conclusions about long-term effectiveness remain elusive” (105), due to a lack of extended follow-up studies. Stanley (2001) reported similar results for short-term positive effects up to 1 year, while finding no statistically significant improvement after 4 years. In the same decade, other important meta-analyses (Hawkins, et al. 2008) found similar results.

Williams (2007a), in his literature review on effectiveness of premarital counseling, arrived at the same conclusion asserting that: “research conducted to date generally supports the effectiveness of premarital counseling” (213).

With a more optimistic tone about effectiveness in marriage preparation, Fagan, Patterson, and Rector (2002) wrote a report titled: “Marriage and Welfare Reform: The Overwhelming Evidence that Marriage Education Works.” They enlisted peer-reviewed journals, studies, meta-analysis, and review literature, arguing that “the scientific research demonstrates that marriage programs... are effective... (even) in a variety of socioeconomic classes” (2-3).

More recently, the evaluation and effectiveness of premarital education programs have become of interest not only for the couple, but also the policymakers and founders who are interested in evidence-based outcome (American Psychological Association 2014; Fawcett, et al. 2010; Hawkins and Erickson 2015; Hawkins, Higginbotham, and Hatch 2016) . From a different perspective, Hammersley (2005) has raised some questions—and doubts—as to the real effectiveness of the search for the “best program”, with the “best long-term” outcomes, and for the “most heterogeneous population.” This will remain an open question and a challenge to the future of premarital education —and to the research in social science at large.

The Professionals for Premarital Education – by *Whom*

If we looked at the history of premarital education until the present, we would find that the religious context has been where we have had most of the premarital programs and primarily done by clergy (Halley, et al. 2011; Murray 2005; Stahmann and Hiebert 1997; Stanley et al. 2001; Williams 2007a; Wilmoth et al. 2010).³²

The issue of clergy's preparation was dealt with in the 2000s (Buikema 2001; see also, Wilmoth and Fournier 2009). Buikema, in his dissertation on the preparation of clergy in premarital counseling, concluded his literature review saying: "researchers largely have overlooked the preparation of pastors, the primary providers of premarital counseling" (35). According to Malewo (2002), clergy should increase ever more their role in marriage preparation, for two reasons: first of all, they are in the front line on providing marriage counseling; secondly, they are—for their role in the parish—intrinsically marriage educators.

Stanley, et al. (2001) found that clergy and lay leaders were as effective as university-trained staff in running premarital education programs. This outcome addresses a previous doubt as to clergy involvement. Olson (1983) believed there should be more investment in training lay couples—confirmed also by the mentioned research—because both professionals and clergy will not easily provide the education. He argued that the professionals will not offer it because they are not interested, while clergy, because of the shortage of time. Other studies (Wilmoth and Smyser 2010) discovered that training clergy can increase their perception of effectiveness.

³² It could be mentioned that two of the pioneers on family life education were religious ministers: the sociologists Ernest R. Groves and David Mace (Rubin and Settles 2012). Another pioneer, Norman H. Wright, was a Christian leader in marriage counseling and developed a specific program for conservative Christian groups (Wright 1992).

The religious factor seems to be an intrinsic positive factor in marriage, as data shows that, related to the Italian context, religious marriages have a lower level of separations and are more stable over time compared to civil marriages (Istat 2016).

The Setting for Premarital Education – the *Where*

As it has been already stated, most premarital education has been offered by clergy in a religious context. We will now present research addressing premarital counseling given by clergy.³³

Wilmoth and Smyser (2012) conducted a national survey (N = 793) among mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations. They investigated the attitude of clergy toward marriage preparation, timing and dosage, format, instruments and assessments, follow-up, and other factors. This kind of research aimed to implement empirical findings in religious settings and increase the effectiveness of premarital education in this specific setting. As the authors stated: “although clergy seems to be providing preparation that helps couples form more stable and satisfying marriages, this study finds room for improvement” (81).

Schumm et al. (2010) have addressed the mandatory aspect of premarital education in religious settings and argued that it has a negative outcome and counterproductive effects: “lower ratings for mandated counseling may have reflected not only client resistance or disappointment with low-quality counseling but also counselor resistance or resentment” (12).

The Targeted Couples for Premarital Education – for *Whom*

The dissemination of premarital educative programs to couples has become increasingly relevant (Duncan 2018).

³³ For premarital education programs in community settings, see Doherty and Anderson (2004).

Many efforts have been made on potential couples profiling (Tambling and Glebova 2013). As a result, several studies started to investigate the personal traits associated with the selection of a specific type of marriage preparation (Duncan, Larson, and McAllister 2014).

Other studies (Sullivan and Anderson 2002) suggest that for many engaged couples, the more important motivation for attending a premarital education program is not only the program's content but also the characteristic of the leader. A similar research (Sullivan et al. 2004) has found that among several factors, the strongest was whether someone recommended counseling to them, thus implying the strategic role of community leaders. Besides those factors, Blair and Cordova (2009) have found commitment to be a strong predictor.

What is more difficult is to plan specific strategies to recruit high-risk couples (Sullivan and Anderson 2002). On the other hand, Carroll and Doherty (2003), in their meta-analysis, suggested that although the programs reached couples who were not necessarily at greater risk for marital problems or even divorce, still it was worth it because "almost every couple can be considered to be at some degree of risk of divorce" (115), due to the 40-50% likelihood of divorce. Hawkins (2018) advocates even earlier recruitment, especially among adolescents and young adults, before they enter a more stable relationship.

From an interethnic and interreligious perspective, an increasing number of studies have been done to disseminate the benefits of premarital education to couples in contexts other than the traditional Christian Western society, for example: (1) in other religions, such as Islam (Killawi et al. 2018; Nadir 2012; Samad, Kenedi, and Mustaqim 2016); (2) in other ethnic groups, such as in African countries (Moeti, Koloi-Keaikitse, and Mokgolodi 2017; Opoku-Adjei 2018; Tuffour 2017), in Iran (Parhizgar et al. 2017), and in Turkey

(Yilmaz and Kalkan 2010);³⁴ (3) in other socioeconomic conditions, such as low-income couples (Hawkins and Erickson 2015); (4) even in second-marriage couples (Doss et al. 2009; Higginbotham, Miller, and Niehuis 2009).

It can be said, along with Hawkins, Higginbotham, and Hatch (2016), that: “A generation of research now is documenting the ability of social marketing campaigns to impact attitudes and behavior” (22).

Premarital Educations Program’s Differences – the *Which*

Premarital programs can be generally clustered in: *skill-based programs*, with the goal of teaching learning skills centered on communication, conflict resolution and problem-solving; *premarital inventories*, with the goal of assessing the couple’s relationship, giving an in-depth feedback highlighting their strength and growth areas, and facilitating dialogue between the couple; *other church-setting programs*, based more on mentoring or experiential weekends (Olson 1983; Williams 2007a; 2007b).

Premarital programs can be delivered in varied format—online assessments, group workshops, individual couples counseling, retreats, etc.—and by different types of educators—clergy, professionals, trained lay leaders—and it seems that they can “be equally effective in achieving a positive result” (Carroll and Doherty 2003, 115; McAllister, Duncan, and Hawkins 2012; see also, Stanley 2001). They can be delivered in self-report format (Madison and Madison 2013)—where the couple takes pre-marriage inventories by themselves—or in a self-directed training program (Hilpert et al. 2016)—where the couple takes the training by watching a video series.

³⁴ Emerging studies have been doing even in Canada (Green and Miller 2013).

Carroll and Doherty (2003) recognized, in their meta-analysis, that it is difficult to make any comparison between different programs of premarital education as they use neither the same dependent variables nor measures to assess their effectiveness.

The diversity of programs can be seen as useful because their different approaches can broaden the spectrum of attending couples, as Duncan and his colleagues, at Brigham Young University, pointed out (Childs 2009; see also, Childs and Duncan 2012; Duncan, Childs, and Larson 2010).

There are variations as to: how far in advance participants take the program (from 4 to 12 months prior the marriage); how many hours (from 6 hours to 24 hours of teaching sessions); how many sessions (from four to nine); delivery modality (couple session, group session, weekend session) (Futris et al. 2011). In their study, Futris et al. explored whether, and how, a different format of delivery—conjoint couple sessions vs. 1-day group sessions—of the program PREPARE (Olson, Olson, and Larson 2012) would influence its effectiveness with couples. They found out, confirming previous research, that either format: “may be equally effective and beneficial in helping engaged couples learn about skills that can enhance the quality of their relationship” (Futris, et al. 2011, 83).

A transversal topic to all premarital educative programs is the working alliance between the practitioner and the couple. As it is in psychotherapy, as well as in premarital programs, the role of a leader can influence the outcome of the educative process: “Leaders’ ability to foster collaborative and purposeful alliances with couples was as important as the specific method employed” (Owen et al. 2011, 55).

Premarital Education in Adventist Context: Where We Stand

The Seventh-day Adventist Church believes, as stated in its Fundamental Beliefs (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2015), that marriage has been “divinely established” (170). It believes, as well, that the time during which a couple is thinking about marriage should be recognized as a “preparatory period” (153) including “premarital pastoral counseling” (154).

The *Minister’s Handbook* (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1997) reaffirms this principle, stating: “Before marrying a couple, Adventist pastors should insist on intensive premarital counseling. Such counseling may require weekly meetings and homework assignments over several weeks prior to the wedding” (264).

How has the Seventh-day Adventist Church accomplished its goal on premarital education? The following section will try to trace its historical development.

A Brief Historical Development in Adventism

Articles

Ministry, the denominational official journal for Adventist pastors, published its first article on premarital education in the 1930s and, from that time on, others have been sparingly published until the late 1970s.

The first article was written by Votaw (1936) and the author’s main thesis was on the need to “spend at least half an hour with the prospective bride and groom” (10) on “proper education” consisting of Biblical teaching on marriage, commitment, and morals.

Reeves (1955) wrote the second article. The author strongly believed in the necessity of premarital education. Yet, at the same time, he would depend on the voluntary participation of the couple in this “necessary” program, based on, what modern

psychology would call, today, the “therapeutic alliance” (Ardito and Rabellino 2011). His approach was essentially parenetical and non-directive.

Standish (1976) was the third article. Similar to the previous two authors, Standish strongly emphasized the necessity for a “thorough preparation” and the importance of spending “considerable time” with the couple”, although he did not give any guidelines as to the number of meetings. He was, somehow, more detailed than the previous authors and gave “ten” guidelines—the number being more of an evocative hint rather than empirical data—for this preparation.

Ferris (1985), whose dissertation dedicated a section to these first developments, noticed that these three articles were published 20 years apart and concluded: “For a journal directed to pastors in the Adventist Church, premarital preparation has evidently had low reader and editorial priority” (21-22).

Ipes (1982) came to a similar conclusion, some years earlier, when he stated: “Perhaps the silence on the subject and lack of interest given to counseling (in print) is the strongest testimony of the attitude that has existed in the past” (10), namely, a skeptical attitude about counseling. The author believed that this sparse attention to counseling—and to marital counseling—was due to a kind of dualism in Adventism related to pastoral duties; specifically, that the evangelistic role is more important—and somehow even the only one—than pastoral counseling. This dualism came from the Adventists’ theological self-understanding of their status as the Remnant Church, which must prepare people for Jesus’ Second Coming, and no other task—including pastoral counseling—must distract pastors from teaching the Scriptures to church members.

Dissertations

Adventist scientific studies on premarital education appeared in the 1980s.³⁵

Ipes (1982) was the first dissertation on this subject, titled “A descriptive study of premarital counseling and its practice by ministers in the Ohio and Potomac Conferences of Seventh-day Adventists”, and was undertaken in a non-Seventh-day Adventist institution: the Lancaster Theological Seminary (Pennsylvania, PA).

Ipes was the director of the Christian Counseling & Educational Center in Newburgh (IN), for over 30 years, where he specialized in marriage and family therapy as well as sexual dysfunctions, and family life education (National Council on Family Relations Report 1990).

His study provided empirical data as to “how much premarital counseling is being done by Seventh-day Adventist ministers” (2). He ascertained that although a significant majority of the pastors interviewed believed in premarital counseling (94%) and required “some type of premarital counseling before conducting a wedding” (84%), only a small minority (18%) said “they felt comfortable doing premarital counseling” (v), or even preached about premarital and marriage topics recently (12%). Among other reasons authors cited was a lack of specific training (87%) and the uncertainty about the actual effectiveness of premarital counseling.

³⁵ Actually, there was a Master’s project in the 1970s (Garcia-Marenko 1978). As this was neither a PhD nor a DMin dissertation, it has not been included in this historic excursus. The author developed a premarital preparation curriculum for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, although, as the author reported, it had to be “field tested and revised appropriately” (85).

Ipes' work was a milestone at the time and inspired many other similar researchers (Brown 1993; Buikema 2001; Stevens 1986; Zhigankova 2008).³⁶

Ipes (1982) concluded, asserting: "The time has come, because of the sociological and theological demands placed upon the Adventist Church, to evaluate the quality and emphasis placed on important areas of pastoral ministry. Premarital counseling is one of those important areas" (15).

Ferris (1985) was the second important doctoral work on premarital preparation in the Seventh-day Adventist Church,³⁷ a dissertation undertaken at Andrews University, the denomination's flagship institution. He remained a pastor, and it seems he never practiced in his specialization, neither as a scholar nor as an administrator.

Ferris devoted a large section on the development of premarital programs in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, more thorough and detailed than Ipes; after all, it could not be otherwise, as this was the first denominational attempt to enter the academic area with a doctoral dissertation on premarital preparation and Adventism in the United States.

The author's conclusion about his historical excursus on premarital preparation by Adventists was not very triumphant: "Despite the considerable effort put into this project and the giant step forward it takes from Votaw (1936), there is, as yet, no premarital preparation material statistically validated within the United States Adventist membership" (Ferris 1985, 26).

³⁶ Apart from Ferris (1985), who did not even mention Ipes's study, although they were contemporaries.

³⁷ The works of Howse (1982) and Stevens (1986) were not object of this research, as they addressed fundamentally programs for noncoupled teenagers and young adults, a type of program that Carroll and Doherty (2003) would have termed: "classroom-oriented forms of marriage preparation" (106).

He advocated a scientific investigation of the Adventist premarital programs used in those days: “useful research project would be... an evaluation of the premarital manuals prepared by Kit Watts for the General Conference Home and Family Service.... to include Adventist Engaged Encounter” (123).³⁸

Brown (1993) was the third important doctoral work on premarital preparation in Seventh-day Adventist Church, a dissertation also undertaken at Andrews University. He always worked in the area of family life education, although he performed administrative roles as well, with a final roles as the Associate Secretary of the General Conference’s Ministerial Association as well as the associate editor of *Ministry* magazine (McChesney 2016).

Brown’s research was the empirical answer to the work of Ipes (1982) and to his quest for more empirical studies in Adventist premarital programs³⁹. He evaluated the Adventist Engaged Encounter (AEE), the “largest premarital intervention program in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination” (Brown 1993, 9), delimitating the sample to those couples who had some relationship to Andrews University.

Brown’s work was the last Ph.D./Ed.D dissertation on premarital education, closing the productive 1970s and 1980s, and after that, the prolific School of Education has not produced anything else about premarital programs ever since. In the following

³⁸ Ferris (1985) did not refer to the updated version of this curriculum, published in 1985, because, although released on February, some months before Ferris’ dissertation—which occurred on October—most likely, it was too late to integrate it in his work.

³⁹ It should be noted that in the decades 1980s and 1990s the School of Education at Andrews University (MI), produced excelled PhD dissertations in premarital education, even though none of the works cited the previous ones, except for Brown (1993) who cited all the previous works. Stevens (1986) did not cited Howse (1982), whose work was similar to his, nor Ferris (1985); and this latter did not cite Howse (1982). It seems unusual that researchers working in the same Department have worked almost independently from each other.

decades, there were other DMin dissertations (Cassimy 1994; Liversidge 2019; Opoku-Adjei 2018; Tuffour 2017; Zhigankova 2008), but they did not add other theoretical developments with respect to the previous works and were more concentrated on the content of premarital education rather than on the process and rationale of premarital education in a religious context.

As to the reasons for this interruption, Jeffrey O. Brown (personal communication, August 1, 2019) has put forward a credible hypothesis. After he graduated, the department of Religious Education (where many of the premarital counseling dissertations came from) was moved from the School of Education to the Theological Seminary. Since premarital education is largely conducted by pastors, it was natural that this type of studies was done at the Seminary. Still, some questions remain open: why the School of Education was no longer interested in this research; and why the Theological Seminary did not conduct further research on this topic at a Ph.D. level, but only as part of a DMin project. It would be advisable to reconsider—and to reverse—this trend.

Premarital Education Programs

The Seventh-day Adventist Church started preparing material for premarital education in the late 1920s, and it was not behind the “zeitgeist” in the Marriage Education Movement. If we think that the first secular course on marriage education was presented in 1927 by Ernest R. Groves, at the University of North Carolina, it could be a surprise to know that the Church’s first pamphlet on the same topic was published just one year later.

The book *Maker of the Home* (Spalding 1928), written by A. W. Spalding, and produced by the General Conference Home Commission,⁴⁰ was the beginning of material on premarital topics for young people: “this appears to be the initial significant Adventist effort at premarital preparation or family-life education” (Ferris 1985, 22).

This book was intended not only for parents on parenting, but also for “young men and young women approaching the age of courtship and marriage” (Spalding 1928, 5). In this regard, it had some chapters on preparation for marriage, dealing basically with the goal of inculcating in young people: “high ideals in thought and conduct” (94). Spalding pointed out that, as training and preparation are required for most professions, so this should be for marriage because he did not consider the common belief in “the course of nature” to be a valid foundation for making “happy marriages and successful husbands and wives” (93). The second reprint, in 1945, had in its preface “the Author” as a signature—instead of “The Home Commission”, which appeared in the 1928 first printing—because during this period, the Commission had been attached to the Department of Education, in 1941 (Oliver and Oliver 2019b).

Spalding also developed an experimental course in Social Science (Spalding 1937), which include a topic in preparation on marriage and parenthood.⁴¹

⁴⁰ This *Home Commission* was created on October 8, 1919 by the General Conference, and marks the beginning of an “organized ministry to families in the Seventh-day Adventist Church” (Oliver and Oliver 2019b, v). Although created in 1919, the Home Commission became operative some year later, in 1922, with Arthur W. Spalding as its secretary (Schwarz 1979) and functioned until 1941, when it was attached to the Department of Education (Oliver and Oliver 2019b).

⁴¹ The outline was followed, one year later, by the syllabus (Spalding 1938) whose goals were: (1) to differentiate wedding—a isolated event on time—from marriage—a journey of a life, which requires hard work, self-understanding; (2) the marital preparation deals more with ideals and goals—from which relational skills would have been derived—rather than with techniques—such as, communication, conflict management, or finances. He quoted well-known specialists and pioneers of that time on family topics, such as Paul Popenoe and Ernest R. Groves, even though much of the content had been inspired by his *Maker of the Home*.

As to how the Church acknowledged this effort, Ferris (1985) pointed out that: “some tension within the church leadership seems obvious, since the material on premarital preparation prepared by the Home Commission director was not published in the *Ministry* despite a twenty-year span in development time” (22).

In the late 1970s, the Seventh-day Adventist Church adopted two premarital programs: one was an independent ministry while the other was the institutional effort by the Church.

Adventist Engaged Encounter was a program—still running today at Andrews University—adapted from the program *Engaged Encounter*, the Catholic premarital program created by Father Calvo and derived from the well-known Marriage Encounter for married couples (Rhoderick 1999). Don and Sue Murray started the Adventist faith expression of this program at Andrews University in 1981 (Frost 1981; Murray and Murray 1986; Murray 2009). Although it is not a traditional premarital program, its topics allow engaged couples to go through typical premarital sessions.

The *Marriage Education; A Course for Engaged Couples* (Watts 1979a) and its companion *Togetherness, Oneness, Joy: A Course for Engaged Couples* (Watts 1979b) was the standard curriculum, from the 1980s onwards, in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and, according to Ferris (1985), it was “[t]he most extensive effort toward systematic premarital preparation by the Adventist Church [to have] occurred toward the end of the 1970s” (25). The project started with the General Conference’s Home and Family Service and was led by Ron and Karen Flowers. In the 1980s, there was an updated version of this curriculum, edited by Ron Flowers and Kitt Watts: *Preparing for Marriage* (Flowers and Watts 1985a) and *Togetherness, Oneness, Joy* (Flowers and Watts 1985b).⁴²

⁴² See also Cassimy (1994) for a detailed history of this curriculum.

The questionnaire *Prepare-Enrich* (Olson, Olson, and Larson 2012) was introduced in Adventism by Pat Morrison, a campus chaplain at Andrews University, as Cassimy (1994) reported in his thesis, although no reference of it was given. Today, *Prepare-Enrich* is the official premarital education program endorsed by the Department of Family Ministries at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and promoted by Willie and Elaine Oliver, the current worldwide Family Ministries directors.

The Historic Development in the Italian Union

The Italian Union has never had a systematic approach to premarital education until the second half of the 2010s, and this could be explained as an influence by the larger socio-cultural context where it operated.

For instance, to date, in Italy, in (almost) all the courses on pedagogy of family at university level, the focus is on parenting—that is, the parental couple—and not on relationship—that is, the dyadic couple. Along this approach is Catarsi (2006) who, commenting on the future of the pedagogy of family in Italy, wrote: “The key factor in the field of family education should be identified in the «education» of parents” (16; see also, Pati 2018). It could be said that in Italy it is still true what Clark E. Vincent said four decades ago in the American context: “there are MA and PhD level programs in child development in almost every major university; but not always even a single course on ‘marriage preparation’.” (Vincent 1977, 5).

Nevertheless, the Italian Union—through the Italian Adventist Publishing House “Edizioni A.D.V.”—took some steps in helping pastors, parents, and young people to enter the marriage with that “sufficient preparation” (White 1905, 358). Ellen G. White talked about, and it (the Union) produced much written material on marriage education.

That literature was not intended to be a formal training for engaged couples, but rather as educational material to inform young people, parents, and educators about marriage. At least, it was a starting point.

Books

In the 1960s, the Italian Union published a valuable multivolume work by Maurice Tièche on family topics, with a general title *A tu per tu...* [Face to face...], and a specific second title for each volume, according to the specific topic it was addressing (Tièche 1963a; 1963b; 1963c; 1963d; 1963e; 1963f; 1963g; 1963h).⁴³ The publishers' preface to the second volume, titled *Coi problemi del matrimonio* [On the marriage problems] (Tièche 1963d), explained that it dealt exclusively with the formation of the married couple, because many young people “as they take this sacred step, [...] are not aware at all of what they are going to do” (3). Its content comprised topics such as love, the time of engagement, preparing for marriage, and the married life.

It is worth noting that the publishers' preface to the sixth volume, titled *Coi problemi coniugali* [On conjugal problems] (Tièche 1963d), pointed out that it was exclusively about marital problems, and not on parenting which would have been addressed in the third, fourth, and fifth volumes (Tièche 1963a; 1963b; 1963e).

⁴³ Maurice Tièche (1895-1959) was a well-known Adventist French psychologist and teacher, founder of the primary school in Collonges-sous-Salève (France), attached to the Adventist University of France “Campus Adventiste du Saleve.” In his life, he was influenced by two well-known pedagogists: Eduardo Claparède—with whom he graduated in psychology (Rimoldi 1970)—and Jean Piaget—with whom he was an assistant researcher (Delameillieure).

We stressed this point because, at least in the 1960s, the Italian Union had a clear understanding that dealing with family topics was not limited to parental issues and that the dyadic couple existed before, and beyond, the parental couple.

In the 1970s, the Italian Union made a more prolific effort in marriage education, when they published a series titled *Educare* [To educate], directed by the then Publishing House's director, Ismaele Rimoldi (Rimoldi 1975), which comprised ten books (Beach 1973; Shryock 1969; 1970; 1973; Tièche 1970a; 1970b; 1974-75; White 1975).

Tièche, in his books, and especially in his multivolume work on parenting (Tièche 1974-75), devoted large sections to marriage education.

One of the other authors, Harold E. Shryock, became known for his appreciated books, *Divenire uomo* [On becoming man] (Shryock 1951a) and *Divenire donna* [On becoming woman] (Shryock 1951b), which shaped hundreds of young Italians' lives—including the author of this work—and provided useful information on marriage.⁴⁴

The late 1980s saw the publishing of another important book for marriage education, namely the work by Georges Vandenvelde (1920-1997), an Adventist French administrator and educator. In the 1990s, his wide-read book *Lui, lei e l'amore* [He, she, and love] (Vandenvelde 1988), became a classic for any young person who wanted to know more about love and marriage. This book should have been the first of a series on marriage—probably, as it was with the *Educare* series—as the publishers advertised in the official Adventist magazine *Il Messaggero* (Editorial Board 1988). In the end, it

⁴⁴ Harold E. Shryock (1907-2004) was an well-known American international educator and administrator, known for being one of the former Deans of the Medical School at Loma Linda University (Adventist Review News 2004).

seems they never achieved that goal and “*Lui, lei e l’amore*” remained the only work on marriage, not only in the 1980s but also up to this day.⁴⁵

As to the *Planbook*—the annual publication by the General Conference Family Ministries department—from this literature review, it seems that nothing has been translated till the late 2010s, when the researcher—as the newly elected director of the Family Ministries department—started translating and publishing the *Planbook*, from the 2016 edition on.

Articles

Il Messaggero [The Messenger], the denominational official magazine for the Italian Adventist Church, has been—until today—the main instrument to educate Italian church members, even in family matters. Throughout the years, the articles published on family topics have been classified under three main subtopics: marriage preparation, marriage life, and parenting. The following literature review will try to analyze any trend, since the 1970s.

In the 1970s, the first article on marriage preparation was the one by Fontanella (1972), although it dealt exclusively with mixed marriages’ dangers. In that decade, there were several articles on marriage preparation: as many as 5, out of 14 articles on family topics (Fontanella 1972; Lucciardi 1979; Rizzo 1979a; 1979b; White [1969] 1974). The most frequent topics addressed were premarital sex, the nature of marriage, and the difference between falling in love and love. Moreover, Lucciardi (1979) hoped for a careful preparation of young people for married life, because “the prevention field must absorb the maximum of our energies” (29).

⁴⁵ G. Pispisa (personal communication, August 10, 2019), the then Publishing House’s director, stated that the series never started because of a change in the editorial strategy.

Such an unusual figures of articles on marriage preparation—the highest, after the 2000s—can be explained by the fact that 1979 was designated by the General Conference as the Youth-Family Life Year (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1976).⁴⁶ Through *Il Messaggero*'s pages, the Euro-Africa Division (EUD) Youth Director, Nino Bulzis, promoted this initiative in the EUD's territories, encouraging the organization of “seminars on family life” (Bulzis 1979, 11) with the principal targets being young people.

In the 1980s, we had many articles on family topics: 9 articles, out of 14, were either on marriage preparation (N=4) (Ferraro 1982; Rizzo 1981; Vacca 1983a; 1983b) or on marriage life (N=5), although often with some emphasis on preparation.

Once again, through *Il Messaggero*'s pages, the EUD's youth director, Pietro Copiz, stressed out the need for “a widespread premarital educational program which should not be limited to a «smattering», just before marriage” (Copiz 1988, 13). Moreover, he mentioned that every Union in the EUD received a useful material titled “Preparing for Marriage”—he was referring to the updated official curriculum in the Seventh-day Adventist Church for marriage preparation (Flowers and Watts 1985a; 1985b)—hoping that every Union would have translated it, as some Unions already had done. Even though the Italian Union was aware of this program, the Italian version was only released a decade later, in 1997 (Flowers and Watts [1985] 1997). One probable explanation is that, as the Italian Union preferred to translate from French rather than from English—mainly because the EUD official language was French, which was more known by the Italian leadership—we had to wait for the French edition before the Italian

⁴⁶ The GC's vote did not mention the Home and Family Service (HFS), just organized the previous year, at the General Conference Session held in Vienna, Austria in 1975 (Oliver and Oliver 2019b) but only the Youth Department.

version could have been released, as it is also specified in the Italian colophon: “Italian translation from French” (Flowers and Watts [1985] 1991, 2).

In the 1990s, we had an escalation of articles on family topics, although the majority were on parenting and the remaining—8 articles, out of 20—were on marriage life. Only two of these eight articles dealt with marriage preparation: the first article was written by the Italian Union President, Vincenzo Mazza (Mazza 1996), presenting the soon-to-be-published manual on marriage preparation, which would have been released the following year, in 1997—as already discussed in the previous paragraph; the second one dealt with mixed marriage (Fantoni 1999). Even though the special issue of *Il Messaggero*, of November 1994, was on family topics, none of the six articles dealt with marriage preparation.

The 2000s kept the trend of the previous decades, and 12 articles, out of 22, addressed topics on marriage: as many as 7, out of the 13 on marriage subtopics, dealt with marriage preparation and the nature of love in marriage (Altin 2009a; 2009b; Iannò 2005; 2009; Marrazzo 2006; Notarbartolo 2002; Rimoldi 2007). As it was with the aforementioned special issue of *Il Messaggero*, so the one published in this decade, in September 2009, had just a small number of articles on marriage preparation (Altin 2009a; Iannò 2009).

The 2010s have been a fruitful decade, with 26 articles on family topics, 12 of which on marriage. Nevertheless, this decade did not produce so much on marriage preparation, apart from the article presenting Prepare-Enrich to the Italian Church (Editorial Board 2016). *Il Messaggero* interviewed Willie and Elaine Oliver, directors of the Department of Family Ministries at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists,

who trained all the pastoral couples, together with the author of this research, as director of the Department of Family Ministries at the Italian Union.

It should be noted that the Italian Union, as stated at the beginning of this paragraph, was influenced by the larger European socio-cultural context on marriage topics and intended its mission to focus primarily on training parents. Even a simple statistical analysis reveals that when the Italian Union thinks of family topics, it thinks primarily in terms of parents—to be trained—rather than of couples—to be formed and sustained (see figure 1).

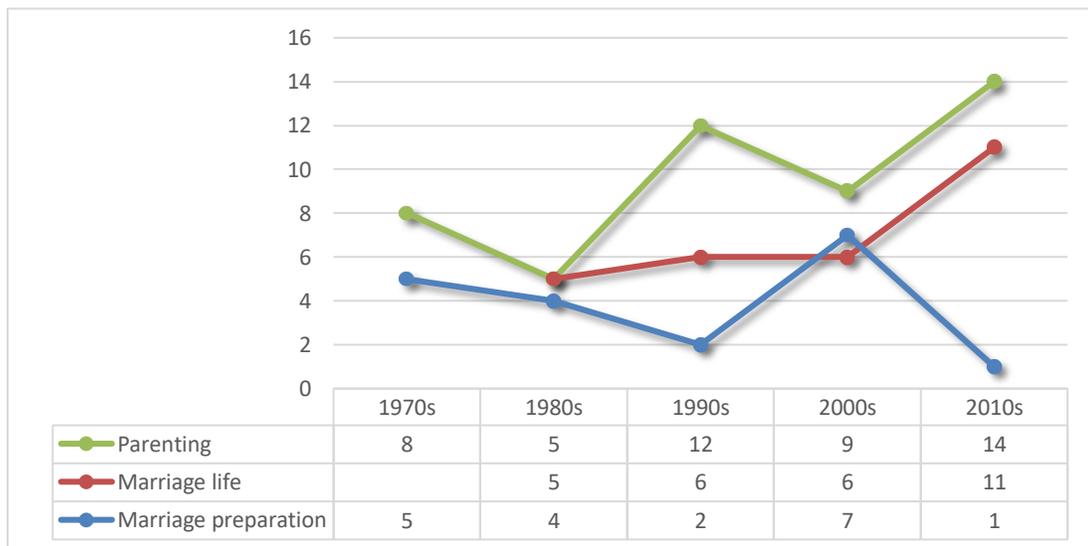


Figure 1. Articles on marriage preparation in the Italian Union, compared to those on marriage life and parenting, since the 1970s

It seems that family is not thought of as a dyadic unit *plus* children, rather as an intergenerational system, even though the Protestant view of marriage—unlike the Catholic one—clearly distinguishes the marital relationship from procreation (Iannò 2007). Unlike the Catholic Church, which requires premarital preparation before marriage (Amevor 2009;

Italian Episcopal Conference 2012), the Italian Adventist Church never required any formal training, leaving to the pastor's discretion the initiative on whether to prepare the couple.

Theses

From this review, the Italian Adventist University "Villa Aurora" in Florence did not produce any theses on premarital preparation. There were works on family topics (Faedda 2010; La Montanara 2007; 2014; Mangiaracina 2005; Nyerges 2005; 2006; Zagara 2017) but none of them on premarital education.⁴⁷

Premarital Education Programs

As to the implementation of programs on premarital education, it seems that the Italian Union has done very little, until very recently.

In the 1980s, the Italian Union sent five couples to the EUD training in Family Life, held at the Adventist Seminary of Collonges-sous-Saleve (France) and led by the Holbrooks,⁴⁸ together with the Flowers (Marrazzo and Marrazzo 1981). The participating couples were so enthusiastic that they intended to pass the acquired principles on to other couples. Unfortunately, apart from an article published the following year on marriage preparation (Ferraro 1982), nothing else appeared as an outcome of that training. Apart from the mentioned educational literature, the Italian Union did not have any other institutional and systematic approach to premarital education.

⁴⁷ In the EUD, example of theses/dissertation on premarital education can be found at the Adventist Seminary of Collonges-sous-Saleve (France), where in the 1980s and, more recently, in the 2010s, two theses have been produced on premarital education (Herimanitra 1981; Monder 2011).

⁴⁸ Delmer and Betty Holbrook were the directors of the "Home and Family Service" (HFS), the Family Ministries' precursor, organized at the General Conference Session held in Vienna, Austria in 1975 (Oliver and Oliver 2019a).

In the 1990s, when the Italian Union published the Italian translation of the official curriculum for marriage preparation (Flowers and Watts [1985] 1997), it seems that nothing else was done: there is no mention in the minutes of meetings of the Executive Committee, nor do the former leaders remember anything about it (from personal communication). The author himself, having been employed as a minister by the Italian Union in 1991, does not remember any formal training based on that manual, nor how he obtained a copy of it.⁴⁹

We would need to arrive at the 2010s—precisely, in September 2016—to encounter the first formal training in premarital education in the Italian Union, held at the Italian Adventist University “Villa Aurora” in Florence. This training took place under the leadership of Willie and Elaine Oliver, directors of the Department of Family Ministries at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, who trained all the pastoral couples, together with the author of this research, as director of the Department of Family Ministries at the Italian Union (Editorial Board 2016).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ As for instance, the Franco-Belgian Union and French-Italian Swiss Conference presented their own manual of marriage preparation, edited by Roberto Badenas, the former EUD director of the Department of Family Ministries (Family Ministries Department of Euro-African Division, Franco-Belgian Union, and Fédération de la Suisse Romande et du Tessin 2006) during a three-day pastoral retreat on family ministry (Monder 2011).

⁵⁰ In March 2013, there was a pre-training with the pastors living in Florence and the surrounding areas, presented by the Olivers, together with Pastor Lucio Altin—the former director of the Department of Family Ministries at the Italian Union. However, as the Italian translation of Prepare-Enrich was not yet ready, those pastors never started administering it and they had to wait for the 2016 training to truly master the program.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The literature reviewed has shown a slow—but steady—progress on marriage preparation, even though in the Italian Union—and Italy, at large—we have been slightly trailing behind the United States’ progress.

Special emphasis can be placed on the need for pastors to have an increased awareness—and readiness—for: (1) the pastor’s role as marriage educator; (2) marital preparation in our complex world. This is the goal of a sound preventive approach, as Markman et al. (2004) pointed out: “we need to learn more about how to get these interventions into the hands of people who can put them to use” (504). In other words, we need to improve our dissemination efforts.

Marriage: from *Preparation* to “*Postparation*”

The preventive approach has also another challenge. Marriage preparation has developed over the years, comprising now not only the time *before* marriage but also the time *after* marriage.

As an example, we may cite Olson’s protocol which has both the Prepare-Enrich questionnaire—for couples who are preparing for marriage—and the Couple Checkup—for married couples who are interested in enhancing their relationship. Another example is taken from the *Encounter Movement*, which has both the *Engaged Encounter Weekend*—for engaged couples who are preparing for marriage—and the *Marriage Encounter Weekend*—for married couples who want to enrich their relationship.

So, if marriage preparation has developed over the years, spanning across the apical event—the marriage ceremony—we may even need to create a new word to differentiate the two phases. The former phase—what happens *before*—is rightly called

“*preparation*”, an English word which goes back to Latin and compound of two parts: *Pre*, meaning “before” and *Parare*, meaning “to supply or furnish”, so “in essence, *prepare* means to make it before” (Shapiro 2008, 6). As a result, for linguistic analogy, the latter phase should be named “*postparation*”, namely to “supply” after something. Obviously, we do not want to enter a nonsensical linguistic discussion—we know that in English we have the compound word “post-preparation”—but the previously-used term is just to point out the need for a clear understanding that “preparing” a couple for marriage has to be understood as a process which never ends; a process which, after marriage, has to comprise both formal and informal training events.

Already, years ago, Spalding (1938), talking of marriage as a journey—not to be confused with the wedding—wrote: “Love must not only win to the altar; it must be proof in the tests of after-life” (35). A more recent author (Collins 2007) stressed the need for more attention to the process rather than to the event and coined a new expression which better describes what many couples do instead of premarital counseling, that is “*preceremonial*” counseling.

This is a challenge to the Italian Union: to implement this educative approach.

One may think that the educative role is just what should happen *before* an event, thus leaving the aftermath to other specialists. So, in the case of marriage preparation, our task should be to “gain knowledge, to explore attitudes and values, and to develop skills” (Ponzetti 2016c, X), and then wait for what could happen in the future. This would be almost a gambling play, hoping the results may be good; otherwise, there could always be the mental health practitioners—in case of *bad* outcome—or, as more often is the case, the lawyers—in case of *worse* outcomes.

On the contrary, if we think of marriage preparation as both *pre* and *post*, then we take responsibility for the entire process of “being married” and not only for “getting married.” A process which, as we do with post-baptismal classes and spiritual care with our church members, spans the entire life cycle; in our case, the Couple Life Cycle.

From this perspective, marriage preparation is just one of the phases in our ministering to couples. Marriage preparation should include not only any formal premarital education program but also any enrichment programs to sustain the couple in its evolution.⁵¹ Furthermore, as the rate of cohabitation tends to rise in the United States (Kuperberg 2019; Rosenfeld and Roesler 2019)—as well as in Italy (Istat 2019) and in Western Europe, at large (Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2014; Kiernan 2002)—and many couples could marry after a certain time of cohabitation, there might be the need to give more attention to the premarital education even of young people who are not yet dating (see the early works by Howse 1982; Stevens 1986).⁵²

⁵¹ The Italian Union Department of Family Ministries is implementing this approach with two programs: the Prepare-Enrich—for the *pre*-phase—and the Marriage Encounter Weekend—for the *post*-phase.

⁵² See, for example, the Catholic approach to marriage preparation, which starts since childhood and continues even after the ceremony, as sanctioned in Canon 1063 (*Code of Canon Law* 1983) and related documents (Pontifical Council for the Family 1996; Pope John Paul II 1981). Specifically, the Catholic Church distinguishes four stages in marriage preparation: (1) the *remote preparation*, that is, the general instruction given to children and young adults “about the meaning of Christian marriage (*Code of Canon Law*, c. 1063, §1); (2) the *proximate preparation*, that is, the “personal preparation to enter marriage” done by the spouses toward marriage (*Code of Canon Law*, c. 1063, §2); (3) the *immediate preparation*, that is, the preparation of a “fruitful liturgical celebration of marriage” (*Code of Canon Law*, c. 1063, §3); (4) the *post-marriage assistance*, that is the “help offered to those who are married” (*Code of Canon Law*, c. 1063, §4). Altogether, all these stages are understood as “journey of faith, which is similar to the catechumenate” (Pope John Paul II 1981, sec. 66). For an in-depth analysis, see (Amevor 2009; Gavin 2004; 2005); especially Gavin (2005) who concluded his article with this summary of Canon 1063’s educative approach: “Canon 1063 envisages a marriage preparation that spans a lifetime from infancy right through to supporting couples after they are married” (200) For an Adventist use of these stages, see Monder (2011), whose Master’s thesis at the Adventist University of France “Collonges”—under Roberto Badenas’ supervision—has shed some new light on marriage preparation in Adventism.

CHAPTER 4

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVENTION

Introduction

The ultimate goal of this intervention is to assist pastors employed by the Seventh-day Adventist Italian Union to make the needed changes—in their work as certified Prepare/Enrich facilitators—that will positively impact their own efforts in working with couples in their preparation for marriage. Using the words of Cameron et al. (2010), the ultimate aim is to *deepen their theology* and *improve their effectiveness*, as summarized by this definition: “to renew both theology and practice in the service of God’s mission” (63).

As pointed out in the literature review, premarital education is not just a matter of techniques to prepare couples for their wedding, but a comprehensive and preventive approach to couple relationships that starts prior to the wedding and should continue—hopefully—even after the matrimonial ceremony.

The theological reflection allowed for the development of a theology of premarital education that considered not only pragmatic reasons—insofar as they may be valuable for reasons such as lowering the high rate of divorce or teaching relationship skills—but also biblical principles.

The above goals are more than new techniques. They are, rather, paradigms that inform the pastors' self-perception regarding their role as marriage educators and shepherds of couples. Such goals require an approach that includes both reflexivity—a continuous reflection on our own practice—and an “action-oriented” (Swinton and Mowat 2016, 262) and transformative style of leadership (Robertson 2000).

What follows is the description of the intervention. The first section consists of a brief profile of the context where ministry—and the project—takes place. Next, the development of the intervention that focuses on the genesis of the project and how the theological reflection and literature review have shaped its successive elaborations. The section on research methodology and methods presents the theoretical foundations of the intervention. The last section presents the description of the intervention. The chapter ends with conclusions and further directions.

Profile of the Ministry Context

As already said in a previous chapter, premarital education has been done—until the present—mainly in a religious context and primarily by clergy (Halley, et al. 2011; Stahmann and Hiebert 1997; Wilmoth and Smyser 2012).

This sociological data is representative of the Italian context, too (Boffi 2006; Gentili, Tortalla, and Tortalla 2010a). In the Catholic Church, premarital education is the most consolidated form of family pastoral care in Italy (Gentili, Tortalla, and Tortalla 2010b).

As for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Italy, the present research has shown that the Italian Union has done little in regard to premarital education, as noted in chapter three: as a result, the situation is not as flourishing as it is in the Catholic Church. The Italian Adventist Church did not see the challenge of being inspired by the Catholic

example—perhaps due to a sort of exaggerated ecclesiastic differentiation that led to an aprioristic refusal of everything labeled “Catholic”—and rather “followed” the Italian secular trend of doing “almost” nothing for the premarital couple.⁵³

Consequently, Italian pastors have received little—if any—guidance as to how to offer, conduct, and evaluate a sound premarital education program with their couples, neither were they exposed to the underlying scientific and theological principles.

The goal of this project is to fill this gap.

Development of the Intervention

Italian Adventist pastors never received systematic training on premarital education (see ch. 3). I do not even know any pastor of my generation who got a premarital education before getting married. This means that any premarital education done by Italian pastors is almost based on a spontaneous, intuitive, and never experienced attempt to better equip the new generations for marriage.

Then, in September 2016, almost two years after I was elected Director of Family Ministries for the Italian Union (November 2014), we offered training in premarital education to all the Italian pastors—the first training ever done—, certifying sixty pastors and their spouses as trained Prepare/Enrich facilitators.⁵⁴

⁵³ Henry Tajfel (1978) would have explained this phenomenon with his Social Identity Theory. According to him, individuals base their social identity on their group membership: this gives them a sense of belonging and emotional stability. This dynamic tends to divide the world into “us”—the *in-group*—and “them”—the *out-group*. This social categorization will tend to see the out-group—and its members—always negatively—even when there is no evidence of such opinion—and with constant prejudice and stereotype (Tajfel 1981).

⁵⁴ The training was held at the Italian Adventist University “Villa Aurora” in Florence, on September 3, 2016, and conducted by Willie and Elaine Oliver—Directors of the Department of Family Ministries at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, World Headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, USA—and by the researcher—Director of the Department of Family Ministries in the Italian Union—as co-trainer.

The Need for a Comprehensive Approach

Certifying does not necessarily mean giving pastors an overall and comprehensive approach to premarital education. We do not know how this program affected their attitude to the subject. We do know that slightly thirty percent are using the Prepare/Enrich protocol. The other pastors are most likely offering some other training program—either assembled by themselves or taken from other sources. Or, in the worst-case scenario, they are just preparing couples for the wedding ceremony—and that’s all.

However, even for those who are implementing the training and integrating it into their pastoral service to couples, we may wonder if they are using Prepare/Enrich just as a tool to prepare couples, or as a first-phase overall ministry to married couples, as expressed—and hoped for—in chapter two.

The more I worked in this area of marriage education, the more deeply I examined this specific ministry. I have become ever more convinced that the Italian Union needs to adopt a more comprehensive approach, where pastors, the Seminary, the Ministerial Association, and any willing Seventh-day Adventist practitioners in helping professions would work synergically with the Family Ministry.

As Buikema (2001) suggested in his doctoral dissertation, there is: a need for seminaries/theological schools to offer formal training to pastors in premarital education during and after their academic training; a need for the Ministerial Association to stimulate pastors to pursue continuing education opportunities; and a need for both clergy and family therapists to learn how to work together “in meeting the needs of couples seeking to marry in the new millennium” (46).

The Need for a Theological Framework

The literature review has revealed that even the more accredited courses on premarital education have little, if any, deep theological reflection (see ch. 2).

Although premarital education should be considered a “specific ministry of the church” (Kis and Mueller 2015, 262), there seems to be little if any mention about marriage preparation as an ecclesiastical—and theological—praxis.

The theological reflection allowed me to find the biblical rationale for premarital education and contributed to the construction of a more comprehensive approach.

Study Aims

As a result, we were able to identify—and to delimitate—more specifically our research problem (Stringer and Aragón 2021) and define, in more detail, the aims of this intervention in promoting the “quality of the service” (Vecchio 2008) offered to premarital couples by Italian Adventist pastors:

- firstly, to create a suitable method and approach that would allow pastors to understand their role as mentors when they connect with couples who are preparing for marriage;
- secondly, to use that method and approach to reflect more deeply—and more consciously—on the needs of couples and offer a more comprehensive and theologically grounded support in marriage preparation.

Research Methodology and Methods

This section will be addressing issues related to methodology and methods adopted in this intervention.

Although the words methodology and methods look similar—almost synonymous— they have different meanings in scientific research (Marradi 2007).

Methodology is a theoretical reflection (Cameron and Duce 2013) about the methods used in the research—the *why* and rationale of the research project (Marradi 2007). It is related to philosophical issues and its relative paradigms, such as the nature of reality (ontology), whether objective, socially constructed, interpreted, and so on; or the nature of knowledge (epistemology), whether positivist, critical realist, social constructionist, pragmatist, and so on (Al-Ababneh 2020).

On the other hand, methods are the tools and techniques used—the *how* to implement the research project—derived from the methodological assumptions, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed (Corbetta 2014).

Overview

This intervention has adopted the action research approach, a qualitative methodology⁵⁵ to investigate social life that integrates an explorative approach. Several fundamental reasons have led the researcher to select action research methodology:

1. First of all, as Stringer and Aragón (2021) explain, unlike academic research done to generate knowledge or to publish results, action research is relevant to practitioners—whose main job is to do things with groups of people—as this form of inquiry enables them to improve their practice. This would comply with the description of the “project”—the professional dissertation for the DMin at Andrews University: “A

⁵⁵ A qualitative methodology—unlike quantitative methodology, based on the positivist/postpositivist paradigm and the reductionist model derived from the natural sciences—is based on the constructivist paradigm and the complex/systemic model (Creswell and Creswell 2023; Stella 2015).

DMin project is a professional project that integrates theological reflection, scholarly research, and practical ministry. The project contributes to the enhancement of ministry in the church” (Williams 2020).

2. Secondly, as Montali (2008) points out, unlike conventional/experimental research, where the researcher has to take a detached and neutral stance—always separated from the research itself (Diebel 2008)—in action research, the researcher is more involved with participants. This approach would be more suitable for my dual role, being at the same time both the researcher and one of the *potential* participants as a certified pastor using Prepare/Enrich in the Seventh-day Adventist Italian Union.⁵⁶

3. Thirdly, its explorative approach lends itself well to our context. According to Stebbins (2008), exploratory research is well-suited when a group has received little or no systematic empirical study. It is also suitable when the researcher is not clear on how variables are related to the problem or when he is not sure about all the variables involved (Duesbery and Twyman 2020). The main goal of exploratory research is the production of a generalization—inductively derived—about a given group (Stebbins 2001), especially when there is little or no empirical knowledge of the group (Swedberg 2020), but nevertheless there are reasons to believe it contains “elements worth discovering” (Stebbins 2008, 327).

4. A final reason is the increasing credibility action research is having in practical theology (Cameron, et al. 2010; Cameron and Duce 2013; Swinton and Mowat 2016), as will be explained later in this chapter.

⁵⁶ Possibly, I could even add a third role, as I am the professor of Theology of Marriage, whose course has been a theological foundation for premarital education with the participant pastors.

What follows is the definition and theoretical foundations of action research as well as its derived methods.

Methodology

Definition of Action Research

In the introduction to the *SAGE Handbook of Action Research* edited by Bradbury (2015b), we find a detailed definition of action research:

Action research is a democratic and participative orientation to knowledge creation. It brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern. Action research is a pragmatic co-creation of knowing *with*, not on *about*, people. (Bradbury 2015a, 1)⁵⁷

Action research is committed to improving *situations* (Bradbury 2015a) rather than *cognitive understanding*, although this latter is not excluded. It seeks to improve experiential practices at every level, from personal to a collective one, *through* and *by* the group (Gilardi 2008).

In action research, the researcher's role changes: from an attitude of external observation to an attitude of participative observation, where a *co-constructed* knowledge develops between the researcher and those who are experiencing the studied phenomenon (Costantino 2008). In this regard, the researcher interacts with the stakeholders and cooperates with them. As a result, the researcher works *with* the group as one member among others, and all together agree towards a collective journey to produce transformative knowledge (Gilardi 2008).

⁵⁷ Besides *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*, edited by Bradbury (2015b), other voluminous and reference works on action research are: the *SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research*, edited by Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014), the *Wiley Handbook of Action Research in Education*, edited by Mertler (2019), and the *SAGE Handbook of Educational Action Research*, edited by Noffke and Somekh (2009).

Paralleling the changed researcher's role, the participants' role changes as well. In action research, according to Greenwood (2008), participants have a strategic role in defining the problem focus because they live with it every day: "the amount of knowledge local stakeholders have about the genesis, configuration, and dynamics of the problem, though often not framed in academic language, is great" (331).

Because of this dynamic interaction between researcher and participants, as well as between action and theory, action research is recursive in its approach, as it uses "continuing cycles of observation, reflection, and action" (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 4).

Compared to conventional research,⁵⁸ action research has, among others, the following distinctive traits, according to the table developed by Bradbury (2015a):

1. Its purpose is to both understand and improve, rather than to just understand;
2. Its basic orientation is *researching* "with", rather than "on";
3. There is solid cooperation between the researcher and the stakeholders rather than the researcher being external to the context and the stakeholders being subjects of the research itself;
4. The learning process is integrated with the dissemination while, with conventional research, dissemination comes after the research;⁵⁹
5. Its strength is the pragmatic and local-based approach, rather than the theoretical and generalized;

⁵⁸ "Conventional approach" is intended as objectivist descriptions of reality, where *dualism* *abounds*, such as: knowledge vs action, mind vs heart, expert vs lay person, reflection vs practice, self vs other, etc. (Aragón and Castillo-Burguete 2015).

⁵⁹ In research, dissemination is the process of making project results available, through publication, to the scientific community. In action research, in particular, dissemination is interested in addressing not only researchers but also—more importantly—other practitioners (Henriksen and Mishra 2019).

6. Its weakness is the difficulty in summarizing data, and a lack of objectivity;
7. Its action outcomes are, primarily, new practices and new learning, and sometimes publishing in peer review, while with conventional research the primary goal remains publication in review journals.

Furthermore, unlike applied research,⁶⁰ action research is not only interested in solving practical questions and providing quite immediate answers, but it also aims to “engage stakeholders in defining problems, planning, and doing research... and evaluating outcomes.” (Bradbury 2015a, 3). As Bradbury further points out, with action research, we can make a step beyond applied research into the *democratization of research processes*.

Stringer and Aragón (2021) go in the same direction affirming that between practitioners—defined as research facilitators—and the stakeholders—those who are facing the issue—the focus should be tended to create a *collaborative approach to inquiry and investigation* in a systematic way, although each of them may be involved in different stages and/or roles of the action research process (Aapaoja, Haapasalo, and Söderström 2013; Pumar-Méndez et al. 2017).

It can be summarized that action research is not just a *set of methods*—another qualitative way of collecting data—but rather a well-defined approach (Bradbury, Lewis, and Embury 2019; Cameron, et al. 2010); a theoretical and ideological understanding of principles such as participation, self-determination rights, democratic management, and

⁶⁰ For a conceptualization of the terms “action research”, “applied research”, and others, such as “intervention research” or “collaborative research”, see (Eikeland 2012; Greenwood 2008).

engaged participation of the group as well as of the individual (Brunod and Olivetti Manoukian 2008).

Main Philosophical Principles

The term *action research* may encompass several approaches, even fundamentally different each from the other (Colombo, Castellini, and Senatore 2008; Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014). Nevertheless, although action research is not a monolithic concept, it is still a collection of approaches, in the community of action researchers, that have in common something distinctive, namely: “an alternative paradigm of transformational knowledge creation” (Bradbury 2015a, 4). Both Bradbury (2015a) and Heller (2004) used a metaphor to describe these diverse-but-similar approaches: a *family* of methods.

Action research, regardless of its different practices developed from Lewin’s original theory (Aragón and Castillo-Burguete 2015; Montali 2008), has some crossing characteristics (Colucci, Colombo, and Montali 2008):

1. Action research is focused on problems, that is, on every-day problems;
2. Action research involves both researchers and participants in a reciprocal collaboration and production of knowledge;
3. Action research is based on a two-way process: new knowledge leads to action, and reflection of the action creates new meanings;
4. Action research understands validity not so much in terms of measure, but rather as the capacity of each action to solve a problem efficiently;

To these characteristics, we may add a fifth one:

5. Action research has an ethical foundation, namely a democratic ethos where change does not occur in a top-down movement but evolves from a bottom-up process (Montali 2008).

According to Stringer and Aragón (2021), action research has a “set of social values” that enrich people in their lives and work: it is *democratic, equitable, liberating, and enhancing*.

Furthermore, action research has defined presuppositions regarding the nature of reality (ontological assumptions); whether the research can know this reality, and how (epistemological assumptions); and how and why to conduct the research (methodological assumptions) (Creswell and Creswell 2023).

As to ontological assumptions, a “multiple nature of reality” is assumed (Buikema 2001, 38) and, as such, it is essential to “hear” those different perspectives, instead of assuming only one “objective reality” to be discovered. Moreover, action research does not aim at *explaining* a phenomenon—as it is in the Galilean science—rather at *producing* it (Colombo, Castellini, and Senatore 2008).

As to epistemological assumptions, it is assumed that to understand the observed and complex reality, the researcher needs to interact with the “observed”, trying to live with it, as the participants—also known as stakeholders—are the primary source of knowledge. In Greenwood (2008)‘s view: “no one, no matter how much social science training and professional authority he or she has, is as much an ‘expert’ in the lives of the local stakeholders as the stakeholders themselves” (330).

As to methodological assumptions, it is assumed that knowledge should be aimed at creating processes of change in communities (Colucci, Colombo, and Montali 2008): a

change produced by the particular emphasis on group. The role of participants is crucial because of its theoretical interpretation in action research. According to this methodology, the group is not only the unit of analysis (Lisiecka 2013; Puntambekar 2013) but also the lever of change to transform social life and improve well-being among people (Gilardi 2008). The basic requirement for such a result is that the group participates actively in the decisional process so that it may establish a new norm and consequent conducts (Gilardi 2008). In other words, to have a change, we need to work *with* the group and not only *for* the group (McIntyre 2008).

Action Research and Biblical Principles

According to Colombo, Castellini, and Senatore (2008), action research is characterized by some specific topics: processes of change, theory-practice relationship, researcher's role, reflexivity. These topics, in turn, could have a biblical and theological counterpart.

The *processes of change*, with its emphasis on change—at an individual, cultural, and organizational level—may remind us of the biblical story of the rich young man (Matt 19:16-22) and his refusal to keep changing—he was satisfied with his accomplishments, which led him to stop the process of change in his life.

The *theory-practice relationship*, with its emphasis on practical knowledge leading to factual changes, may remind us of the biblical teachings about the true and false disciples (Matt 7:21-23), where only the *doer*—not the *knower*—may be called a “true disciple”; or the one about the wise and foolish builders (Matt 7:24-29), where only the *practicer*—not the *hearer*—is praised and called wise.

The *researcher's role*, with its emphasis on the participation of the researcher *with* the social actors—rather than *over* them—and the involvement of the latter in the research, may remind us of the incarnation motive (Phil 3:5-8), where Jesus—the Deity—did not teach from *above* but *among* us, living in our world and calling us in His mission for cooperative and relational practices.

The *reflexivity*, with its emphasis on the importance of reflecting about our practice and theory (Robertson 2000), may remind us of the teaching on the original purpose of marriage (Matt 19:1-10), where Jesus challenged the Pharisees' male chauvinistic idea about marriage and divorce and “pushed” them to examine—and integrate—a radical change of mind, more faithful to the spirit of the Mosaic law.

Action Research and Practical Theology

Action research has not only biblical tenets but also a shared task with practical theology, according to one of those tasks, listed by Osmer (2008): the *pragmatic task*, which is based on determining strategies of action to change through reflective conversations.

Action research may help practical theology to fulfill its goal to make “practice more theological” and—reciprocally—“theology more practical.” (Cameron, et al. 2010, 17)

Swinton and Mowat (2016) see a similarity in the reflective process and the transformative action-oriented goals and dynamics. They come to state, although carefully, that “practical theology *is* fundamentally action research” (261).

However, they assert that this non-incidental similarity between action research and practical theology should not make us forget that practical theology has a broader

theological jurisdiction, that is, to call for a change in current practices in the hope of moving closer to faithfulness, rather than just moving closer to more secular social goals.

This is, maybe, the fundamental difference between practical theology and action research that leads Swinton and Mowat, applying a teleology argument, to remark that practical theology seeks to enable people to “function not more effectively but more faithfully” (Swinton and Mowat 2016, 262).

This *telos* makes practical theology different—in status but not in methods—from social sciences because the latter lack both the transcendental dimension in their forms of action and the eschatological horizon of their practice.

To conclude Swinton and Mowat’s argument, their most explicit statement about the role of action in practical theology can be quoted: “action is not merely pragmatic or problem-solving... (its ultimate goal is) to remain faithful to God and to participate faithfully in God’s continuing mission to the world” (Swinton and Mowat 2016, 263).

Methods of Inquiry

Action research tends to use qualitative methods (Cassell and Symon 2004; Denzin and Lincoln 2018)—such as qualitative interview, *focus-group*, participant observation, ethnography, and others—because they allow a more profound and richer description of reality as well as facilitate the active engagement of the participants (Montali 2008).

Action research—differently from traditional research, which is based on procedures carefully articulated and specified in detail—is more dynamic and realistic, as the real-life situations cannot be entirely be fitted into the *a priori* scheme (Stringer and Aragón 2021). In action research, the researcher has to be “flexible and allow for the

possibility that questions and purposes may change as new knowledge and situations emerge” (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 37).

Participatory action research cannot plan every detail of the intervention as its practices are based on an emerging design process (Weber 2002). Nevertheless, although action research is not as structured as a quantitative study, it should maintain a *rigorous and ethical* standard of actions.

The following theoretical section will be used, then, to develop this intervention.

The Methods

The methods used are determined by the methodological assumptions, in this case by the participatory action research framework (Bradbury 2015b; Pant 2014). Qualitative methods will be preferred as they are not reductionist and allow for an understanding of the larger relational patterns of the people involved—pastors’ perspectives, administration’s expectations, church community’s environment, etc. (Stringer and Aragón 2021).

Focus-groups will be used not only as an explorative instrument—derived from a positivist matrix, whose goal is to collect opinions, attitudes, and representations—but mainly as a transformative instrument—derived from a social constructionist matrix, whose added goal is to modify the way of thinking of a given group (Gilardi 2008).

At the same time, even more practical reasons influence the methods used, such as the constraint of time and resources as Osmer (2008) points out, which may lead to rule out those methods that are *time-consuming* and costly.

Ethical Dimensions

This intervention met all the conditions of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and received its approval (see Appendix A). None of the participants were subjected to

any significant risk—no greater than the normal activities of life—and all of them were requested to sign an informed consent form to participate in the project, which was based on voluntary participation. Confidentiality also had to be preserved (Mostert 2018).

As the researcher has different roles—as explained better in the following section—this requires a *continuous inquiry* into how the institutional role may impact—and shape—power relations with the participants and the “process of collaboration as well” (Somekh 2008, 6).

The relationships between the researchers and their colleagues have many implications, as Drake and Heath (2011) acknowledge, for instance: what the researcher happens to “know” about colleagues and the problem of “confidentiality”; the researcher’s being “ beholden ” to the participant colleagues and being unwilling to challenge some of their views; the stakeholders’ tendency to excessively comply with “helping the research” in the case of friendship with the researcher.

Researcher’s Bias

My different roles in the intervention—being both the researcher, as one of the stakeholder participants as Prepare/Enrich facilitator, and the director of the department of Family Ministry that owns the Prepare/Enrich instrument—allowed me to smooth out the entire process and have a broader bird’s-eye view. This intervention was not requested by the community/group. Instead, as often happens in action research where it is the researcher who approaches a specific group (McIntyre 2008), I took the initiative to invite the Italian Adventist pastors, trained as Prepare/Enrich facilitators, to investigate the topic of premarital education.

This intervention falls into the case cited by Weber (2002) where “in the ideal situation... the researcher already lives in the community and partakes in its affairs” (106).

It is also relevant to readers of this intervention to know my past and present role as the professor of Theology of Marriage—whose course has been a theological foundation for premarital education with the participant pastors—as well as the Prepare/Enrich trainer of those participants in the intervention. Therefore, I had already had the opportunity to gain the participants trust and more easily obtain their collaboration and cooperation.

These multiple roles of mine could be an advantage—as they allow me to better know the research setting—as well as a hindrance—as Rudestam and Newton (2015) point out, referring to students who may be “walking a tightrope as they serve the multiple roles of student, researcher, and participant in the research and maybe even employee in the organization” (64).

Nevertheless, I believe that over time I had developed satisfactory expertise at being neutral in my different roles. This self-understanding comes not only from my academic training—as a counselor with an M.A. in Family Counseling—but also from my professional experience as a church administrator with multiple roles.⁶¹

⁶¹ To this regard, I can mention when I chaired the Italian Union Ethics Committee (2006-2010), while simultaneously being the Executive Secretary. This double position could have created some tension as the two roles were, somehow, counterposed. However, at the end of the term of office, the Ethics Committee stated “Roberto Iannò, although being at the same chair of this Committee and the Executive Secretary, has led the Committee work correctly, with a desire for neutrality, and having always in mind his double role” (Italian Union of Seventh-day Adventists 2009).

Researcher's Positionality and Relation with Stakeholders

I am aware that, regarding the type of participatory involvement, a tension remains as to how much the mobilization of every stakeholder will be participatory and democratic. The question is about emancipating people from the tendency that organizations have towards asymmetrical power relationships (Cassell and Johnson 2006).

I am also aware that the *researcher/participants* relationship may be strongly asymmetrical, where the researcher has defined *a priori* the research design and where the participants are just instrumental to the implementation of the project (Charmaz, Thornberg, and Keane 2018; Colucci, Colombo, and Montali 2008). In this participative intervention, the approach to relationship aims at more equal roles—democratizing the research process—although there could be the risk of being more a rhetorical assumption rather than a factual one, as Reason (2002) points out. However, there remains the strong intentionality of sharing and broadening skills, instruments, and resources as much as possible outside the “expert” circle (Colucci, Colombo, and Montali 2008).

I am finally aware that, for participatory approaches, a tension relates to the difficulty of guaranteeing that the “form of consensus”—that is, the agreement about aims and expected outcomes—is not rather a “manipulated product of power relations” (Cassell and Johnson 2006, 807) because there is always the risk that the researchers will impose their own voices, values, and goals on the participants.

Intervention Limitations

This is the first known project in the Italian Union about premarital education among its pastors. As other similar studies were not found in the Seventh-day Adventist

Italian context nor its larger European context, most sources used pertained to the North American context.

After investigating any previous sociological study with an action research approach, I have not found any suitable study about this topic and approach, neither in the Italian context nor abroad.⁶² I have not found a similar approach in any projects presented at Andrews University for a DMin.⁶³

This lack of previous studies led me to enter this field with a great desire to discover a new way of studying this topic but, at the same time, gave me a certain dose of uncertainty as I could not benefit from other insights.

This intervention will consist of only one cycle of reflection and action, unlike the action research common practice of having reiterated cycles (Bradbury, Lewis, and Embury 2019; Stringer, Dick, and Whitehead 2019), namely continuous cycles of planning, action, reflection, and reviewing (Davis 2008; Dick 2014b; Morales 2019). The rationale for this choice is because the entire process could go beyond the limits for a DMin dissertation as well as, as Rudestam and Newton (2015) suggest, action research in itself may be “too prodigious a challenge for most graduate students” (63).

⁶² As Herr and Anderson (2014) have stated: “there is more writing *about* action research than documentation of actual research studies.” (6) This is, in part, because action research projects are often confined to the setting under study and not designed to generate knowledge transferable beyond it.

⁶³ At the time of writing, to our knowledge, this is the first DMin professional dissertation with an action research approach ever presented at Andrews University, let aside Guzman (2015) whose work mentions action research as adopted methodology but it was not discussed in depth nor was the intervention itself fully oriented methodologically.

Dissemination: Validity, Reliability, and Transferability

As synthesized by Andrade (2018), in quantitative methods, *validity* and *reliability* are desirable psychometric characteristics whose meanings are, respectfully: the accuracy of the measured situation (Dick 2014c), and the consistency of the results over time and contexts (Dick 2014a).

In qualitative studies, especially in action research practices, the terms “validity” and “reliability” are questioned and not universally accepted as they come from paradigms and philosophical presuppositions different than those used in action research (Hayashi, Abib, and Hoppen 2019).

In action research, the legitimacy of validation should be interpreted with categories different from the positivist paradigm.

According to both Andrade (2018) and Kihlstrom (2021), the validity of the research may be accepted in terms of ecological validity, that is whether the study and its results can be generalized from laboratory to real-life settings. However, its reliability may fail the test as any knowledge and insight in action research belongs to the people involved in the project.

In action research, validation comes not from the method but from the participants of the research inasmuch as the credibility of the research comes from the extent of participants’ involvement (Montali 2008). The author adds, as well, another criterion for validity: *pragmatic validity*, which stresses the practical impact towards the solution of problems.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ What cannot be addressed in this work is the important debate about the usefulness and legitimacy of measuring in social sciences and the call for Evidence-based practices (EBP). Hammersley (2013) provocatively challenged the EBP approach—calling it a “myth”—and its complex relationship between research, practice, and the strategic policymaking (See, for instance, the case for evidence-based in family policymaking, addressing both researchers and practitioners, in Bogenschneider 2014). He

Weber (2002) stressed that validity relies on the “experiential and personal encounters” (109) of the research. Greenwood (2008) has an even more radical defense of pragmatic reliability in action research, arguing that this approach produces more reliable knowledge than the one produced by unilateral investigation, because of the degree of agreement among the participants.

Despite the abovementioned limitations in action research, it remains a challenge for this approach to emerge from the narrow context where knowledge has been generated and to be able to disseminate its results to a larger context. In their case for dissemination in action research, Henriksen and Mishra (2019) argue that the action researcher—or practitioner—should not be just satisfied with the benefits gained within the boundaries of a given context but should aim at sharing the research and its potential innovations with others through dissemination. Of course, their argument capitalizes on the principle of *transferability*, that is the idea of considering “what ideas might transfer to their context and how this might look or be valuable in their own setting” (397). This process should be applied by the readers—not by the researchers—who only know how to make connections between the study described and their own practices in their own contexts. The essential obligation for the researcher is a thorough communication about the findings and details of the study’s context (See also: Dick 2014b).

challenged the idea that research should serve policymaking and practice. Others (Nevo and Slonim-Nevo 2011), too, have questioned the excessive emphasis on empirical findings to validate a practice in the social practices, and in the helping professions at large, and have called for an integration of both empirical evidence and clinical and constructive narratives. Even in the natural sciences, such as the Evidence-based medicine (EBM), skepticism is arising (Boswell 2018). What cannot be addressed here is the other critique done by Hammersley in his already-cited *The Myth of Research-Based Policy and Practice* (2013): the critic to the action-research movement itself, when he calls for a legitimacy of both terms “research” and “action”, and expects that neither first term—based on the Cartesian’s primacy of reason over reality—nor the opposite one—based on Deweyan pragmatism—should serve each other’s goals.

Description of the Intervention

I have developed the intervention according to the model suggested by Stringer and Aragón (2021) who propose a protocol for action research intervention described as a three-phase framework: the “Look, Think, Act” cycle (see figure 2).

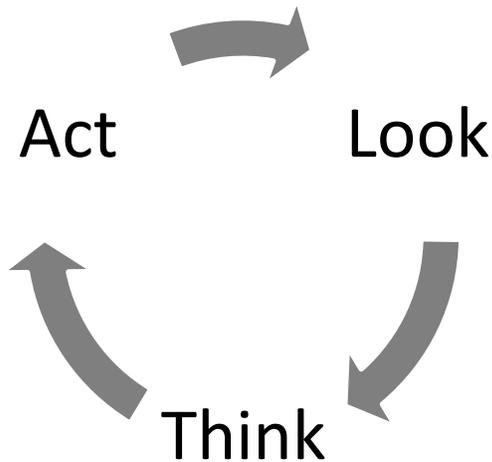


Figure 2. The Look-Think-Act Framework (Stringer and Aragón 2021).

The “Look” phase is for generating and gathering data: it is the phase where data are examined for trends and knowledge increases in “depth of understanding” (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 84). The “Think” phase is for reflecting and analyzing: it is the phase where we systemize data and where categories and themes emerge and are “presented in frameworks that provide the basis for accounts and explanations” (85). The “Act” phase is for implementing practical solutions: it is the phase where the “real” work starts—unlike traditional research that ends with a report—and “continue the process of investigation... planning actions... reviewing progress and planning continuing activities” (85).

Setting the Stage

In this preliminary phase, our primary goal is to set the premises for initiating the action research intervention, especially to identify our stakeholders. In this phase I have used the simple diagram suggested by Stringer and Aragón (2021), although more complex diagrams are suggested for identifying and differentiating stakeholders (Aapaoja, Haapasalo, and Söderström 2013; Pumar-Méndez, et al. 2017). (See figure 3)

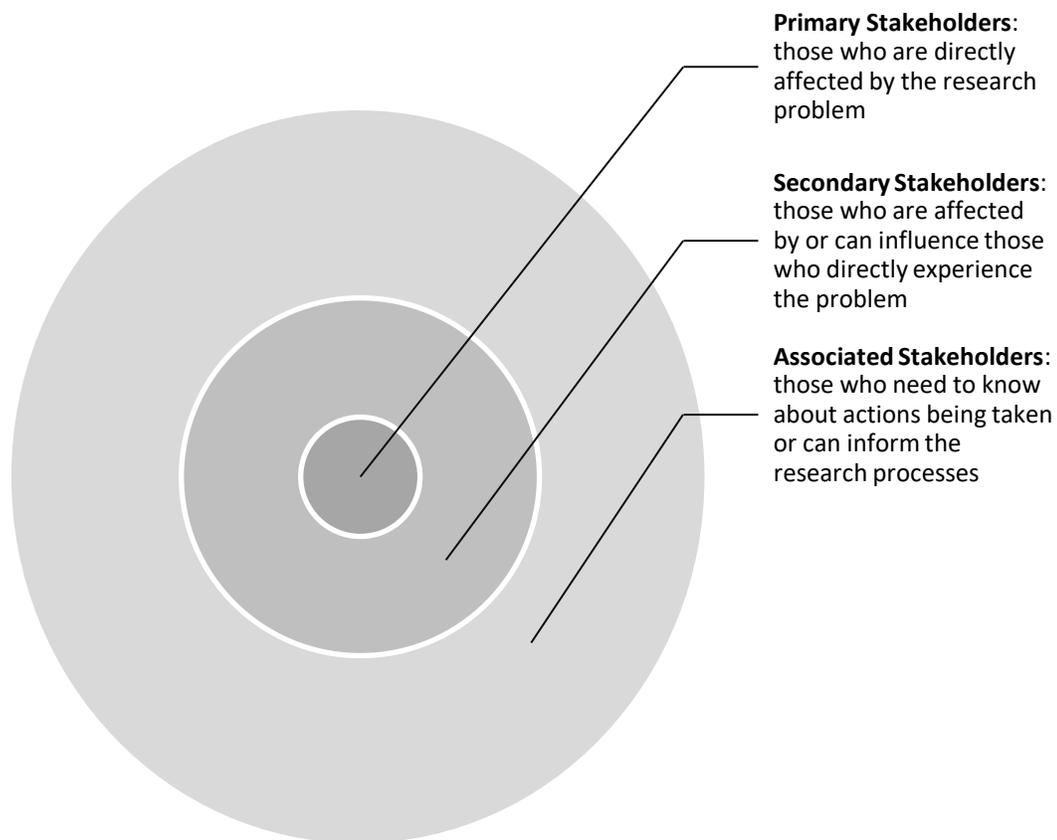


Figure 3. Different Levels of Stakeholders Participants (Stringer and Aragón 2021).

Information about the intervention was done through the Ministerial Association newsletter—addressing the pastors—as well as the official Italian newsletter—addressing

the general audience (see Appendix C). All participants were recruited either by email or personally and signed an informed consent form (see Appendix D).

Determining the Primary Stakeholders' Sample Size

When conducting qualitative research, one of the main problems to be addressed is determining the sample selection criteria—that is, to answer the question of *how many interviews are enough* (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006)—as a qualitative sample is not representative of the entire universe of research study (Pace and Losito 2020).

According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), in literature there is not a unique view about the sample size—ranging from one to several tens, it depends on the research design as well as the sampling method (Oppong 2013).

Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), in their literature review of guidelines for qualitative research, point out that a very frequent milestone for determining the size of a non-probabilistic purposive sample is the term '*theoretical saturation*'.

The term 'purposive sample' refers to the fact that participants are chosen according to some common predetermined criteria, basically the knowledge/experience of the issue being addressed in the research (Oppong 2013), and it is the method adopted in this research. The term 'saturation' refers to the point reached in data collection when no relevant or new information useful to the developing theory can be found (Saumure and Given 2008).

Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) argue that the theoretical guidelines to sample until the saturation is reached is a valid construct although it is difficult to implement. Firstly, it is often vaguely defined and poorly operationalized (See also: Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi 2017; Saunders et al. 2018). Secondly, the researcher usually has to state the

number of participants before starting the research, and then a “general yardstick is needed, therefore, to estimate the point at which saturation is likely to occur” (61).

They found in their study that data saturation was, for the most part, reached by the time they coded twelve interviews, results that have been confirmed by more recent studies (Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi 2017). Beyond that figure, the codes already created were fairly stable and no other significant codes were found. Therefore, they posited that twelve interviews could be a valid “yardstick” in non-probabilistic sampling, providing that the sample is homogeneous, data quality is high, and the domain of inquiry is well defined.

Along the same lines, describing the sample’s characteristics for achieving saturation more easily, Saumure and Given (2008) suggested the following strategies: (1) to have a cohesive sample—that is, where all participants belong to a particular demographic group; (2) to have a theoretical sample—that is, to select those participants who are actually contributing to the emerging theory; (3) to be already engaged in the field—as the researcher may better understand the slight differences of the research setting.

For a focus group, an ideal size of the group would be between six and 12 participants (Fusch and Ness 2015).

In a very recent study where they conducted a systematic review of studies that empirically assessed sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) demonstrated that “saturation can be achieved in a narrow range of interviews (9–17) or focus group discussions (4–8), particularly in studies with relatively homogenous study populations and narrowly defined objectives” (9).

The entire process of sampling of this research was based on the abovementioned criteria and strategies.

Identifying Stakeholders Groups

The main participants to be included in this intervention—the *primary* stakeholders—were the Italian pastors selected on the following basis: (1) trained at an accredited Adventist Seminary; (2) working for the Italian Union of Adventist Churches; (3) trained as Prepare/Enrich facilitators; (4) willingness to participate in this research voluntarily and actively. This main group was further divided according to those who had experience in providing marriage preparation in an ecclesiastic context with Prepare/Enrich and those who had not done so yet. This was the group that was directly affected by our research problem.

I estimated that ten participants would most likely have allowed to reach data saturation. Furthermore, this figure allowed to have an ideal size for the focus group, seeking to balance between having a size that enabled people to share freely and having enough representativity of the larger group (Fusch and Ness 2015; Logie 2014).

According to action research's principle of *participation*—rather than just involvement—of the participants (McIntyre 2008), the selected pastors were invited to be an active part of the intervention, taking joint responsibility for the intervention itself.

As the action research approach requires, I needed to look for other participants—the *secondary* stakeholders—who may be affected by—or can influence—those who experience the problem. These other participants were those involved in a leadership position over the pastors, such as the Italian Union Officers—the president, the executive secretary, and the treasurer—and the Ministerial Association Secretary, or the directors of

a Field.⁶⁵ As a result, before recruiting the *participating* pastors and meeting with them, I needed to be sure to have an agreement with the administrators, to secure their approval and cooperation in the intervention.

Other subjects not directly related to the pastors—the *associated* stakeholders—were those who could have partnered with them as mentors or advisors, such as Seventh-day Adventist practitioners in the helping relationship. I included, as well, those couples who had benefitted from the Prepare/Enrich program and who were willing to participate to improve the effectiveness of premarital education for future couples.

Table 2 below shows the general description of the participating stakeholders involved in the intervention.

Table 2. General description of stakeholders involved in the intervention (N = 30)⁶⁶

Stakeholders	Pastors		Administrators		Practitioners			Couples			TOT
	PE	nPE	Officers	Seminary	SDA	RC	LAY	SDA	MIX	nSDA	
<i>Primary</i>	7	3									10
<i>Secondary</i>			2	3							5
<i>Associated</i>					3	1	3	5	2	1	15

⁶⁵ The Italian Union of Churches has divided its territory in four Fields—North, Center, South, Sicilian—that are more a pastoral entity rather than an administrative one. Each Field is overseen by a director who, in turn, collaborates directly with the President.

⁶⁶ Explanation of adopted abbreviations. *Pastors*: PE, using Prepare/Enrich; nPE, not using Prepare/Enrich. *Practitioners*: SDA, Adventist; RC, Catholic; LAY, secular. *Couples*: SDA, Adventist; MIX, mixed faith with one Adventist; nSDA, non-Adventist.

Preliminary Conversations

With some stakeholders, I started preliminary conversations—what Singh (2014) would call “pre-dialogue consultations—laying down the premises to a successive multi-stakeholder dialogue. The advantages of these consultations are several: to avoid misunderstanding among different stakeholders, to help focus the dialogue and create awareness in a new theme, and to reduce the gap between different understandings.

So, first, I had a video call with the Officers as well as with the Ministerial Association Secretary—the secondary stakeholders. We discussed the overall goal of this intervention and we activated what Stringer and Aragón (2021) would call the *snowballing* process, to explore whether to include other actors at the institutional level.

After this preliminary conversation with organizational leaders, I mapped the subsequent meetings with pastors—the primary stakeholders—although the entire process was not fully developed in advance, as Stringer and Aragón (2021) suggest. Although in traditional research the conversation with organizational leaders is enough to implement what has already been agreed upon, in action research we need to redesign the entire process with “the input and *constructions* of a broader range of stakeholders” (115).

As a result, at this point, I planned to meet with the participant pastors. In this preliminary conversation, I presented the entire intervention and explained the basic principles of the action research approach. I also presented to the group the rationale of having some pastors who, although certified with Prepare/Enrich, have not yet administered this protocol to any couple, as their contribution could add a different perspective and new insights. I concluded by asking them to do some reflective writings about their role and feelings in premarital education (see Appendix E). I explained that

someone other than me— for privacy reasons—would receive these journals, then they would be collated anonymously as a single document and be shared with the whole group so that every participant could be aware of each other’s ideas and feelings regarding our issue (Cameron, et al. 2010).

The Place: Finding the Right Venue

As this intervention took place during the COVID-19 pandemic period, no special attention was given to the venues as meetings were exclusively being held on online platforms. The specific platform used for this research was Zoom, a videoconferencing software that has become one of the most popular video conferencing apps for connecting virtually with others, both in business and personal settings—besides being the fastest growing app in Europe in 2020 (Okta 2021). For a discussion of the shifting research context for qualitative interviews from in-person to virtual platforms, see: Engward et al. (2022) and Oliffe et al. (2021).

Otherwise, as no venue is neutral in its meanings (Cameron and Duce 2013; Stringer and Aragón 2021), an analysis would have been done regarding the significance that people usually assign to space, intended as symbolic territory (Kelle 2017; Manekin, Grossman, and Mitts 2019).

Recording Data

Every meeting and interview were “recorded” by Zoom. The verbatim transcription—with the exclusion of non-speech sounds or emotional/facial expressions—was done with the help of voice-recognition technology available through “Word for the web”, the online browser-based app available in Microsoft Office 365. This Word feature not only automatically transcribes any pre-recorded audio file, but

makes the transcription process easier, as it separates speakers, adds timestamps, and splits the interview into sections.

For the editing phase, Word allows for the editing of the speaker label—and its occurrences—as well as the editing of each individual section to correct any issues found in the automatic transcription—addressing errors introduced either by the software itself or through a weak and unstable connection that disturbed the recording (McGinn 2008). Although we are aware that a verbatim transcription may represent interviewees as less articulate—because of the difference between spoken and written language (Poland 2008)—we tried not to correct neither incomplete sentences nor poor grammar—to “capture the form and style of the participant’s expression” (Bazeley 2021, 101).

Every transcript went through “member checking”, the process of reporting back to the research participants to ensure the accuracy of data (Sandelowski 2008).

To preserve the anonymity of research participants, we removed every interviewee’s name—replacing it with a code⁶⁷ (Allsop et al. 2022)—as well as every potential identifying detail (Poland 2008). The same code has been used to rename the transcription files. For every interview, two files have been stored: the audio file—in MPEG-4 format—and the transcription—in Word format.

I also made use of “field notes”, to keep a record of what is being observed and experienced during the intervention (Caulkins 2014; Denzin and Lincoln 2018).

⁶⁷ The codes have been chosen according to the criteria listed below: *Primary Stakeholder*, “PS-” followed by PE (using Prepare/Enrich) or nPE (not using Prepare/Enrich), and a sequential number; *Secondary Stakeholder*, “SS-” followed by ADM (administrator), and a sequential number; *Associate Stakeholder-Facilitator*, “AS-” followed by FSDA (Adventist facilitator), or FRC (Catholic facilitator), or FLAY (lay facilitator), and a sequential number; *Associate Stakeholder-Couple*, “AS-” followed by CSDA (Adventist couple), or CMIX (mixed-faith couple), or CnSDA (non-Adventist couple), and a sequential number.

Ethical issues

At this phase, every participant was informed of the purpose, goals, and use of results. All of them were informed about the informed consent as well as about the researcher's biases (as discussed in paragraphs: "Ethical Dimensions", p. 103 and "Researcher's Bias" p. 104).

Formal approvals of both the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Italian Union Officers had already taken place in this phase of the intervention (see Appendixes A and B).

The "Look" Phase: Gathering Data

In this phase, I gathered data for the subsequent reflection and action.

Data Collection: Interviews

In the first phase, I had an interview with each stakeholder group. It was not a conversation, as commonly understood, as I did not express my own perspectives and experience. It was, rather, an informal interview to build a "communicative space" (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 125) where the stakeholders could feel confident and secure.

For this guided conversation, I used "Grand Tour Questions", a type of interview that enables the research participants to describe a given situation in their own words, without a structured grid or directive focus (Poole and Mauthner 2014). An example of such questions is: "Tell me about your experience in premarital education", or "What do you think is your role in helping couples to prepare for marriage?" (see Appendix E).

If needed, I used some "Prompt Questions", for assisting the participants in further developing their flow, such as "Tell me more about...", or "Is there anything else you may add about...?" (see Appendix E).

Besides the primary stakeholders, I interviewed the two groups that are part of the associate stakeholders: the couples—who had taken the Prepare/Enrich assessment—and the mental health professionals—who obtained the Prepare/Enrich certification.

As to the couples, their names emerged from the pastors' preliminary conversation as being more receptive to the program than others had been. As to the professionals, I contacted those willing to be part of the larger stakeholders.

Member Checking

Following this first phase, I ran my data through the “member checking” process, with the informants, to improve their validity and enhance transferability (Brear 2018).

The “Think” Phase: Reflecting on Data

In this phase, I promoted a process for distilling the data, aiming at a more meaningful account of the findings and experiences of the participants.

Reflecting: the Summative Report

At the end of these interviews with the research participants—the pastors, as *primary stakeholders*; the administration, as *secondary stakeholders*; the couples and the professional practitioners, as *associated stakeholders*—I processed both the transcripts and the field notes in order to have a summative report of the main themes that emerged from the different consultations (Schreier 2012; Schreier 2014). All these consultations provided a more detailed sketch of the entire process, as well as an increased probability of the participants' involvement in the implementation of the project and future outcomes because of this initial involvement (for a list of all the questions, see Appendix E).

Collaborating: the Multi-stakeholder Dialogues

In the second phase, I started building, with the research participants, the “body of knowledge and understanding” (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 133) for reflection and action.

Meeting with primary stakeholders

In a preliminary meeting with the “primary stakeholders”, we discussed our gathered data: (1) the preliminary interviews with the primary stakeholders; (2) the interviews with all the stakeholders; (3) the collected reflective writings, from primary stakeholders.

This meeting had another goal: to evaluate whether data were sufficient or if we needed other sources of data and further stages of data gathering, such as surveys and questionnaires, or institutional documents and records.

During data evaluation, the group agreed that we should have had the point of view of the Seminary, as well. We decided that I should interview the Dean of the Italian Adventist Seminary in Florence as well as the coordinator of the Specialist’s Degree in Family Pastoral Care—the specialized area in family ministry.

Meeting with all stakeholding groups

As data analysis was being done privately by the researcher—although in cooperation with primary stakeholders, from time to time—at this stage of the intervention, I risked losing contact with the stakeholders and their interpretative perspective. To mitigate this risk, we discussed a possible collective workshop to be planned with the participation of the diverse stakeholder groups, having one or two people for each group. A multi-stakeholder dialogue (Helbig, Hofhues, and Lukács 2021) was planned to engage all the stakeholding groups in a collective process of analysis,

with the key objective being to “enhance levels of trust between the different actors, share information... create new knowledge and generate... relevant good practices” (Singh 2014, 543). This dialogue was based on the same summative report.

Whenever possible, we operated “on the basis of consensus rather than on majority vote” (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 157), as this fosters agreement and encourages cooperation towards common goals.

During the whole process, all stakeholders were informed of meetings, activities, and other events, to avoid feelings of exclusions or loss of ownership.

Data Analysis: Coding and Categories

To preserve the different perspectives that emerged from the data, I initially kept the analysis of each stakeholding group separate and coded each of them.

The coding process in qualitative research consists of producing ideas and concepts from the raw data, such as interviews, fieldnotes, reports, articles, and so on (Benaquisto 2008; Creswell and Creswell 2023). The coding has been done according to the *inductive* approach (Bingham 2020; Fox 2008) in a *data-driven way* (Schreier 2014)—that is to look for ideas and themes that appear more frequently in the data—as we did not find similar studies with an action research approach—and related existing literature—that we could have used for developing concepts and theoretical terms before the coding process (Cameron and Duce 2013).⁶⁸

This approach is used in research methodologies such as grounded theory (Charmaz and Bryant 2008), developed by two famous sociologists, Glaser and Strauss

⁶⁸ This latter approach is based on deductive processes.

(1967), in their pioneering book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. According to the authors, the inductive method tries to bring out ideas—the underlying uniformities—from such a great diversity usually found in qualitative data. The challenge for the researcher is to aim at what they call a “reduction of terminology” (114).

To increase reliability and rigor in coding, data files were imported, coded, and analyzed with NVivo 1.0,⁶⁹ a software belonging to the family of Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) programs used in qualitative research to help researchers manage data and produce meaning out of it (Bazeley and Jackson 2013). Although the coding process, especially if done with CAQDAS tool, may appear rigorously reliable, the process itself is still liable to subjective interpretation (Benaquisto 2008).

Once the coding process has been completed, I searched for overall categories—or themes—that emerged from any given set of codes and compared them across stakeholding groups (Stringer and Aragón 2021).

Data Reporting: Participatory Written Report

At the end of this phase, a participatory written report was produced with the goal of implementing “a valuable resource for building a sense of community” (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 193).

This report has been based on a framework derived from the category system created during the phase of data analysis. A time was provided to give each primary stakeholder an opportunity to read it and give feedback, and it was distributed in its final version to all stakeholder groups.

⁶⁹ “NVivo 1.0 is a major version release for Windows and Mac. It follows the last major version, NVivo 12 (Windows and Mac)” (QSR International 2022b).

Furthermore, this report will be the basis for dissemination and further implementations: a sort of road map for the Italian Union, who will be the principal institutional stakeholder in charge of carrying on this project in the future.

The “Act” Phase: Implementing Data

In this phase, as a result of new knowledge generated in the previous phase, I set the premise for action and transformation regarding our research problem.

Planning Actions

A planning meeting was organized with primary stakeholders to evaluate future actions. Action research is aimed at transformation so that all the participants may achieve “better results or a more positive outcome” (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 196).

The basic question that informed this meeting was: “What can we *do* now?”

Other questions that helped to frame more precisely the plan of action were: “In which ways can our premarital counseling be improved from now on?”, “How can we benefit from a professional network with other stakeholders?”, “Which is the ‘best interest’ of the couples we are working with?”

We concentrated on three main tasks (adapted from Stringer and Aragón 2021):

1. identify our priority for action – *choose the issue we will work on;*
2. set goal – *what we want to reach for this issue;*
3. state objectives – *how this goal could be implemented.*

Implementing Actions

All primary stakeholders agreed to integrate the new knowledge into their practice as an outcome of their active participation in “planning and decision-making activities” (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 209).

As a research facilitator, I would assist in supporting all participating pastors in their implementation and reflection about their actions. I would commit myself to keep developing an attitude of working *with* people, rather than just *for* them, as the action research approach requires.

Closing Celebration

As Stringer and Aragón (2021) observe, “a good action research project often has no well-defined ending” (220).

A first ending was as soon as the “Act” phase concluded. It was a time for mingling together, for talking and eating. A time for thanking *all* participants, regardless of their efforts in the project. A time for thanking God and asking for His blessings and guidance as we serve others—in our cases, the couples—in their journey towards an increased faithfulness to God.

A second—and final—ending will be when this intervention will be completed and discussed at Andrews University for the conclusion of my DMin journey. Around that time, I will celebrate with all the participating stakeholders.

As a final summary, on the following page, a concept map is presented with the flowchart of the whole intervention (see figure 4), based on the model suggested by Stringer and Aragón (2021). It should be noted that, although this map is linear and based on one cycle of Look-Think-Act, the entire process should consist of continuous *cycles*.

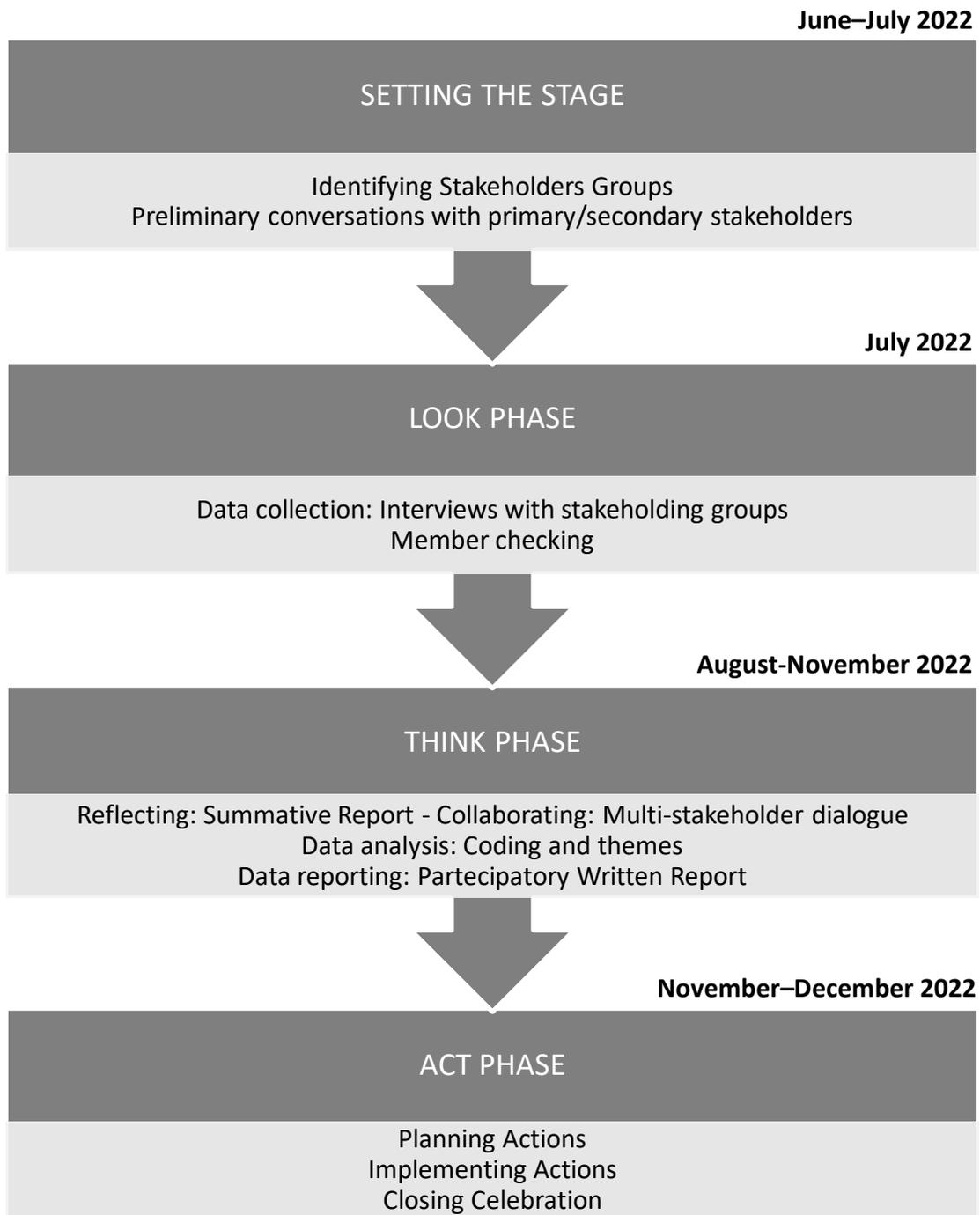


Figure 4. Flowchart of the intervention, based on the Look-Think-Act framework (Stringer and Aragón 2021).

Conclusions and Further Directions

By using a methodology based on the action research approach, I have been able to identify a well-defined plan to reach my Study Aims, which were:

- firstly, to create a suitable method and approach that would allow pastors to understand their role as mentors when they connect with couples who are preparing for marriage;
- secondly, to use that method and approach to reflect more deeply—and more consciously—on the needs of couples and offer a more comprehensive and theologically grounded support in marriage preparation.

This process helped all stakeholding groups to increase their awareness of the issue, generate new and participative knowledge, and design community-based plans of action.

A byproduct of this intervention is a new understanding of doing research—through the action research approach—as well as, hopefully, a stimulus for a new era of professional dissertations in the Doctor of Ministry Program at Andrews University based on the vast family of action research approaches.

CHAPTER 5

NARRATIVE OF THE INTERVENTION IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

Implementation of the intervention took place between June and November 2022. This chapter presents the narrative of the action research intervention in its three-phase framework: the “Look, Think, Act” cycle (Stringer and Aragón 2021).

Phase Zero: Setting the Stage (June-July 2022)

In this preliminary phase, our primary goal was to set the premises for initiating the action research intervention, especially to identify our stakeholders, besides promoting the initiative in the Adventist official media.

The intervention was advertised in the HopeMedia Italia News—the official Italian newsletter—and the Inter-European Division Newsletter (see Appendix C). The news release almost coincided with the 2022 General Conference Session’s vote to add the new “Premarital Education/Counseling” section to the *Church Manual*, whose rationale was emphasizing the importance of premarital education/counseling (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2022).

Stakeholders Recruitment

In this phase, I started recruiting my stakeholders. Although the intervention was already advertised in the Italian Union, I preferred to personally select the participants rather than wait for volunteers.

For *primary* stakeholders, ten Italian pastors have been selected according to the criteria listed in chapter 4. As a result, seven pastors using Prepare/Enrich and three pastors not using it were recruited.

For *secondary* stakeholders, I contacted two of three Italian Union officers, besides the Ministerial Association Secretary. All of them were willing to participate, and their contribution was pivotal to the intervention. Later, I had a dialogue with two faculty members at the Italian Adventist University Seminary in Florence, as suggested by primary stakeholders in one of our meetings.

For *associate* stakeholders, I contacted some mental health professionals—psychologists/psychotherapists and social workers—who were also Prepare/Enrich certified facilitators. I selected not only Adventist professionals but also those from other contexts: one who worked in a Catholic family counseling center and three who worked in private lay studies. Regarding the couples who took the Prepare/Enrich assessment, I could contact them only after I had the first meeting with pastors, who recommended some of their couples.

Altogether, I had a total of 30 participants.

Preliminary Conversations with Stakeholding Groups

Secondary Stakeholders: Administrators

These preliminary conversations took place on June 20 and 29 and were the most formal, although the three participants showed empathy and esteem—beyond their institutional role.

They were very sincere in their role and did not try to provide a kind of “diplomatic camouflage” for what the Italian Union did not do in the past in promoting premarital education among its pastors.

At the question, “What premarital education resources did the Italian Union adopt in the past”, one administrator admitted:

So, I honestly remember a manual... a few manuals... but nothing as structured as the Prepare/Enrich protocol... I don't know who gave it to me, maybe my internship director... maybe, it belonged to his material, to his volumes. But nothing so structured. And, let's say, so well done. (SS-ADM1)

Another administrator mentioned the lack of training to use that material: “I had this material, but I don't know who gave it to me. I don't know how it got into my computer... But I didn't receive a training to use that material” (SS-ADM2). Yet another administrator knew something more about that material and added some details:

a manual existed, still exists, because it is a paper available, a manual, translated by Giovanni Fantoni [retired pastor], in the 1980s... Until the late 1990s, it was the only tool, to my knowledge... that was generally given to pastors when entering the service, along with other general materials. (SS-ADM3)

It is unclear whether the handover of this manual has been a regular practice over time, or rather a hoped-for desire never accomplished regularly.

When we entered deeper into the issue and talked about their responsibility, at the question, “In which way you—as administrators—can have an active role in promoting

premarital education among Italian pastors?”, one administrator admitted that the Institution should do—and should have done—more in promoting premarital education in the Italian Union:

the administrator has a great responsibility to help colleagues be sensitive to what we consider principles... [unfortunately] at the moment, everyone does a little bit on their own, and that’s what I think should not happen... So, the administration should push to make sure that there are sensitivities on the part of the pastor; however, I have not always adopted that practice. (SS-ADM1)

Another administrator suggested that they should work more in synergy with the Ministerial Association and with the Department of the Family Ministries: “the administration has to interface a little bit (more) with the Department [Family Ministries] to sustain the mission and strategy that the department has been promoting.” (SS-ADM2)

An interesting admission by one administrator was that he had not realized the importance of this ministry and the need for a deeper awareness for many years:

Let’s say that, up to that time [the 2016 Prepare/Enrich training in Florence, by the Olivers], I have to admit... confess, that I underestimated, I did not give due importance to this need..., the need for updated material... He who took over this department [the researcher] certainly grasped this need... this gap... From that training in 2016... there has been—at least, as far as I am concerned, but I also think for other colleagues in the administration—a greater awareness of the long-term results of that quality improvement, started with that training. (SS-ADM3)

Despite this growing awareness, a gap remains between belief and practice:

There is certainly a greater awareness. However, if I talk about the capability to place, or to give spaces, appropriate areas for this department, I think the road is a little bit uphill... There is still a lack in the annual planning of the Italian Union, in addition to what the department does... a lack of focus and more effective synergy to make this service not only available but also usable to the fullest extent. (SS-ADM3)

Talking about the future and strategies, the administrators touched on several strategic areas: “strengthening churches” (SS-ADM2); “promoting material that creates a culture... The culture of the Church is also created through the material that is printed

[referring to the publishing house's strategies]" (SS-ADM2); "(the wish) that this tool does not fall into oblivion... That it may become a working tool" (SS-ADM3).

The co-researcher pastors solicited two more "voices" during the meeting for data evaluation. It was considered essential to have the Seminary faculty's point of view, as they are in charge of pastors' training and could offer some insights about their preparation—or lack of it—in premarital education. The interview with the dean of the Italian Adventist Seminary and the coordinator of the Specialist's Degree in Family Pastoral Care took place at the beginning of October, on the 5th and 11th. Although they temporally occurred later, we will present the results in this section as they logically belong to this preliminary phase.

At the question, "What specific training does a pastor receive during the years of study at school?" they admitted that there is nothing structured but only sporadic experiences, often motivated by personal initiative. In response to this evident lack, the Seminary is working on the curriculum, at the researcher's input given since he started teaching the Theology of family. In particular, the Seminary will try to add some specific courses in the B.A. program, which is common to all students, before they will separate, choosing different M.A. programs.

Primary Stakeholders: Pastors

This preliminary conversation took place on July 12 in a Zoom meeting. It was the most difficult to arrange just because I had to find the right time with a proverbially hectic schedule.

I commend many pastors because they accepted this meeting even though they were already on vacation with their families. As director of the Department of Family

Ministry, I should not have interfered with family time although, during the summer months, it would have been impossible not to have the meetings on vacation. This was the only exception.

According to Stringer and Aragón (2021), in this phase it is crucial to create a positive climate that fosters the passion and enthusiasm of stakeholders. After welcoming the participants, summarizing anew the goal of the intervention, and explaining their role as co-researchers in an action research intervention, I asked them an introductory question: “What motivated you to join this group?”

The conversation was crucial for the entire intervention because it shed light on many aspects that I was unaware of. Beyond a common motivation of wanting to help me with my research—a recognition of both esteem and affection towards my person—a widely shared reason was out of a need for sharing and being mentored in their premarital ministry to couples: “this dialogue with you and my colleagues can help me to have more knowledge” (PS-nPE3); “I was even more excited to reason together... To have a lightbulb moment to find a way, or perhaps an idea that eluded oneself, that instead it is enriching and can become a blessing” (PS-PE5); “the chance of sharing together with someone who is using the same tool, who has experienced it several times, even with someone who has not yet used it, and dialogue about it” (PS-PE2).

Others were just enthusiastic about the tool, and a way to reinforce this perception was to work on this project: “we were lacking materials in this area... as I was using it... I realized that it could have been even more valuable than it initially seemed to me” (PS-PE6); “having found this tool, a very helpful one” (PS-PE7).

The more we talked, the more I realized that what I wanted to deepen with this intervention was already their felt need. It was as if two different perspectives—mine and theirs—were already on the same track and ready to cooperate reciprocally. It was as if they were already prepared. They were just waiting for someone who would have challenged them to dig deeper into their premarital education practice, as someone said: “I feel the need, on a personal level, but I also think as a pastoral body, that we can train ourselves and grow in this ministry” (PS-PE3).

All the participants showed willingness at my request to do some reflective writing and take an active side in this intervention—beyond being just interviewed. As someone stated: “there is much work to be done, and so I think this research is absolutely a very valuable tool in that regard” (PS-PE3).

With this passion and enthusiasm in the stakeholders—and in myself, as confidence began to grow—our action research started, with a promising kickoff.

Phase One: LOOK (July 2022)

The “Look” phase is for generating and gathering data: it is the phase where data are examined for trends, and knowledge increases in “depth of understanding” (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 84).

Data Collection: Interviews

The exploratory interviews—whose little structure depended on the explorative nature of the research (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018)—were conducted as soon as I received each signed informed consent form. Twenty-five in-depth dialogues were carried out with the participants between the end of June and the end of July.

One of my crucial concerns was creating a trusting environment that would establish and sustain rapport with the participants during the process. As a matter of fact, all the interviews with stakeholding groups went smoothly—more than expected. Probably, the online format has facilitated the entire process as everyone was not forced to go out to a given place. Moreover, the familiarity I had with the participants— except for some couples—helped to create a suitable climate and allowed the interviewees to be relaxed and to talk freely.

On my end, I made sure always to be respectful and nonjudgmental. I repeatedly reassured participants that there were no right or wrong answers and that they could correct their ideas as often as needed. They were also aware that their anonymity and confidentiality were being respected and that they were not being tested in any way.

For some interviews, when the respondents were less productive—even passive—in their responses, I tried, using Brinkmann’s (2007a) words, to “frame the interview situation differently” (1117), that is, practicing a more active and confronting interview. Brinkmann argues that the interviewer may take a right to question and challenge what the interviewee says—that is, using an epistemic interview—to produce *more* knowledge than the traditional approach would have obtained—that is, with a *doxastic* interview.⁷⁰ The outcome of this approach of “challenging and confronting questions” (1136) may be

⁷⁰ Brinkmann, a Danish Professor at Aalborg University, Denmark, and currently co-director of the related Center for Qualitative Studies, challenged the common view of qualitative interview, what he calls a doxastic interview—from the Greek term *doxa*, for opinion—which adopts a phenomenological, descriptive, lifeworld approach that focus on experiences and opinions (Brinkmann 2018). As an integrative approach, he argues for the epistemic interview—from the Greek term *episteme*, for knowledge as a result of dialectical processes of questioning—a model developed to acquire knowledge on a subject rather than just opinions, and where “both parties are engaged in dialectically examining a topic, with the aim of gaining knowledge in a normative–epistemic sense.” (Brinkmann 2015, 1116). For a deepening of the philosophical and epistemological implications, see (Brinkmann 2007a; 2007b; 2014). For further development, see (Curato 2012).

not only more knowledge but also more “readable interview reports” (1136) compared to the lengthy monologues that strictly phenomenological and narrative techniques can occasionally produce.⁷¹

The interviews with the co-researcher pastors—the *primary stakeholders*—had the value of building the foundation for the entire intervention as they helped me to always have in mind my primary subjects—the pastors—with their needs, desires, expectations, and challenges. During the interviews, they opened up without reserve.

The interviews with the professional practitioners—the *associate stakeholders*—had the peculiar value of setting the foundations to bridge the gap between a preventive and reparative approach—at least, in the small “population” of professionals working with Prepare/Enrich. They all showed great interest in creating a culture of synergies between educational and clinical practitioners.

The interviews with the couples—the *associate stakeholders*—had the value of giving voice to the most critical subjects in premarital education: the couples themselves. Their feedback was valuable, and many common themes converged from their interviews, even though they came from different cultural backgrounds or belonged to different age groups.

Member Checking

As soon as I had finished each interview, I edited the text—always within the same day, when memory is still fresh—as the automatic transcript is never a perfect copy

⁷¹ For a conceptualization of the phenomenological approach in qualitative interviews, see (Aspers 2009; Berner-Rodoreda et al. 2021; Berner-Rodoreda et al. 2020; Irarrázaval 2020).

of the audio file. I tried to limit my interpretation of the text (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2020) and preserved the spoken language style as much as possible.

I sent the edited file to the interviewee, asking him/her “to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences” (Birt et al. 2016, 1802). Each participant was very collaborative and answered no later than a couple of days.

The process of replacing every interviewee’s name with a code and the chosen codings have already been explained in chapter 4.

Phase Two: THINK (August—November 2022)

The “Think” phase is for reflecting and analyzing: it is the phase where we systemize data and where categories and themes emerge and are “presented in frameworks that provide the basis for accounts and explanations” (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 85).

Reflecting: the Summative Report

Before coding the interviews, I needed to maintain the collaborative process with primary stakeholders. This means that I wanted to discuss my raw data with them before starting the personal coding work. Furthermore, as I had to code according to the *inductive* approach—because no other known studies would have provided me with categories I could work with (Bingham and Witkowsky 2021; Schreier 2014)—I wanted to have a sort of rough pre-coding process and explore potential categories with them.

Another rationale for this pre-coding phase was to prevent what Richards (2020) calls the “coding trap,” that is, the ever-increasing coding, especially when not working with concept-driven categories—not obtained from previous knowledge—and with CAQDAS

software, such as NVivo. There is a real danger of “never finishing your project” and falling into a sort of “coding fetishism” (119). Her suggestion is to code with a purpose.

Therefore, I started with a preliminary “broad-brush” coding (Bazeley and Jackson 2019; QSR International 2022a) but without using NVivo. I tried to look at the transcripts “from a distance” and see if I could get a general overview of ideas or themes. While skim reading the interviews, I underlined sentences, words, recurring expressions, or whatever struck me.

According to Gibbs (2018), in this phase, the use of paper can preserve creativity and flexibility, and ease of access, leaving the use of software for later analysis. Moreover, as Saldaña (2021) recommends—especially for those who are simultaneously learning the basics of coding and qualitative data analysis, as is my case—it is easier to start coding on paper rather than via computer because “manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing codes in pencil (...) gives you more control over and ownership of the work (45).

I arranged my information into broad topic categories in a separate file for each stakeholder group, reporting each question and the raw themes I found.⁷²

After collating these single files, I obtained a sort of summative report for later analysis by both primary stakeholders and all the other stakeholding groups.

Collaborating: the Multi-stakeholder Dialogues

In this phase, I had two meetings, one with the primary stakeholders and the other with all stakeholding groups.

⁷² For the list of codes used in place of respondents’ names, see Chapter 4, section “Recording Data.”

Meeting with Primary Stakeholders

The first meeting was with my co-researchers and was held on September 20, during the Italian Pastoral Retreat, in the Adventist Youth Center Tuscany. On that occasion, we discussed all the material gathered and the summative report.

Evaluations of pastors' interviews

One recurring theme was the lack of premarital education in their own marriage.

Some shared that it was difficult to find a pastor willing to do premarital education: "I had a hard time finding a pastor... (willing) to accompany in this growth path" (PS-PE5). Some did not even think to ask for it: "I did not have the opportunity to take a premarital course, but I must say I did not even think about it" (PS-PE3).

The reason for not asking was usually cultural: "At that time, it was not even an option! We only had an interview with the pastor, one afternoon, and that was all" (PS-PE4). One pastor recognized that in our recent times, a paradigmatic change happened, namely that now it is normal to ask for help for psychological and relationship issues:

Until recent years, to ask for help—especially if it was something other than breaking a leg— still had a kind of stigma from the population, in general, but especially from the Christian population, and even more so from the Adventist population. (PS-nPE1)

Talking about the possibility of making premarital education mandatory, several pastors—from their past experience—require premarital education before marrying a couple, even without the Italian Union demanding it: "I would never perform a wedding with a couple without knowing a couple and their reasons to marry. I tell them: let's take the course and see what happens" (PS-PE6); "[to marry a couple] remains a great responsibility—we talk about blessing a couple... I don't dare to marry someone who doesn't make a journey together" (PS-PE2).

During this explorative dialogue about themselves and their practice of doing premarital education, a pastor—one who does not use Prepare/Enrich and does not feel trained enough in this area—raised the issue of the lack of training during the school years. He admitted that when choosing the area of specialization for his M.A., he intentionally did not choose the area in Family Pastoral Care. Nevertheless, he realizes that these courses are the ones he needs the most. He concluded by suggesting that I should have dialogued with the Faculty.

The pastors discussed the spouse's role—and involvement—during premarital education. They realized that not every spouse is present at the sessions, although with different variations: from “totally absent” to “totally involved,” including the “occasional presence.” When they discussed this issue, several admitted that their role was not clear, even though they were trained together with their spouses:

I remember taking the training with my wife.... But when the training ended... I had not realized that I could have done premarital education with her... later, talking with my wife, it was not clear to her, too... Reading the interviews, it seems that it was unclear to many of us. (PS-PE2)

During this intense conversation, I added an interesting—and sad—fact: after taking the Prepare/Enrich training, every couple received a free score to use for themselves. As far as I know, the great majority never used that opportunity, although I do not know the reason. My personal questionable—but plausible—answer is that taking a psychological couple assessment has brought a certain level of anxiety to many pastoral couples, and the easiest way of coping was unconscious avoidance.

Another interesting theme was their felt need for continuing education in this area. As a result, there emerged a large consensus for ad-hoc meetings on specific topics related

to premarital education, as one pastor affirmed: “There is the need to have meetings where facilitators come together” (PS-PE2).

Evaluations of couples’ interviews

The first discussion was about the couple’s answer to the question: “What were your expectations about the Prepare/Enrich assessment?”

The co-researchers were surprised by a recurrent theme in the couples’ answers: a certain amount of anxiety while waiting for the assessment results.

One pastor said: “One thing I didn’t like was this overemphasis on the questionnaire” (PS-PE2). Then, the entire discussion revolved, reflectively, around the facilitator’s possible role in inducing this high expectation: “it seems that we almost presented the questionnaire and not a training program” (PS-PE2); “I insist quite enough on the importance of the assessment... as a starting point for the program... but, in the light of their reactions, maybe I should revert this emphasis: the program more than the assessment” (PS-PE5); “we also need to ask ourselves whether we have expressed ourselves well” (PS-PE6).

Without any external stimulus by myself, all pastors tried to take a step further and proposed a solution: “surely we can reassure them” (PS-PE3).

This dialogue on anxiety opened another central theme: the anxiety felt by the facilitators just before starting with a new couple:

The first moment has an impact not only on them—the couple—but also on us—the facilitator. So, maybe, my anxiety... the fact that I had to take over the whole training process... the exercises, the report, and so on... perhaps, all of these factors caused us to project some of our anxiety onto them. (PS-nPE1).

Another discussion was about what couples appreciated the most. Pastors were positively impressed by their answers—mentoring relationships, learning communicative

and conflict resolution skills, listening to the facilitator's story about his/her marriage, and so on—as it was probably, the first time they received feedback on their educative intervention. Some of them realized the importance of sharing with the couples: “When we talk about the issue of conflicts... it is natural to share something from our own marital experience. But I was pleased to learn that they appreciate this” (PS-PE6).

One pastor made an interesting observation: as pastoral couples share their stories honestly, not only do they become mentors for premarital couples, but they come to have a more realistic view of themselves. In this regard, he coined this meaningful expression: “we are both *facilitators* and *fragilitators*”⁷³ (PS-PE4).

At the same time, they did not expect to hear that couples also appreciated the possibility of “arguing” in the presence of a facilitator/mentor: “It struck me that some couples felt the need to experience that [arguing] in front of the mentor” (PS-PE5).

Before closing, one pastor raised a doubt about the fact that all couples were satisfied with the Prepare/Enrich program, assuming that pastors suggested names of “good” couples who would have made the pastor “look good”: “I am sure that my colleagues presented those couples who represented the best of the best” (PS-nPE1). This legitimate question allowed the other pastors to share their criteria for choosing couples to be interviewed: all co-researchers, but one, used time criteria, namely, the most recent couples who took the Prepare/Enrich assessment: “I looked more at the date, I mean... how long [ago] they had been finished” (PS-PE6); “I used the same criteria... I thought of the most recent couple. I didn't choose the best couple” (PS-PE2). As said, only one

⁷³ The term *fragilitator* is a made-up word. It is a pun: *fragilitator* looks like the term “facilitator” but also “fragility.” So, the *facilitator*—who facilitates—sometimes brings in his fragility—and becomes a *fragilitator*.

pastor used a mixed criterion: “my criterion was mixed: on the one hand, the time criteria...on the other hand, the choice of a couple that could express some enthusiasm about the Prepare/Enrich program” (PS-PE4). Interestingly enough, although I did not give them any criterion for choosing their couples, they naturally chose an “objective” parameter—time—that probably allowed me to have more reliable interviews, less likely to lead to potential response bias.

Evaluations of facilitators’ interviews

At the question, “What have you learned [that’s] new from professionals who use your same tool, although more in the Enrich dimension?” co-researchers expressed great appreciation for what they learned. Someone appreciated the holistic approach using Prepare/Enrich: “To see those professionals consider the integration of spirituality in therapy as a natural way of meeting needs that human beings have—not only spiritual needs but also existential ones— well... to me, it was... it was a nice positive feedback” (PS-PE2).

The area more appreciated was how professionals consider the assessment’s evaluative potentialities: “they appreciated, as much as I did, the questionnaire... if it is useful for them, then I am not the only one who needs it” (PS-PE5). But, even more emphasized was their appreciation for the “exercises”, considered by the facilitators as a “picture of the couple.” The entire group has reinforced their perception of the instrument’s practical usefulness as a reflection of the professionals’ perception: “So if this is a support for a professionals, we can imagine that it is for us as well” (PS-PE4).

Even in this discussion—as when talking about couples—they moved on and talked about some practical action:

These results [the facilitators' appreciation of Prepare/Enrich, in its evaluative and educative aspects] would perhaps be useful to those who do not use it, yet. If they understood that a mental health professional finds it useful... not said by us, but by those who work as specialists.... then it could be an incentive. (PS-PE2)

The last explored area was the one about the referral. The group acknowledged that pastors should network more with other professionals, especially when pastoring couples with significant psychological distress: "I think they're all right—totally right—when they say they're sorry that no religious person ever sent anybody to them" (PS-PE5). They realized that it is not healthy, nor deontologically correct, for a pastor to try personally to deal with a church member with clinical problems and not to refer him/her to a professional for further help.

At the same time, they suggested cooperating with these professionals but in a symmetrical perspective, as someone verbalized: "surely, they are right. However, I also expect the opposite, meaning that I have never heard of people going to a therapist, and the therapist refers to a pastor for spiritual issues that arose in therapy" (PS-PE2).

It was in this context that pastors appreciated the idea, proposed by a professional, to have an interdisciplinary meeting among Prepare/Enrich facilitators to better know—and learn from one another—the respective professions: pastors—with Prepare educative emphasis—and professionals—with the Enrich clinical emphasis.

Meeting with All Stakeholding Groups

The first meeting was with all the stakeholding groups and was held on October 25 via Zoom. On that occasion, I presented the summative report and the preliminary data analysis, as it emerged from the meeting with the primary stakeholders. The PowerPoint presentation is to be found in Appendix F.

The different groups appreciated the report and identified with its content.

During the dialogue time, the dean of the Italian Seminary intervened, appreciating the presentation and sharing with the group that the Seminary is already working on the curriculum so that every theological student—and not only those who chose the specialization in family ministry—would receive proper training in the field of premarital education. This outcome was very positive for the entire group.

One facilitator appreciated the action-research methodology: “I appreciate this approach because it values the interviewees—[who are] actually, the real protagonists and key players in this project” (AS-FLAY1)

There was no other significant intervention.

Data Analysis: Codes and Categories

In this phase, I started the coding process, which consists of coding and categorizing (Gibbs 2018).

Codes are labels with symbolic meaning (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2020). Coding entails attaching one keyword—a code—to a text section for later identification (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). These designated sections—identified elsewhere also as *units of meaning* (Stringer and Aragón 2021) or *meaningful words or phrases* (Allsop, et al. 2022)—describe ideas, concepts, or events experienced by the interviewee(s).

Categories are clusters or “families” of codes sharing some characteristics and having a consolidated meaning (Saldaña 2021). Categorizing involves conceptualizing a statement more systematically (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). To categorize is to cluster similar or related codes to create patterns and do additional analysis (Saldaña 2014).

While coding is descriptive in its nature, categorizing is a more theoretical and analytical

level of coding. As a result, with the use of categories, we move from description to interpretation (Bazeley and Jackson 2019; Gibbs 2018).

Following the coding methodology outlined by Gibbs (2018), I started identifying, for each stakeholding group, “chunks of text” and finding a code that would have best represented each.

For the coding methods, we used values coding, emotion coding, and process coding (Saldaña 2014). According to Saldaña’s (2021) First Cycle coding methods, the first two types of coding belong to the affective methods—which investigate participants’ emotions or values—while the third one belongs to the elemental methods—which are the “foundational approach” to coding in qualitative data analysis.

We summarize the methods’ major characteristics as follows: *values coding* reflects the participant’s attitudes, values, and beliefs, as well as his/her worldview; *emotion coding* labels the feelings that participants recollect and/or experience or that the researcher infers about participants; *process coding* uses gerunds (“-ing” words) and connotes actions or mental processes in response to situations (Saldaña 2014; 2021). The selection of these methods is because each may help to explore the participants’ experience with Prepare/Enrich, according to the cognitive model of human beings, with its interconnection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Beck 2021; Fenn and Byrne 2013).

Then, the identified codes were organized, developed, and categorized in a more theoretical and analytical way, with the help of the NVivo 1.0 software program (Allsop, et al. 2022; Bazeley and Jackson 2019; Coppola 2011; Gibbs 2014; QSR International 2022a) and according to the above three methods (see tables 3 and 4).

A separate report on the codes involved is given for each of these broad categories. Despite this division, however, these separated codes also have several intersections throughout the groups, as later analysis will point out.

For a graphical representation of the most frequently used words in the coded interviews for each category, I have used NVivo, and Word Pro Cloud for word frequency queries to generate word clouds. These representations help to visually identify concepts and explore major themes (Cidell 2010; DePaolo and Wilkinson 2014; Kabir et al. 2018; Mathews et al. 2015). The method used for creating words was based on the display of words and the length of words found in codes. I chose to have 100 displays of words and limit the display to words with at least five letters to prevent unnecessary words.

As the language of the interviews was Italian, and NVivo does not provide a text content language in this language—and an associated “stop word” list⁷⁴—I had to develop a workaround to obtain word clouds in English. First of all, once I had obtained the query list, I manually marked the Italian stop words and reran the query. Then, I exported the query list to an Excel file and manually translated all the words contained in it. These translated words were copied into a Word file—as NVivo does not work with Excel files—and I ran a new query with this file for a newly generated English word cloud.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ A “stop word” list contains words we do not want to be counted, such as “is” or “the” (Bazeley 2021).

⁷⁵ As the exported Excel file contained every word and its count, I used a formula to automatically repeat each word based on its occurrence. All these words were exported to a Word file, to be imported to NVivo.

Table 3. List of codes for couples' interviews

Categories	Codes	References
Cognitive experience of PE	Program useful	9
	Role of facilitator	9
	Importance of sharing stories	5
	Useful for solving problems	5
	Be empathic	4
	Assessment as a mirror	3
	Importance of preparing	3
	Need to know each other	3
	Facilitator who has experienced PE	2
	Couple complicity	1
	Total	44
Emotional experience of PE	Being helped	13
	Affirmed in self-efficacy	9
	Curious	4
	Pleasant time	4
	Satisfied	3
	Anxiety	2
	Desire for growth	2
	Fear of being judged	2
	Demanding but useful	1
		Total
Experiential experience of PE	Being more aware	15
	Growing in relationship skills	15
	Implementing what learned	11
	Repeating the program	2
	Total	43

Table 4. List of codes for facilitators' interviews

Categories	Codes	References
Cognitive experience of PE	Referral important	19
	Program useful	13
	Assessment as a practical tool	10
	Assessment as a photo	9
	Networking	5
	Co-therapy	2
	Importance of preparing	1
	Total	59
Emotional experience of PE	Satisfied	5
	Confident	4
	Total	9
Experiential experience of PE	Referral not used with educators	9
	Networking	6
	Making diagnosis	5
	Exploring educative aspect PE	2
	Being more aware	1
	Total	23

Cognitive Experience of Prepare/Enrich

The first aspect explored is the cognitive dimension as it emerges from the participants' attitudes, values, beliefs, or worldviews, related to their experience with Prepare/Enrich.

To examine this category in depth, I will refer to the ten codes associated with the couples' interviews and the seven codes associated with the facilitators' interviews.

Couples' analysis

As to the couples, the most significant aspect is the program's perceived usefulness and the facilitator's role. Obviously, the two main "actors" of the program itself.

The experience was evaluated as "very useful [especially] for conflict resolution" (AS-CMIX1). A non-SDA couple expressed a similar evaluation: "I was very pleased... the program has been very much our outrider, our guideline" (AS-CnSDA1). Other adjectives were: "very challenging" (AS-CSDA3) and "interesting" (AS-CSDA2).

A couple gave a rationale about the usefulness of Prepare/Enrich, and their answer shows an above-average understanding of the importance of premarital education:

I think these are courses that need to be taken. Also, because, very often ... so many couples are a little bit... how do you say... are a little bit "unaware." they don't know certain dynamics, and sometimes you are a victim of some... communication issues. Sometimes, you just need to know some things, and one could avoid many unpleasant things, isn't it? So, on that, I acknowledge that it was interesting for me. (AS-CSDA2)

The role of the facilitator has been evaluated paramount for several reasons. First of all, for the mediating role:

Often, maybe... it happens that I have a discussion... we talk, and I say something like: "we would need another person from outside"... sometimes we brought themes or topics that we had talked about on other days, and it was useful for us. So, just a lived experience together with an outside person who could look from another perspective at us, that's all. (AS-CMIX1)

The facilitator also had a role in facilitating the dialogue: “Both of us are not so good at... dialoguing. We needed... a little help, a little guidance to improve this aspect. In this [the facilitator] has been most important” (AS-CMIX1). Or even normalizing the diversity in the couple: “he wanted to assure us that diversity, and the fact that we are not the same in the way we live ... or that we belong, perhaps, to different worlds, does not mean that (it is a problem) ... very often, we can complement each other” (AS-SDA2).

One of the most appreciated aspects of the facilitator’s role was the personal stories shared with the couple: “he helped us from his personal experiences because he was a married person... someone who has a couple background... let’s say, he was able to help us with real examples regarding various issues” (AS-CnSDA1). There was even someone who understood the preventive role of such stories, a healthy way to prepare for the future:

Absolutely the experiences he told us, his personal experiences. (These) are an example... maybe, you have not yet faced those experiences; however, they make you understand how... not to repeat again, in case they are negative experiences. Or, if they are positive experiences, how to work on them. (AS-CSDA4)

I want to report another aspect highlighted by couples, that is, the idea of the assessment as a sort of mirror for the couple, as this is a cross-cutting concept among all stakeholders: “it is a mirror... which returns to you who you are” (AS-CSDA3); “it is as if the course also helped me to see myself inside and manage my emotions differently” (AS-CSDA5); “I also really liked the image that my husband said, the mirror image, because, actually, I think that... I mean... it’s a good metaphor” “AS-CSDA3).

As an integration, the word cloud elaborated with the coded answers in the cognitive area, returns a vivid picture of couples’ perception of the program, that it is primarily: an experience with a facilitator, whose role is to assess, to help, and to give meaning to their experiences. A role comparable to that of a mirror (see figure 5).

the tool is really this initial informative baggage, especially in highly critical situations, because it allows you never to lose track” (AS-FLAY2). For professionals, P/E gives a “snapshot”, it is helpful to make “diagnoses”, and it allows them to have “information that is unlikely to be accessed in couples (for example, abusive situations)... too often, those areas are discovered along the way” (AS-FLAY2).

Regarding the practical aspects of P/E, the facilitators appreciated the set of tools available for the feedback sessions. The added value is that they are supported in their therapeutic and educational role: “(all information)... having all together, all systematized, all organized, even with exercises to do, definitely is a nice added value” (AS-FLAY1); “having a track on which to carry out one’s path... having an idea of the goals, what can be the initial (aspects) of intervention and what to achieve in the end so that even in the clinical aspect one has an idea of where to start and where to go” (AS-FLAY2);

The most mentioned concept is the value of networking and making referrals with other professional certified P/E figures, namely those working in the educational aspects, such as pastors. Although all facilitators were in favor of creating a referral program, the Italian cultural tradition does not educate on how to implement it, and *de facto*, no one has a referral network to work with—which will be explained in more detail when examining the “Experiential experience of P/E.”

As an integration, the word cloud elaborated with the coded answers in the cognitive area returns a vivid picture of facilitators’ perception of the program, that it is primarily: a mission to couples, based on an assessment comparable to a photo, with an educational program. In the background, the need for referral and networking with educators is still present (see figure 6).

Someone was satisfied because he learned a new way of talking about what is still missing in the couple: “also the perspective of not talking about weaknesses but about growth, so to always put in a positive light” (AS-CSDA3).

Another aspect to be considered is the pleasant time they remember when participating in the program, even though it was challenging for many: “(If I had not done this program) I would have missed that little joy in getting together here, at that time, every seven or ten days or so... and having a pleasant conversation, that’s it” (AS-CMIX1); “it was a nice thing to do... to frame ourselves as a couple, to understand...” (AS-CSDA5).

Only two couples expressed some anxiety about taking the assessment because of the “fear” of the results, although that feeling disappeared as soon as they had the first feedback session: “a little bit of anxiety... at the beginning, because... anyway... when you don’t know something... it’s still a form of test that is administered to you” (AS-CMIX1).

As an integration, the word cloud elaborated with the coded answers in the emotional area returns a vivid picture of couples’ perception of the experience: feelings of wellness and happiness, a sense of understanding because of the assessment (see figure 7).

Facilitators’ analysis

As to the facilitators, it is rather evident that they remained more on the cognitive level than the emotional one. I was able to find only two codes, satisfaction, and confidence, for a total of 9 references. Maybe, their professional approach to dealing with others’ emotions did not allow them to explore their own. A plausible alternative—or complementary—reason could be the way I formulated the question.

Experiential Experience of Prepare/Enrich

The third aspect explored is the experiential dimension, as it emerges from the participants' actions or mental processes in response to their experience with Prepare/Enrich.

To examine this category in depth, I will refer to the four codes associated with the couples' interviews and the five codes associated with the facilitators' interviews.

Couples' analysis

Overall, the couples showed a great emphasis on action, both when attending the sessions and when they had to implement on their own what they learned.

During the sessions, they were mainly concentrated on discovering and becoming more aware of themselves as couples: "at that moment (P/E) helped me to get to know him even more" (AS-CMIX1); "the questionnaire helped me discover the couple... but also, and first of all, myself" (AS-CSDA1); "Well... the first word that comes to mind is awareness" (AS-CSDA2); "P/E encouraged me. First of all, it allowed me to know myself and her better during our sessions" (AS-CSDA3).

The couples really put in every effort to benefit from the program, as they recall those moments: "We needed to improve and have more dialogue. Because, maybe, we were still missing some... some pieces of dialogue between us to deal with certain issues" (AS-CMIX2); "I saw some progress as we went along. I mean... I saw the progress of our relationship, because, anyway, the course lasted a while, didn't it?" (AS-CSDA1).

The same effort, later on, is put into everyday life, when they have to remember and implement what they previously learned:

Maybe, when... I'll give you an example... we're angry about something, and we can't communicate.... and just, we're at a level where we can't talk anymore, or anyway... yes, let's say we accuse each other. (Then) we stop and take the P/E, with that particular exercise... (AS-CSDA1)

The same idea, even more elaborated, is expressed in this answer:

Yes, let's say I was struck by this concept of assertiveness, which was something that... let's say... I hadn't heard before. A word that I was not used to hearing or even using. Especially the concept behind it, that is... to know how to ask, to communicate in the right way to the other person... Now, if I express it [correctly] as a wish and the other person is forced to listen to me, because behind it I use my feelings and the right words... the other person not only listens to you, but you allow her to put [it] in the right wavelength and give you a gift, that's it, right? (AS-CSDA2)

So, the experience is not only in the past but also in the present and evolves in the future, as this other couple shares: “the P/E, still today, is, let's say, a benchmark regarding self-evaluation, when we have to take back a problem that we need to solve. And so, let's say the balance is positive and good” (AS-CSDA1)

Even one couple expressed the idea of taking this assessment periodically because human beings tend to forget. Without knowing it, they were referring to the principle of preventive couple checkups (Cordova et al. 2005; Doss et al. 2019) and the follow-up program in P/E, the Couple Checkup (Olson, Larson, and Olson-Sigg 2009):

I think this course—I was just talking about it a while ago—now should be redone, let's say, every six months. We should retake the assessment and reread the notes he left us. Because man tends to forget... It would be nice for each couple, or rather let's talk about us, to take it every six months and reread a little bit of what has been said, studied, analyzed... It helps more. It will help us more. (AS-CSDA2)

Even from the word cloud, the same trend is inferred, as the words displayed are linked to proactive actions: talking, helping, remembering, and knowing (see figure 9).

Facilitators' analysis

As to the facilitators, the most significant aspect is what they are *not* doing, although believed to be helpful and needed: creating a referral network with educational professionals.

know any facilitator... nor even a pastor who is part of this P/E community in my city and prepares the couples with the P/E... We need to know each other... to communicate, have meetings, exchange ideas.. how to say?... our experiences.

In this case, the word cloud does not help to highlight the aspect of creating a referral network, as there is no word related to this (see figure 10). As Turner (2017), the founder and director of Quirkos,⁷⁶ clearly points out, a word cloud is not qualitative analysis; at best, it is a “quantification of qualitative data, presenting only counting” (2017). As a result, one of the limitations of word cloud analysis—as a research tool—is that it treats “each word as the units of analysis” (McNaught and Lam 2010, 641), and it may fail to find actual meaning when specific words are not present in the text (Atenstaedt 2017).

In any case, this word cloud represents how facilitators are involved in implementing this tool through keywords such as: knowing and diagnosis.



Figure 10. Clouds of words in the “Experiential experience of P/E” Category by facilitators (elaboration: NVivo and Pro Word Cloud).

⁷⁶ Quirkos is a relatively new and affordable CAQDAS software (Gibbs 2018) that is usable by people with little to no prior knowledge of research and qualitative data analysis (Lewins and Silver 2009; Silver and Lewins 2014).

Data Reporting: Participatory Written Report

A last meeting with my co-researchers was held on December 12, via Zoom, to work on the participatory written report and to plan future actions.⁷⁷

For the draft of the report, I freely followed one of the case examples in Stringer and Aragón (2021).

The co-researcher pastors were amazed at what we had accomplished together. Moreover, they were very involved in working on the final document: the Participatory Written Report (see Appendix G).

This meeting laid the foundations for phase three, which *de facto* was developed in the same session.

Phase Three: ACT (November-December 2022)

The “Act” phase is for implementing practical solutions: it is the phase where the “real” work starts—unlike traditional research that ends with a report—and the researchers “continue the process of investigation... planning actions... reviewing progress and planning continuing activities” (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 85).

While working on the final report, the co-researchers suggested adding a specific section on the practical actions the Italian Adventist Church should take to reach the goal of this research intervention: to develop a comprehensive approach to premarital education among Seventh-day Adventist pastors in the Italian union.

⁷⁷ The original meeting was planned for November 24 but then postponed to December 12 due to unforeseen pastoral events.

Planning Actions

The researcher and the co-researchers worked on planning specific actions for the Italian Union.

In Appendix G, the entire Participatory Written Report can be read. Here, we would like to share the final suggestions to the Italian Union:

“The researcher, assisted by the research team, highlighted not only key issues but also practical ways of returning and disseminating the research results to foster institutional cultural and practical changes so that premarital education becomes a perceived and implemented pastoral priority.

To Pastors

- Have a space at pastoral meetings in the four Italian fields for the return of the research results, to raise more awareness of the practice of premarital education, dialogue regarding possible tools used as an alternative to Prepare/Enrich, and for pastors continuing education;
- Have a space at the next Pastoral Couple Retreat, in 2023, where the Olivers—world directors of Family Ministries and first trainers of the Italian pastors back in 2016—will present motivational speeches on the topic, along with the researcher’s summary of the intervention.

To the Field

- Prepare spot interviews with couples who have taken the Prepare/Enrich program and agreed to share their experience as testimonials. The participation of the training pastor—and spouse, if applicable—is also

desired. Official and social channels will be used for dissemination, especially having in mind the Ambassador/Youth target audience;

- Invite the above couples to national Ambassador/Youth events for live interviews;
- Publish articles and testimonies for the Adventist press: *Il Messaggero*, HopeMedia Italy.

To the Institutions

- Send this report to the officers of the Italian Union of Seventh-day Adventist Churches, the dean of the Seminary of the Italian Adventist University, and the ADV Publishing House Committee. The hope is that a joint document will be drafted to make explicit the concrete steps that the above parties intend to implement to achieve the objectives of this research” (Appendix G).

Implementing Actions

As stated in chapter four, all primary stakeholders agreed to integrate the new knowledge into their practice as an outcome of their active participation.

All agreed to cooperate for presentations at pastoral meetings in the four Italian fields, for the return of the research results as well as for spot interviews with couples they worked with. These shared presentations will be done according to the principles of participatory presentations (Stringer and Aragón 2021), that is, the direct involvement of primary stakeholders in “providing presentations themselves” (241).

The outcomes of this approach are several:

- increased understanding of the experienced processes;
- a better sense of authenticity to the project, otherwise difficult to achieve;

- fostered self-efficacy and empowerment;
- promoted “feelings of ownership” (241).

We set our final deadline for implementation in September 2023, as described in the following section.

Closing Celebration

During our first meeting, we planned to have our closing celebration during the Italian Union national event, “Forum Permanente per l’Evangelizzazione” (Permanent Forum on Evangelism), on November 26, 2022, as all co-researcher pastors would have attended. As this event has been brought forward one month, we had to choose another date. All agreed to postpone the celebration time to September 2023, at the Italian Pastoral Couples Retreat for the Italian Union. This time will be evocative because among the speakers will be Willie and Elaine Oliver, who, in 2016, trained the pastors and will be speaking about the rationale of premarital education in pastoral ministry.

Summary

This project started as stepwise discoveries of the action research methodology applied to the ecclesiastic context. It was filled with a certain dose of anxiety, mixed with excitement, as it was a totally unexplored field.

Leading the volunteer pastors and gradually transforming them into co-researchers was not easy. Nevertheless, the experience was worthwhile.

The project started in June 2022 and ended in December 2022, although—as action research teaches—such projects never end as they are based on a continuous “recycling set of activities” (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 10).

The Look-Think-Act routine is never finished but reiterates itself as a never-ending spiral (see figure 11).

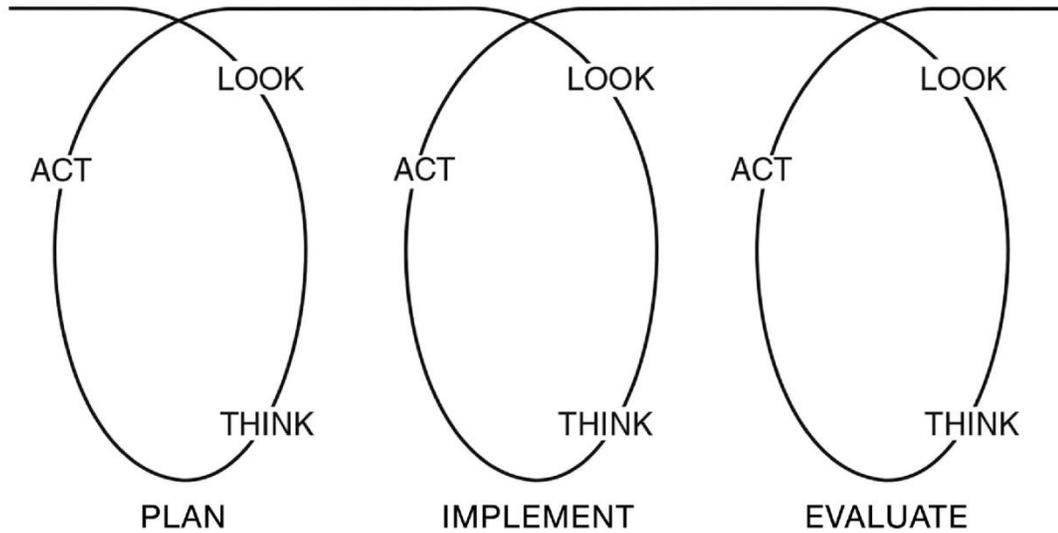


Figure 11. The Look-Think-Act spiral (Stringer and Aragón 2021).

The effects of this “spiral” will be seen in the future. Nevertheless, we may taste some fruits right now, both in the co-researchers and in the researcher himself, as he will be reshaping the Department of Family Ministries according to these findings.

CHAPTER 6

EVALUATION AND LEARNINGS

This chapter's goals are to provide an overview of the project, restate the process used to evaluate the initiative, examine the findings and inferences made in each of the previous chapters, and reveal any changes in the way my ministry has evolved professionally. The chapter ends with recommendations for improving premarital education in the ecclesiastic context.

Summary of the Project

The goal of this project was to develop, implement, and evaluate a comprehensive, systematic, theologically based, and evidence-based approach to marriage life, based on premarital education, for the Italian Adventist pastors. As Italian Adventist pastors never received systematic training on premarital education, it was paramount to build a framework for thinking theologically about premarital education, reviewing current literature, and developing and implementing projects. The intervention adopted the action research approach, where the researcher is more involved with participants—the primary stakeholders, pastors, who are also co-researchers—with the ultimate goal of directly involving them in reflecting on and creating new knowledge and practices. The involvement of couples who took the Prepare/Enrich, and of professional

Prepare/Enrich certified facilitators, gave us a broader perspective on premarital education and laid the premise for further cooperation.

The three-phase framework, the “Look, Think, Act” cycle, allowed the researcher, along with the co-researchers, to explore, reflect and take action to improve premarital education in the Italian Union. In the preliminary phase (June-July 2022), I identified our stakeholder groups—primary, secondary, and associated stakeholders—for a total of 30 participants. I also had some preliminary conversations to lay down the premises to a successive multi-stakeholder dialogue.

In the “Look” phase (July 2022), I gathered data through interviews and reflective writings, and produced a “summative report” with the first raw results. In the “Think” phase (August-November 2022), I discussed data findings both with the co-researcher pastors—my primary stakeholders—and with all other participants—the other stakeholder groups. I also ran extensive data analyses, coding and categorizing the interview material. Finally, I wrote a participatory written report as a synthesis of all analysis and consultations. In the “Act” phase (November-December 2022), I planned, with my co-researchers, future actions to reach the goals of this intervention. A closing celebration event was planned for September 2023, at the Italian Pastoral Couples Retreat for the Italian Union, where I will present a return of this project.

Description of the Evaluation

What follows is a concise description of the evaluation and interpretation of data from the intervention (Chapter 5). Resulting conclusions and observations are also included.

Evaluation Method

For this project's study, a qualitative methodology was used. Data were collected by interviews, reflective writings, and focus groups. Since there were no studies with an action research methodology that we might have utilized to construct concepts and theoretical terminology prior to the coding process, we had to code the data using an inductive technique. The coding process was done with the help of NVivo, the software belonging to the family of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Following the coding process, I looked for overall categories, or themes, that arose from any particular collection of codes and compared them among stakeholding groups. I used NVivo 1.0 and Word Pro Cloud for word frequency queries to generate word clouds that show the most commonly occurring terms in each category of the coded interviews. These visual representations aid in visually exploring concepts and major themes. As in action research, the degree of participant participation determines the study's credibility; the research's participants serve as its primary source of validation, not the research's methodology. Despite the limitations of action research described above, it remains a challenge for this strategy to leave the small environment where knowledge has been created and to spread its findings to a wider setting.

Interpretation of Data (Chapter 5)

Using values coding, emotion coding, and process coding, I ultimately identified three main categories for the experience with Prepare/Enrich by couples and facilitators: the cognitive, the emotional, and the experiential aspect. What follows is a concise description of these aspects, along with a report of the correlation with the pastors' experience of Prepare/Enrich.

As to the cognitive experience of Prepare/Enrich, the most significant aspect in the couples' interviews was the relationship with the facilitator who had a role in modelling—sharing personal stories as a married person; in facilitating and mediating—allowing a safe space where deal with sensitive issues; in mirroring—returning a real image of the couple, with its strengths and weaknesses. As to the facilitators, they appreciated the possibility of having a “snapshot” of couples, useful both for educational interventions and diagnostic purposes. They also valued the structured protocol established to help keep them on track with couples.

As to the emotional experience of Prepare/Enrich, the most significant aspect in the couples' interviews was a feeling of accomplishment as a result of the help received. This satisfaction was due to learning new relational skills and a sense of increased self-efficacy. As to the facilitators, this analysis did not reveal so much since the focus of the facilitators was more on the cognitive than the emotional level.

As to the experiential experience of Prepare/Enrich, the most significant aspect in the couples' interviews was the strong focus on action, both during the sessions and when they had to use what they learned on their own. As to the facilitators, the most important factor is what they were not doing, despite it being thought to be important and necessary: building a network of referrals with academics.

The above results deeply impacted the co-researchers as this was, very probably, the first time they had received feedback on their educative intervention. They realized the importance of sharing some aspects of their marital relationship with the couples, or the importance of their role as mediators and facilitators, or even some overlapping areas with professionals (psychologists and psychotherapists) to further explore reciprocally.

Conclusions Drawn from the Data (Chapter 5)

The above reflection identified some key issues, as reported in the Participated Written Report, the conjoint elaboration for planning future actions (see Appendix G).

Mentors without a mentor

Several pastors in the research group said they had not received any preparation before their marriage and therefore had no model to refer to. They felt they need to have more experience in this field. Moreover, they expected the institutions—both the Italian Union and the Seminary—to invest in more training so that seminary students could obtain a better preparation.

Mentors in couples

The co-researching pastors brought out one critical issue, namely, that premarital education is not always conducted as a couple, although both partners might have received certification as facilitators, and they recognize the educational and mentoring value of the pastoral couple as trainers, where possible. This couple mentoring mirrors similar approaches used in clinical areas, such as: the presence of the therapeutic dyad and the process of self-disclosure.

Growing mentors

Co-researching pastors shared the added value of positive impact on the training couple as they prepare other couples for marriage. It is also crucial that the training couple is personally acquainted with the tool, that they bring an introspective approach to the relationship, and that they are open to conscious and intentional couple growth. There is a similar positive repercussion in the context of one's own pastoral life, as it promotes

both a greater awareness of family issues and develops a preventive approach to ministry of couples and families, as opposed to a reparative one.

Networking mentors

The co-researching pastors expressed the need to relate with other pastors to share challenges encountered in premarital education—and learn from each other—and improve their skills. Regular ad-hoc meetings on specific topics are desired. Both pastors and professionals agree that there is a need for greater attention to networking and growth in the use of referral, in both directions: from the educational to the clinical side, and vice versa.

Mentors/couples as testimonials

Co-researching pastors have increased awareness of their role as key players in promoting a cultural change related to premarital education. The testimony of couples trained by them can also be an excellent tool, as they become genuine testimonials to other young couples—based on the widely evidence-based educative practice of *peer-education* intervention.

Outcomes of the Intervention

The co-researching pastors were amazed at what they accomplished together. Their outcomes from this intervention—especially in regard to the action research approach—are several:

- increased understanding of the experienced processes;
- a better sense of authenticity to the project, otherwise difficult to achieve;
- fostered self-efficacy and empowerment;
- promoted “feelings of ownership” (Stringer and Aragón 2021, 241).

Summary of Chapter Conclusions

In addition to conclusions drawn from the intervention data (Chapter 5), brief summaries of the theological, theoretical, and methodological conclusions reached in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are provided.

Theological Conclusions—Chapter 2

As premarital education has been done mainly in a religious context, and primarily by clergy, it was paramount to wonder about the legitimacy of such practice within an ecclesiastical context and develop an appropriate theology of premarital education. I pointed out the necessity of progressing from a *need* for premarital education to a *value* for premarital education—with its theological ontology. Such reflection, based on God's way of relating to humankind, led to stressing the importance of planned and *ordinary* educative actions rather than a tendency to rely on discontinuous emergency pastoral actions. I concluded that such theology of premarital education should be based on a preventive approach. Moreover, if premarital education has a theological and ecclesiological status, pastors are—consequently—brought into play. Pastors' involvement in premarital education cannot be a marginalized—or elective—pastoral duty.

Theoretical Conclusions—Chapter 3

The literature review has shown that premarital education is based on a preventive approach, as opposed to remedial approaches. The preventive approach can be conceptualized in different levels—primary, secondary, and tertiary—and can be further theorized regarding its goal, whether to decrease the risk or promote mental health. One of the conclusions was that the preventive approach has become increasingly focused on well-being, and not only focusing on reducing relational dysfunctions. The literature review has

also shown the need to include premarital education in a larger framework where the emphasis is not only on the *event* but on what will follow. Premarital education should take responsibility for the marriage as a whole, of which the ceremony is only one phase, and it is to be included in a larger and more comprehensive marriage education approach.

Methodological Conclusions—Chapter 4

I may conclude—freely borrowing from Swinton and Mowat (2016)—by saying that “the research described here has shown a new way of researching and being with people” (259). Both the methodology and methods adopted for this intervention proved to be most appropriate, and were a confirmation of the researcher’s rationale given in chapter 4: (1) action research is relevant to practitioners—whose main job is to do things with groups of people; (2) as in action research the researcher is more involved with participants, this approach would be more suitable for my dual role, being at the same time both the researcher and one of the *potential* participants as a certified pastor using Prepare/Enrich in the Seventh-day Adventist Italian Union; (3) its explorative approach lends itself well to our context, when a group has received little or no systematic empirical study; (4) there is an increased credibility that action research is having in practical theology.

Personal Transformation

This project and implementation has had a great impact on my professional, intellectual, and spiritual life.

Professionally, I added expertise and experience to an insightful approach about premarital education. I still remember my presentation for the Italian department of Family Ministry at the EUD Advisory in Seville, in September 2016 (see figure 12). It was clear in

my mind that premarital education—specifically, the Prepare/Enrich program—should have been part of a larger context, including pre- and post-marriage courses, according to the classic distinction of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. But that primitive intuition needed to grow and expand in reflection and practical implementation; and, at the same time, be firmly anchored in a developed theological ground. During the years of this intervention, I saw myself mastering more the Department of Family Ministry, leading it in a broader perspective, not only in each of its programs—such as family camps or premarital programs—but also in its theoretical and foundational approach. All of these goals have been achieved only thanks to this Doctor of Ministry Program.

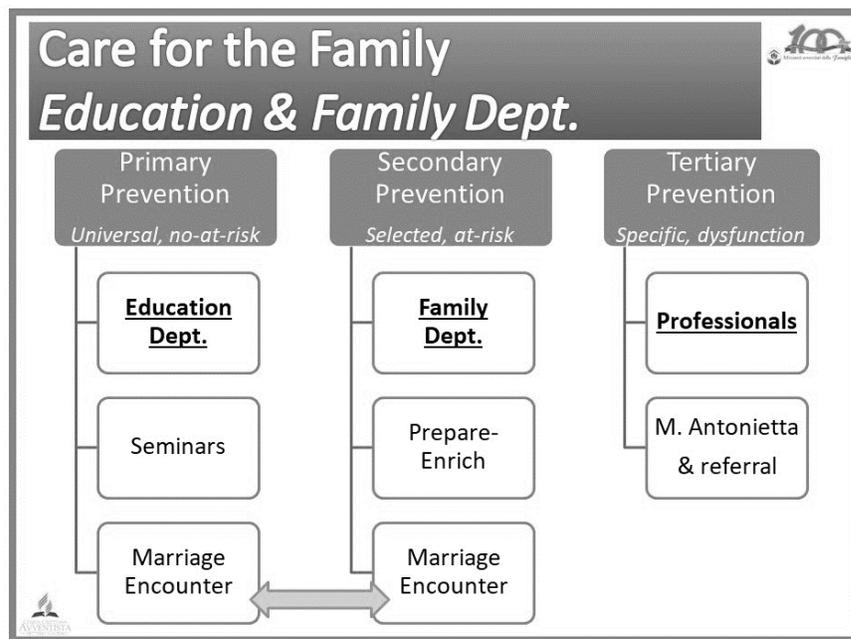


Figure 12. Researcher’s presentation for the department of Family Ministry

Intellectually, it was a positive experience to come back to writing according to required academic and scholarly standards. I already had some experience, as I had to

write theses both for my B.A. and M.A. But this time, the DMin's higher standards demanded a dissertation that pushed me beyond my limits—and it was a greatly welcomed challenge. The highly positive feedback by my advisor and second reader encouraged me to explore every idea, assertion, and hypothesis. Although the most challenging chapter was the methodological one—as I explored a new methodology, even for DMin dissertations at Andrews University—I was able to appreciate the results in the work with my co-researchers as well as in my advisor and second reader's appreciations.

Spiritually, I would never have imagined being engaged in such an exciting—and at the same time, demanding—journey. Many times, I had the impression that I did not know where to go, or that I no longer had sufficient strength to continue. And every time—as it was with the story of the widow at Zarephath and her shortage of food (1 Kings 17), or with the journey of the prophet Elijah to Horeb, the mountain of God (1 King 19)—God provided vision, strength, and encouragement. It was a practical experience of the invitation of God to “not worry” because He is our provider. At every moment of my legitimate and human worry, phrased in biblical terms: “What shall I write? What shall I evaluate about the collected data? What shall I implement?”, God always—and marvelously—answered with the same known refrain: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt 6:34).

Recommendations

The researcher, assisted by the research team, highlighted not only key issues but also practical ways of returning and disseminating the research results to foster cultural

and practical changes within the institution so that premarital education becomes a perceived and implemented pastoral priority in the Italian Union.

To Pastors

1. Have a space at pastoral meetings in the four Italian fields for the return of the research results, to raise more awareness of the practice of premarital education, create more dialogue regarding possible tools used as an alternative to Prepare/Enrich, and enhance pastors' continuing education.

2. Have a space at the next Pastoral Couples Retreat, in 2023, where the Olivers—world directors of Family Ministries and first trainers of the Italian pastors back in 2016—will present motivational speeches on the topic, along with the researcher's summary of the intervention.

To the Field

3. Prepare spot interviews with couples who have followed the Prepare/Enrich program and agreed to share their experience as *testimonials*. The participation of the training pastor—and spouse, if applicable—is also desired. Official and social channels will be used for dissemination, especially having in mind the Ambassador/Youth target audience.

4. Invite couples who have followed the Prepare/Enrich program, together with their pastor facilitator, to national Ambassador/Youth events for live interviews.

5. Publish articles and testimonies for the Adventist press: *Il Messaggero Avventista*, HopeMedia Italy.

To the Institutions

6. Send this report to the officers of the Italian Union of Seventh-day Adventist Churches, the dean of the Seminary of the Italian Adventist University, and the ADV Publishing House Committee. The hope is that a joint document will be drafted to make explicit the concrete steps that the above parties intend to implement to achieve the objectives of this research.

A Final Word

It is essential to reiterate that the emphasis on the educational process should not end at the marriage ceremony. On the contrary, the effort in preparing for married life (*marriage*) should be greater than that in preparing for the marriage ceremony (*wedding*).

From this point of view, a pastor should perceive himself—as an alternative to the widespread perception of the one who prepares the marriage ceremony, as if he were a *wedding planner*—rather with the idea that includes a broader educational and preventive approach, that is, as a *marriage planner*.

He should be a planner who cannot work without the guidance of the divine Planner: “Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain” (Prov 127:1).

APPENDIX A

IRB RESEARCH APPROVAL

November 3, 2021

Roberto Ianno
Tel: 329-293-833 (Italy)
Email: r.ianno@awentisti.it

RE: APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS
IRB Protocol #: 21-109 **Application Type:** Original **Dept.:** Doctor of Ministry
Review Category: Expedited **Action Taken:** Approved **Advisor:** David Penno
Title: Premarital preparation: A comprehensive approach for Seventh-day Adventist pastors in the Italian Union.

This letter is to advise you that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed and approved your IRB application for research involving human subjects entitled: *"Premarital preparation: A comprehensive approach for Seventh-day Adventist pastors in the Italian Union"* IRB protocol number 21-109 under Expedited category. This approval is valid until November 3, 2022. If your research is not completed by the end of this period you must apply for an extension at least four weeks prior to the expiration date. We ask that you inform IRB whenever you complete your research. Please reference the protocol number in future correspondence regarding this study.

Any future changes made to the study design and/or consent form require prior approval from the IRB before such changes can be implemented. Please use the attached report form to request for modifications, extension and completion of your study.

While there appears to be no more than minimum risk with your study, should an incidence occur that results in a research-related adverse reaction and/or physical injury, this must be reported immediately in writing to the IRB. Any project-related physical injury must also be reported immediately to the University physician, Dr. Katherine, by calling (269) 473-2222. Please feel free to contact our office if you have questions.

Best wishes in your research.

Sincerely,



Mordekai Ongo, PhD.
Research Integrity & Compliance Officer

Institutional Review Board -8488 E Campus Circle Dr Room BUL 234 - Berrien Springs, MI 49104-0355
Tel: (269) 471-6361 E-mail: irb@andrews.edu

APPENDIX B

ITALIAN UNION AUTHORIZATION

Segreteria

UNIONE ITALIANA DELLE CHIESE
CRISTIANE AVVENTISTE DEL 7° GIORNO

August 21, 2021

Institutional Review Board
Andrews University
4150 Administrative Drive, Room 322
Berrien Springs, MI 49104-0355



Segretario Generale
Andrei Cretu

Subject: Letter of Authorization to Conduct Research at the Seventh-day Adventist Italian Union.

Dear Institutional Review Board:

Based on my review of the proposed research by Roberto Iannò, I give permission for the researcher to conduct the study entitled "Premarital Preparation: A Comprehensive Approach for Seventh-day Adventist Pastors in the Italian Union" within the Italian Union.

I authorize the researcher to contact: the Italian Adventist pastors (*primary stakeholders*), the Administrators of the Italian Union (*secondary stakeholders*), the Adventist couples who have taken the Prepare/Enrich protocol, and the Adventist practitioners trained in the Prepare/Enrich protocol (*associated stakeholders*). Moreover, I authorize: to recruit those willing to participate in the research; to collect and store data from the participants; to disseminate the results, providing that privacy and confidentiality be maintained. The permission has been granted to the extent of the procedures outline in the IRB protocol we have reviewed. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion. Therefore, the researcher will have to obtain informed consent prior to the subjects' participation.

We will provide the researcher with needed support, as for instance time for conducting the research, possible rooms in institutional buildings for the meetings with the participants, and supervision, to make the data collection process a success.

We understand that the research will include several meetings with the participants abovementioned, and the development of a plan of action to increase the effectiveness of premarital education among the Italian pastors.

We understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the Andrews University IRB.

Segreteria

UNIONE ITALIANA DELLE CHIESE
CRISTIANE AVVENTISTE DEL 7° GIORNO

Please feel free to contact us if you have any concerns or require additional information.

Sincerely,


Andrei Cretu
Executive Secretary Italian Union



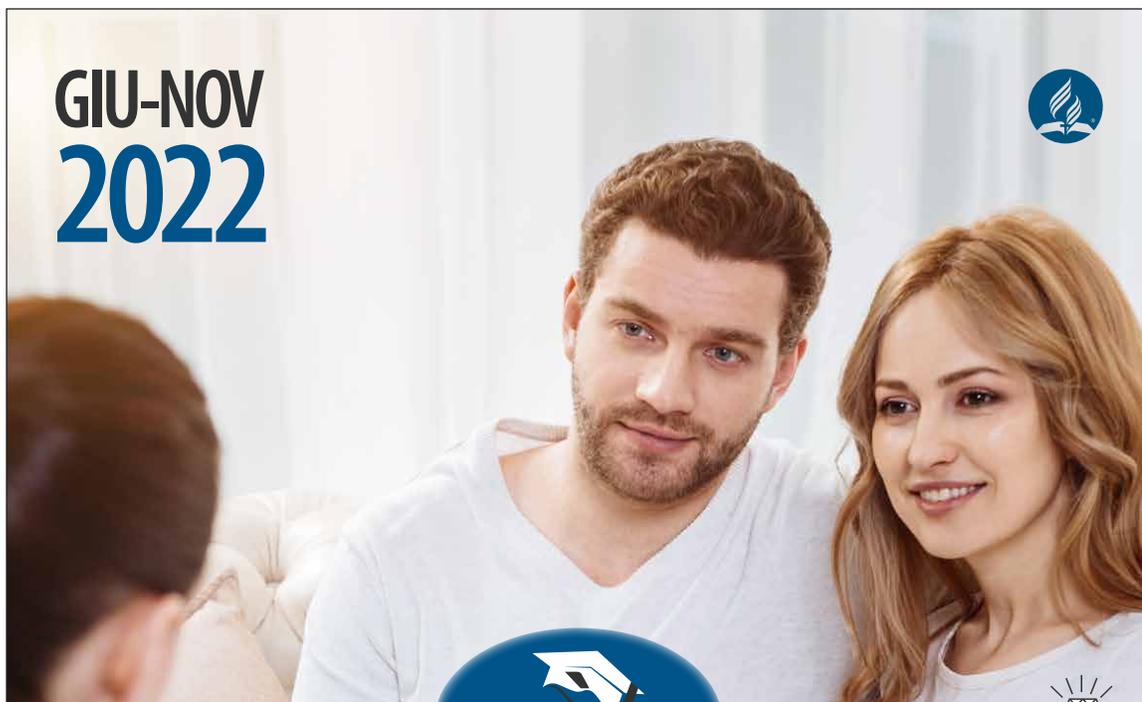
Segretario Generale
Andrei Cretu

LUNGOTEVERE MICHELANGELO, 7 - 00192 ROMA
TEL. +39063609591 | FAX +390636095946 | CF 80421780588 | WWW.CHIESAAVVENTISTA.IT

APPENDIX C

INTERVENTION ADVERTISEMENT: FLYER AND NEWSLETTER

GIU-NOV
2022



PREPARARSI OLTRE IL SI



INIZIA LO STUDIO
per la formazione
di consulenti di coppia
per la preparazione al matrimonio



LA PRIMA RICERCA ITALIANA
sull'uso dello strumento Prepare/Enrich®
per la preparazione al matrimonio
in un contesto denominazionale



LA RICERCA CHE AIUTERÀ
a costruire
matrimoni più solidi
e relazioni più sane

**Diventa un mentore
per i futuri sposi**

Ricercatore: **Roberto Iannò**

GRAFICA: HMI 2022


Ministeri Avventisti
della Famiglia

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

PREPARE ENRICH®
• costruire matrimoni solidi •

JUN-NOV
2022



PREPARING BEYOND THE IDO



THE STUDY BEGINS
to train couples mentors for marriage preparation



THE FIRST ITALIAN RESEARCH
on the use of Prepare/Enrich® for marriage preparation in a denominational context



THE RESEARCH THAT WILL HELP
to build stronger marriages and better relationships

Become a mentor for future spouses

Researcher: **Roberto Iannò**

GRAPHICA HMI 2022



Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

PREPARE ENRICH®
• building strong marriages •

GIU-NOV
2022

PREPARARSI
OLTRE
IL

Ricercatore: **Roberto Iannò**

Ministeri Adventist della Famiglia

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

PREPARE ENRICH
• costruire nozze forti •

Diventa un mentore
per i futuri sposi

GRAFICA IANNÒ 2022

JUN-NOV
2022

PREPARING
BEYOND
THE

Researcher: **Roberto Iannò**

Adventist Family Ministries

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

PREPARE ENRICH
• building strong marriages •

Become a mentor
for future spouses

GRAFICA IANNÒ 2022



TEMa CHIESA, PLAYLIST DIPARTIMENTO FAMIGLIE

Partita la ricerca su Prepare/Enrich® per l'educazione prematrimoniale

11 Luglio 2022 / News Avventisti / 3 min. lett.

Roberto Iannò – Il dipartimento dei Ministeri avventisti della famiglia presenta la prima ricerca italiana sull'uso dello strumento Prepare/Enrich® per la preparazione al matrimonio in un contesto denominazionale. Lo studio è portato avanti dal direttore del dipartimento, Roberto Iannò, candidato al dottorato *Doctor of Ministry* in "Ministeri della famiglia", presso il Seminario teologico avventista della Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

Il titolo della ricerca è "Educazione prematrimoniale: un approccio integrato per i pastori dell'Unione Italiana delle Chiese Cristiane Avventiste del Settimo Giorno". Lo scopo di questo studio è quello di assistere i pastori impiegati dall'Unione italiana, in quanto facilitatori certificati Prepare/Enrich®, ad attuare quei cambiamenti che influenzeranno positivamente il loro lavorare con le coppie in vista della loro preparazione al matrimonio. A questa ricerca collaboreranno diversi soggetti, tra cui: pastori, amministratori, professionisti della relazione d'aiuto, coppie che hanno sperimentato in prima persona il programma Prepare/Enrich®.

Leggi anche: [Educazione prematrimoniale. Sarà inserita nel Manuale di Chiesa](#)

Il programma Prepare/Enrich® è una risorsa per aiutare le coppie a costruire relazioni più solide e conoscere il proprio partner più profondamente, con l'obiettivo di: a) comprendere veramente se stessi e il partner; b) facilitare il dialogo sugli argomenti difficili; c) risolvere i conflitti; avvicinare la coppia.

Il programma Prepare/Enrich® è costruito su un solido fondamento scientifico e aiuta le coppie ad avere un dialogo aperto e sincero su argomenti sui quali è difficile dialogare. Con questo strumento di valutazione, sarà più semplice comprendere il proprio partner e creare una relazione più sana e più profonda.

Il programma parte, prima di tutto, da un questionario online che aiuta la coppia a identificare le aree di forze e gli ambiti di sviluppo della loro relazione. Poi, con un facilitatore certificato, ci sono degli incontri con lo scopo di aiutare a comprendere e discutere i risultati, oltre a imparare delle competenze relazionali. Il programma è pensato per essere, in ogni sua fase, un'esperienza confortevole, rilassante, e persino divertente.

Con il programma Prepare/Enrich® si imparerà come:

- identificare le aree di forze e gli ambiti di sviluppo
- rafforzare le competenze comunicative
- migliorare le competenze per la risoluzione dei conflitti

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- conoscere le rispettive famiglie di origine
- discutere serenamente di argomenti finanziari
- affrontare temi legati all'intimità e alla sessualità
- fissare obiettivi personali, di coppia e familiari

Il programma Prepare/Enrich® è lo strumento giusto da donare al proprio matrimonio. Il matrimonio è una delle relazioni più importanti e soddisfacenti che si potranno mai avere. Ma, come per qualsiasi altra relazione di qualità, la soddisfazione è proporzionale all'impegno. Un buon matrimonio richiede un investimento di tempo, energie e impegno nei confronti del proprio partner e della relazione.

Come diciamo in Prepare/Enrich: "Il matrimonio è un viaggio. È utile avere una guida. Prepare/Enrich® aiuta a costruire matrimoni più solidi e relazioni più serene".

Puoi visitare il sito di Prepare/Enrich® per saperne di più: prepare-enrich.it

In attesa dei risultati finali, puoi preparare per questo progetto. Se vuoi saperne di più, puoi chiedere informazioni al sottoscritto, scrivendo a: r.iano@avventisti.it

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ALL NEWS

News



Photo: Shutterstock

ITALY WILL BE A PILOT COUNTRY FOR THIS IMPORTANT PROJECT.
Pre-marital education will be included in the Church Manual

JUL 14, 2022 NOTIZIE AVVENTISTE, EUDNEWS.

[EUD NEWS \(EN/\)](#) > [ALL NEWS \(EN/ALL-NEWS/\)](#)

> **PRE-MARITAL EDUCATION WILL BE INCLUDED IN THE CHURCH MANUAL**

The Italian Union's Department of Family Ministries presents the first Italian research on the use of Prepare/Enrich[®] assessment for premarital education in a denominational context.

The research study is done by the director of the department, Roberto Iannò, a Doctor of Ministry (DMin) candidate specializing in Family Ministry at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, located in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

The research title is: *Premarital Preparation: A Comprehensive Approach for Seventh-day Adventist Pastors in the Italian Union.*

The purpose of this research is to assist pastors, employed by the Seventh-day Adventist Italian Union, to make those needed changes in their work as certified Prepare/Enrich facilitators. The goal is to encourage changes that will positively impact their own efforts in working with couples in their preparation for marriage.

Several people will collaborate in this research study: pastors, administrators, practitioner certified Prepare/Enrich[®] facilitators, couples who have benefitted from the Prepare/Enrich[®] program.

GC Session 2022

When this project started, four years ago, in 2018, nobody would have imagined that, some years later, the 2022 General Conference in St. Louis would have voted to add a [paragraph to the Church](#)

<https://news.eud.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2022-07-14/pre-marital-education-will-be-included-in-the-church-manual/>

[manual \(https://adventistreview.org/gc-action/premarital-education-counseling-church-manual-addition/\)](https://adventistreview.org/gc-action/premarital-education-counseling-church-manual-addition/) to emphasize the importance of this valuable ministry of premarital education/counseling.

On June 9, delegates at the World Assembly 2022 voted to add the *Premarital Education/Counseling* section to the Church Manual, to better prepare couples who are planning to marry and reduce potential divorce rates. Approved with 93.3 percent of the votes, this section will be included in Chapter 13 of the Church Manual, entitled *Marriage, Divorce and Second Marriages*, after the engagement section.

More about the Prepare/Enrich Program

The Prepare/Enrich program is a resource to help couples establish stronger relationships and get to know each other like never before, with the goal of: a) truly understanding their spouse and themselves; b) making difficult conversations easier; c) resolving conflicts; and d) bringing couples closer together.

The Prepare/Enrich program is a proven tool, scientifically developed to help couples stimulate honest, open dialogue about some of the hardest-to-discuss subjects. Using our assessment tools, you'll find it easier to understand your partner and create a deeper, healthier relationship.

The program begins, first of all, by taking the Prepare/Enrich online assessment to identify the couple's current strengths and growth areas in their relationship. Then, the couple meets with a trained facilitator who provides feedback to help understand their results as well as teach important relationship skills. From beginning to end, the program is designed to be comfortable, relaxed, and even fun.

Marriage is one of the most important and satisfying relationships one will ever have. And like any quality relationship, to get a lot out of it, you have to put a lot into it. A successful marriage takes an investment of time, effort, and a commitment to your partner and the relationship.

The Inter-European Division's support

"The EUD administration and the EUD Family Ministries [teams] supported these studies and are grateful for Roberto Iannò's work on the subject. Pastor Iannò made an incredible tool accessible to couples in Italy," commented Rainer Wanitschek, EUD Family Ministries director.

"More than 4,000,000 couples have prepared for marriage or enriched their relationship through taking the Prepare/Enrich assessment and working with a Certified Facilitator worldwide. The assessment itself has been proven to improve relationship satisfaction; however, there is something extraordinary about the relationship a facilitator develops with a couple that truly helps the couple grow more than they would on their own," continued Wanitschek.

"Preparing couples for marriage is important, so important that it has been found to reduce the rate of divorce by 30%. Premarital counseling, coaching, and education are investments in your couples' futures, investments you shouldn't risk passing up. Overall, Prepare/Enrich is an excellent tool with substantial evidence supporting its reliability and validity of its scores and their uses. It can be used effectively to improve couple relationships. Thank you, Roberto (Iannò), for your studies, energy and engagement [towards] improving couples' relationships in Italy," concluded Wanitschek.

To know more about the project, click [here \(https://www.prepare-enrich.com/\)](https://www.prepare-enrich.com/).

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We take the protection of your personal data seriously. The data you provide will not be

<https://news.eud.adventist.org/en/all-news/news/go/2022-07-14/pre-marital-education-will-be-included-in-the-church-manual/>

2/3



**Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Newsletter to pastors**

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The research title is: *Premarital Preparation: A Comprehensive Approach for Seventh-day Adventist Pastors in the Italian Union.*

The purpose of this research is to assist pastors, employed by the Seventh-day Adventist Italian Union, to make those needed changes, in their work as certified Prepare/Enrich facilitators, that will impact positively their own efforts on working with couples in their preparation for marriage.

Several will collaborate in this research study: pastors, administrators, practitioner certified Prepare/Enrich facilitators, couples who had benefitted from the Prepare/Enrich program.

To this regard, the Italian Union has already granted the Letter of Authorization to conduct research at the Seventh-day Adventist Italian Union. Those of you who will be recruited are authorized to participate and to include the time spent in their work report.

The news has been advertised in HopeMedia Italy: [\(link\)](#)

While you wait for the final results, you may pray for this project. If you want to now more about it, you can contact me mailing at: r.ianno@avventisti.it



**Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Newsletter to Churches**

The Department of Family Ministries presents the first Italian research on the use of Prepare/Enrich[®] assessment for premarital education in a denominational context.

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Several will collaborate in this research study: pastors, administrators, practitioner certified Prepare/Enrich[®] facilitators, couples who had benefitted from the Prepare/Enrich[®] program.

The Prepare/Enrich[®] program is a resource to help couples establish stronger relationships and get to know each other like never before, with the goal of: a) to truly understand their spouse and themselves; b) to make difficult conversations easier; c) to resolve conflicts; d) to bring couples closer together.

The Prepare/Enrich[®] program is a proven tool, scientifically developed to help couples stimulate honest, open dialogue about some of the most hard to discuss subjects. Using our assessment tools, you'll find it easier to understand your partner and create a deeper, healthier relationship.

Your program begins, first of all, by taking the Prepare/Enrich[®] online assessment to identify the couple's current strengths and growth areas in their relationship. Then, the couple meets with a trained facilitator who provides feedback to help understand their results as well as teach important relationship skills. From beginning to end, the program is designed to be comfortable, relaxed, and even fun.

The Prepare/Enrich[®] program will teach how to:

- identify current strengths and growth as a couple
- strengthen communication skills
- resolve conflicts
- uncover stressful areas
- understand and appreciate personality differences
- explore your families of origin
- comfortably discuss financial issues
- address issues related to intimacy and sexuality
- establish personal, couple, and family goals

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The Prepare/Enrich[®] program is the right tool to give one's marriage. Marriage is one of the most important and satisfying relationships one will ever have. And like any quality relationship, to get a lot out of it, you have to put a lot into it. A successful marriage takes an investment of time, effort, and a commitment to your partner and the relationship.

As we use to say in Prepare/Enrich: *Marriage is an adventure. It helps to give a guide. Prepare/Enrich[®] helps to build stronger relationships and healthier relationship.*

You can visit our website to know more about it: prepare-enrich.it

While you wait for the final results, you may pray for this project. If you want to now more about it, you can contact me mailing at: r.ianno@avventisti.it

APPENDIX D

RECRUITING LETTERS AND INFORMED CONSENT



**Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Recruiting Letter**

Principal Investigator: Roberto Iannò, Director of the Department of Family Ministries (Italian Union of Seventh-day Adventist Church), and Professor of Theology of Family (Italian Adventist University “Villa Aurora”)

DMin Candidate
Email: r.ianno@avventisti.it

Research Project Advisor: David Sedlacek, PhD, LMSW, CFLE, Professor of Family Ministry and Discipleship; Chair of the Department of Discipleship and Religious Education (Andrews University)
Email: sedlacek@andrews.edu

Hi,
my name is Roberto Iannò, Director of the Department of Family Ministries and DMin doctoral candidate in Family Ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University.

As a part of my doctoral professional dissertation, I am conducting a research study to assist pastors, employed by the Seventh-day Adventist Italian Union, to make those needed changes, in their work as certified Prepare/Enrich facilitators, that will impact positively their own efforts on working with couples in their preparation for marriage.

You have been invited to take part in this research as *primary stakeholder* because you are a pastor working for the Italian Union of Adventist Churches and trained as Prepare/Enrich facilitator.

You may refuse to take part and can withdraw at any time, as stated in the form on the consent letter. If you agree to take part, you will be involved in the following methods of data collection:

1. Take part in a one-to-one interview
2. To do some reflective writings on an assigned outline
3. Attendance, as an active participant, in group discussions and a plenary session

We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. Agreement to participate in this research should not entail the loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Andrews University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data collected during the research will be kept securely in the researcher’s personal computer and the Italian Union’s cloud. Your participation in the research will be kept anonymous and confidential as you will not be named at any stage and a code will be used to represent participants.

**YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS TO KEEP,
TOGETHER WITH A COPY OF YOUR CONSENT FORM**

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As a part of my doctoral professional dissertation, I am conducting a research study to assist pastors, employed by the Seventh-day Adventist Italian Union, to make those needed changes, in their work as certified Prepare/Enrich facilitators, that will impact positively their own efforts on working with couples in their preparation for marriage.

You have been invited to take part in this research as *secondary stakeholder* because you are involved in a leadership position over the participating pastors in the study.

You may refuse to take part and can withdraw at any time, as stated in the form on the consent letter. If you agree to take part, you will be involved in the following methods of data collection:

1. Take part in a one-o-one or group interview
2. A single attendance, as an active participant, in a plenary session.

We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. Agreement to participate in this research should not entail the loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Andrews University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data collected during the research will be kept securely in the researcher’s personal computer and the Italian Union’s cloud. Your participation in the research will be kept anonymous and confidential as you will not be named at any stage and a code will be used to represent participants.

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You have been invited to take part in this research as *associated stakeholder* because you are either a practitioner certified Prepare/Enrich facilitator or a couple who had benefitted from the Prepare/Enrich program.

You may refuse to take part and can withdraw at any time, as stated in the form on the consent letter. If you agree to take part, you will be involved in the following methods of data collection:

1. Take part in a one-to-one interview
2. A single attendance, as an active participant, in a plenary session.

We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. Agreement to participate in this research should not entail the loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Andrews University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

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**Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Informed Consent Form**

Principal Investigator: Roberto Iannò, Director of the Department of Family Ministries (Italian Union of Seventh-day Adventist Church), and Professor of Theology of Marriage and Family (Italian Adventist University “Villa Aurora”)

DMin Candidate

Email: r.ianno@avventisti.it

Research Project Advisor: David Sedlacek, PhD, LMSW, CFLE, Professor of Family Ministry and Discipleship; Chair of the Department of Discipleship and Religious Education (Andrews University)

Email: sedlacek@andrews.edu

Research Title: Premarital Preparation: A Comprehensive Approach for Seventh-day Adventist Pastors in the Italian Union.

Statements about the Research:

This research study is part of my doctoral project, in partial fulfillment for my Doctor of Ministry in Family Ministry, at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this research is to assist pastors, employed by the Seventh-day Adventist Italian Union, to make those needed changes, in their work as certified Prepare/Enrich facilitators, that will impact positively their own efforts on working with couples in their preparation for marriage.

Procedures: As a pastor, you will be asked to share your experience in premarital preparation, using Prepare/Enrich. If you are an administrator, you will be asked to share your expectations from pastors doing premarital preparation within the Italian Union. If you are either a couple, who has taken the Prepare/Enrich protocol, or a certified Prepare/Enrich facilitator, you will be asked to give your own perspective to the premarital education process.

You will participate as co-researchers and will be involved in co-creating a plan of action to reach the goal of this study.

Duration of participation in study: We understand that the research will last no longer than six months, consisting of one personal interview and a couple of meetings.

Risks and Benefits: We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. We expect to offer some direct benefit, both to pastors and the other participants, as we will co-create some useful plans of action in premarital education.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is completely voluntary, refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security. The information provided by you will remain confidential. No one except principal investigator (Roberto Iannò) will have access to it. Your name and identity will also not be disclosed at any time. However, the data may be seen by an ethical review committee and will eventually be published in a Doctor of Ministry thesis and possibly elsewhere, but without ever giving your name or disclosing your identity.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent of the law. There will be nothing linking you to the study. None of your identifiers, if any, will be used in any report or publication.

Whom to Contact: If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, contact my advisor David Sedlacek, sedlacek@andrews.edu; or researcher Roberto Iannò, (+39) 329/9293833, r.ianno@avventisti.it. You can also contact the IRB Office at: irb@andrews.edu or at (+1) 269 471-6361.

Statement of Consent.

I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I Consent to take part in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

Your Signature _____

Date _____

Investigator's Name (printed) _____

Investigator's Signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS



**Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Interview Questions**

Principal Investigator: Roberto Ianno, Director of the Department of Family Ministries (Italian Union of Seventh-day Adventist Church), and Professor of Theology of Family (Italian Adventist University “Villa Aurora”)
DMin Candidate
Email: r.ianno@avventisti.it

0 - Setting the stage

1. Preliminary conversation with primary/secondary/associate stakeholders

1) *I met with pastors—as primary stakeholders—to start our focus group, explaining the entire intervention and the basic principles of action research.*

- **“What motivated you to join this group? What do you think you will receive from this participation? Do you have questions about this collaboration?”**

I asked pastors—as primary stakeholders—to do some “reflective writings” about their role and feelings in premarital education. Each journal has been collated anonymously as a single document and being shared with the whole group so that every participant could be aware of each other’s ideas and feelings regarding our issue (Cameron et al. 2010). The question is:

- **“What are my experiences in preparing couples for marriage? How did I feel the first time I used the Prepare/Enrich protocol? How did my feelings evolve over time with that couple—and with couples at large—as my experience and knowledge of the entire process had been developing? How do I feel now? What do I need most to be more effective as mentor for premarital couples? What can the Department of Family Ministry implement to improve my expertise as mentor?”**

2) *I asked administrators—the secondary stakeholders—to tell about their expectations about premarital education among pastors, and the role Prepare/Enrich could have in improving their ministry to couples. The questions are:*

- Italian SDA Union - **“What premarital education resources did the Italian Union adopt in the past? Are you familiar with some of those? In which way, you—as administrators—can have an active role in promoting premarital educations among Italian pastors? What are the main needs of premarital couples? How can Prepare/Enrich meet those needs?”**
- Italian SDA University – **“Pastors have, among their specific tasks, that of following couples in their marriage preparation... what specific training do they receive during the years of formation at school? Among those pastors who are most involved in marriage preparation, many of them have chosen *Religion, Rights and Society* instead of *Pastoral Family*... but now they realize that they lack specific preparation in pastoral care to families and in counseling, that actually absorbs most of their time. How can the School and the Union respond to this need?**

3) *I asked couples—the associate stakeholders—to tell about their experience with Prepare/Enrich and how the facilitator’s role helped them to focus on relationship and improve it. The question is:*

- **“What were your expectations about the Prepare/Enrich assessment? How did the facilitator help you in your relationship and skills? What would you have missed in your relationship if you had not taken the Prepare/Enrich? How has your relationship evolved as a result of this program?”**

4) *I asked practitioners—the associate stakeholders—to tell about their professional experience with Prepare/Enrich and what type of synergies could be implemented with the pastors preparing couples for marriage. The question is:*

- **“How did—could—Prepare/Enrich improve your work with couples?”**

Prepare/Enrich is also used as an educational tool in assisting couples for marital relationship: have you ever received a couple sent by a marriage educator? The (Italian) code of ethics for psychologists, article 37, provides for the possibility of making appropriate referrals with other professionals when indicated and professionally appropriate: what type of referrals would you see desirable (if any) between marriage educators, certified P/E facilitators (including spiritual guides, such as pastors and priests), as they train couples for marriage, and psychologist/psychotherapist?”

1 – LOOK phase

1. Preliminary interviews with primary stakeholders

For this guided conversation, I used “Grand Tour Questions”, a type of interview that enables the research participants to describe a given situation in their own words, without a structured grid or directive focus (Poole and Mauthner 2014; Stringer and Aragón 2021). Examples of such questions are:

- **“Tell me about your experience in premarital education, both when you received it for your marriage and when you were the facilitator. Describe how you prepare yourself before meeting a couple. What do sessions of premarital education teach you about your own marriage/ministry?”**

If needed, I used some “Prompt Questions”, for assisting the participants in further develop their flow, such as:

- **“Tell me more about... Is there anything else you may add about...?”**

2. Member checking

Following this first phase, I did member check with the informants my data to improve their validity and enhance transferability. (Brear 2018)

2 – THINK phase

1. Collaborating: meeting with primary stakeholders & discussion/evaluation data

With the research participants I started building the “body of knowledge and understanding” (Stringer and Aragón 2021) useful for reflection and action.

In a meeting with the “primary stakeholders”, I discussed our gathered data: (1) the preliminary conversations with all the stakeholders; (2) the collected reflecting writings, from primary stakeholders; (3) the preliminary interviews with the primary stakeholders.

This meeting had another goal: to evaluate together with the participating pastors whether data are sufficient, or we need other sources of data, and further stages of data gathering, such as surveys and questionnaires, or institutional documents and records.

- **“How does the data help us answer the research question?”**
- **“Is there anything that surprised/impressed you?”**
- **“What type of vision and/or approach emerges from the data regarding premarital education?”**
- **“How does this view fit in with a biblical view of marriage? Where does it depart from?”**

2. Collaborating: meeting with all stakeholders & Analysis workshop

To engage all the stakeholding groups in a collective process of analysis to produce a participated written report.

- **“What strikes you from this overall picture? Convergences, or divergences?”**
- **“Is your perspective—as a stakeholder—well represented?”**

3 – ACT phase

1. Planning meeting with primary stakeholders

Stakeholders to evaluate future actions. Action research is aimed at transformation.

- “What can we *do now*?”
- “In which ways our premarital counseling can be improved from now on?”
- “How could we benefit from a professional network with other stakeholders?”
- “Which is the ‘best interest’ of the couples we are working with?”
- “What kind of action—and transformation—can we take from now on?”

Reference List

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- Cameron, Helen, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Clare Watkins. 2010. *Talking About God in Practice. Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*. London: SCM Press.
- Poole, Jennifer M., and Oliver Mauthner. 2014. "Interviews." In *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research*, edited by David Coghlan and Mary Brydon-Miller, 463-465. Los Angeles: Sage, 2014.
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APPENDIX F

ANALYSIS WORKSHOP WITH STAKEHOLDING GROUPS



GOALS:

1. **Acquaintance** among participants
 2. **Sharing** partial results
 3. **Creating** new knowledge
 4. **Developing** good practices
 5. **Contributing** to the final report
- > Sense of Community

Stakeholders	Pastors		Administrators		Practitioners			Couples			TOT
	PE	nPE	Officers	Others	SDA	WC	LAY	SDA	MIX	HSDA	
Primary	7	3									10
Secondary			2	3							5
Associated					3	1	3	5	2	1	15

STAKEHOLDING GROUPS (N=30)



EDUCATORS/PASTORS

Seventh-day Adventist
Theological Seminary
Andrews University

- Pioneers
- PME promoters



PIONEERS: not received PME/taken for granted/russian-roulette dynamics/first family-community as mentors

-> training proposal x Seminary

PME PROMOTERS: requirement to marry-responsibility/new psychological culture

-> appreciate benefit for couples. Example: pedal assisted

PROMOTRI PME: requisito per sposare-responsabilità/nuova cultura psicologica

-> apprezzano beneficio per le coppie. es. pedalata assistita

EDUCATORS - COUPLES

Seventh-day Adventist
Theological Seminary
Andrews University

- P/E: objective evaluation
 - worries/confirmation
- P/E: educative
 - growing experience
- P/E & peer-education



P/E as OBJECTIVE : eliminated subjective factor (it was obstacle to therapeutic alliance)

- compensate (anxiogenic) emphasis on assessment

P/E as TOOL: structured educational program

- topics never addressed in therapy/dialogue & conflict resolution

- awareness, managing differences,

- it would be missed: **photo, mirror** (see facilitators), **safe space** do dialogue

PEER-EDUCATION: *testimonial couples* at YOUTH meetings.

EDUCATORS - FACILITATORS

Seventh-day Adventist
Theological Seminary
Andrews University

- Spouse's participation
 - co-therapy
- Personal examples
 - self-disclosure
- Couple's evaluation
 - snapshot / diagnosis
- Networking
 - referral



SPOUSE'S PARTECIPATION: pastoral dyad (role-modeling for the couple, alliances)
- therapeutic dyad (better data collection, holistic approach, shared responsibility)

PERSONAL EXAMPLES: what couples remember most: testimonies
- positive for therapeutic alliance (psychodynamic therapists less likely)

EVALUATION: pastors impressed by use/appreciation of professionals

WORKING NETWORK: bi-directional referral

EDUCATORS - INSTITUTIONS

Seventh-day Adventist
Theological Seminary
Andrews University

- **Lack of training**
 - **UICCA: nothing before P/E**
 - **FAT: PDF Vs RDS**
- **Culture of mentoring**
 - **UICCA: train mentors couples**
 - **FAT: train to relationships**



SEMINARY: privatization of family ethical choices.... affected SEMINARY curriculum.

Seventh-day Adventist
Theological Seminary
Andrews University

The effort put into preparing for the marital life—*marriage*—should be more than the one put into preparing the ceremony—*wedding*.

We are *marriage planner*

Seventh-day Adventist
Theological Seminary
Andrews University

Let's dialogue...

Thanks.

9

7

APPENDIX G

PARTICIPATED WRITTEN REPORT



**Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Participated Written Report**

Research Title: Premarital Preparation: a Comprehensive Approach for Seventh-day Adventist Pastors in the Italian Union

Principal Investigator: Roberto Iannò, Director of the Department of Family Ministries (Italian Union of Seventh-day Adventist Church), and Professor of Theology of Family (Italian Adventist University “Villa Aurora”)
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Introduction

This is a report to the pastors of the Italian Union of Seventh-day Adventist Churches regarding the progress of an action research study entitled “Premarital Education: a Comprehensive Approach for Seventh-day Adventist Pastors in the Italian Union.” The research has been conducted by Roberto Iannò—a Doctor of Ministry candidate in “Family Ministries” at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI (USA)—along with a group of ten Adventist pastors as co-researchers.

The study analyzes, in particular, the use of PREPARE/ENRICH®, a scientifically proven program to help certified pastors to make a significant impact in the lives of engaged couples to help them build stronger and more lasting relationships.

This report includes the following:

- A brief description of the background of the action research project and its critical issues;
- The project’s objective;
- A summary of the key issues identified in the research;
- A conclusion.

The researcher, together with the ten co-researchers, analyzed the data that emerged from interviews and *focus groups* done with the following subjects—the research stakeholders:

- Pastors who use the PREPARE/ENRICH® tool for premarital education, as well as a small number of pastors who do not use it;
- Administrators of the Italian Union, and the Dean of the Italian Adventist University Seminary;
- Couples who have followed the PREPARE/ENRICH® educational program in their preparation for marriage, whether both Adventist, mixed, or non-Adventist;
- Certified PREPARE/ENRICH® facilitator psychologists in denominational (Adventist, Catholic) and secular settings.

Background of the Ministry Context

The research project took place in the territory of the Italian Union of Seventh-day Adventist Churches and concerns premarital education as offered in the Italian Union.

The Italian Union, only recently in 2016, officially adopted a tool for premarital education offered by its pastors: the PREPARE/ENRICH® tool. The training was held at the Italian Adventist University “Villa Aurora” in Florence, on September 3, 2016, at a pastoral retreat attended by pastoral families, too. The training was conducted by Mr. Willie and Mrs. Elaine Oliver—directors of the Department of Family Ministries at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in Silver Spring, Maryland, USA—and by the researcher—director of the Department of Family Ministries in the Italian Union—as co-trainer. Sixty-one pastors and 49 spouses were trained and received the international PREPARE/ENRICH® facilitator certification, providing them the skills to administer the online assessment, interpret couples’ reports, provide useful feedback to couples, teach relationship skills, and conduct practical exercises for couples to improve their couple relationship.

Despite the 2016 training, and although the task of counseling couples for marriage is among the pastoral priorities, premarital education within the Italian Union remains an underdeveloped, and rather underestimated, area.

Critical Issues

The **critical issue** highlighted by the research team concerns the process of marriage preparation of couples by Adventist pastors.

The **issues** are several: (1) the inadequate—if not absent—academic preparation in this regard; (2) the lack of an established policy in the Italian Union in the area of premarital education, leaving each pastor the initiative on whether—and how—to do it; (3) the relatively recent adoption of the PREPARE/ENRICH® program, which prevented Italian pastors from strengthening its use; (4) the even meager use of the PREPARE/ENRICH® tool by pastors (according to data available to the Department of Family Ministries), leaving open the question of whether other—and which?—tools are used, or, if on the contrary, none are used; (5) the lack of an authentic theological-pastoral culture of premarital education.

The problem is that pastors do not receive any specific preparation, during their academic training, in the area of premarital education, nor have they generally received adequate preparation in their own marriages. Interviews conducted with a sample of pastors indicate that most of them have not taken a course in premarital education, which the celebrant considered to be almost taken for granted or taken as superfluous given the specificity of the nascent pastoral couple, considered already having mastered couple skills.

Another problem is the lack of published material regarding relationship and family education—a topic now absent for many decades in the Adventist religious press, whose last publication dates back to the 1980s. This leaves couples themselves uneducated about the importance of investing in their relationship as well as demanding the best in premarital education.

Finally, at present, there is no actual institutional policy regulating the PREPARE/ENRICH® certification of new trainee pastors—and continuing education of those already certified—nor the premarital preparation (compulsory?) prerequisites required for a marriage celebration officiated by a pastor.

Objectives

The researcher's ultimate goal—together with the 10 co-researchers—is to assist pastors employed by the Seventh-day Adventist Italian Union to make changes in their work as certified PREPARE/ENRICH® facilitators, changes that will positively impact their own efforts on working with couples in their preparation for marriage.

Summary of the Key Issues

Below is the summary of the key issues as they emerged from: (1) interviews with pastors on the research team; (2) interviews with couples who have taken the PREPARE/ENRICH® program; 3) interviews with certified PREPARE/ENRICH® professionals; and (4) interviews with administrators from the Italian Adventist Union and the Italian Adventist University Seminary.

Mentors without a mentor

Several pastors in the research group said they had not received any preparation before their marriage and therefore had no model to refer to.

Both the Italian Union and the Italian Adventist University Seminary agree that we need to catch up and do something more concrete for pastors in training. The Seminary, in particular, has decided to initiate an in-depth reflection on the study curriculum—both from a theoretical point of view, such as a course in “Theology of Couples and Family,” and from a practical-pastoral point of view, such as training in the theoretical-scientific foundations of the preventive approach to couples’ relationships—in order to offer future pastors a more comprehensive training regarding couple relationships.

Mentors in couples

The co-researching pastors brought out one critical issue, namely, that premarital education is not always conducted as a couple, although both partners might have received certification as facilitators, and they recognize the educational and *mentoring* value of the pastoral couple as trainers.

The interviews with couples revealed that one of the most appreciated factors was listening to the pastoral couple's real stories, which became even more credible if presented by the couple. In particular, these shared stories helped couples have more realistic expectations and compensate for the tendency to idealize couples deemed "perfect"—including the pastoral couple. A positive repercussion also occurs toward the pastoral couple who, as they shared their stories honestly, come to have a more realistic view of themselves. In this regard, one co-researcher coined this meaningful expression: *we are both facilitators and fragilitators*¹.

This couple mentoring mirrors similar approaches used in clinical areas: on the one hand, co-therapy, where the presence of the therapeutic dyad provides the therapeutic intervention with better data collection, two different points of view, a holistic approach, and shared responsibility; on the other hand, that of self-disclosure, where the conscious and intentional disclosure of certain aspects of self by the therapist to the patient stimulates role-modeling dynamics and fosters a positive therapeutic alliance.

Growing mentors

Co-researching pastors share the added value of positive impact on the couple as they prepare other couples for marriage. It is also crucial that the training couple is personally acquainted with the tool, brings an introspective approach to the relationship, and is open to conscious and intentional couple growth.

There is a similar positive repercussion in the context of one's own pastoral life, as it promotes both a greater awareness of family issues and a preventive approach to ministry to the couple and family, as opposed to a reparative one.

Networking mentors

Co-researching pastors expressed the need to relate with other pastors to share challenges encountered in premarital education—and learn from each other—and improve their skills. Regular ad-hoc meetings on specific topics are desired.

Co-researching pastors have realized how much the professionals in the helping relationship—such as psychologists and psychotherapists—appreciated the tool, besides having known more about the many potentials in both educational and clinical settings. Both pastors and professionals agree that there is a need for greater attention to networking and growth in the use of referral, in both directions: from the educational to the clinical side, and vice versa. Also, in this context, there is a desire for joint events—for instance, conventions or training seminars—where we can meet, get to know each other, and exchange experiences.

¹ The term *fragilitator* is a made-up word. It is a pun: *fragilitator* looks like the term "facilitator" but also "fragility". So, the *facilitator*—who facilitates—sometimes brings in his fragility—and becomes a *fragilitator*.

Mentors/couples as testimonials

Co-researching pastors have increased awareness of their role as key players in promoting a cultural change related to premarital education. The testimony of couples trained by them can also be an excellent tool, as they become genuine testimonials to other young couples—based on the widely evidence-based educative practice of *peer-education* intervention.

Conclusion

The researcher, assisted by the research team, highlighted not only key issues but also practical ways of returning and disseminating the research results to foster institutional cultural and practical changes so that premarital education becomes a perceived and implemented pastoral priority.

To Pastors

- Have a space at pastoral meetings in the four Italian fields for the return of the research results, to raise more awareness of the practice of premarital education, dialogue regarding possible tools used as an alternative to PREPARE/ENRICH[®], and for pastors continuing education;
- Have a space at the next Pastoral Couple Retreat, in 2023, where the Olivers—world directors of Family Ministries and first trainers of the Italian pastors back in 2016—will present motivational speeches on the topic, along with the researcher's summary of the intervention.

To the Field

- Prepare spot interviews with couples who have taken PREPARE/ENRICH[®] program and agreed to share their experience as *testimonials*. The participation of the training pastor—and spouse, if applicable—is also desired. Official and social channels will be used for dissemination, especially having in mind the Ambassador/Youth target audience;
- Invite couples who have taken PREPARE/ENRICH[®] program, together with their pastor facilitator, at national Ambassador/Youth events for live interviews;
- Publish articles and testimonies for the Adventist press: *Il Messaggero*, HopeMedia Italy.

To the Institutions

- Send this report to the officers of the Italian Union of Seventh-day Adventist Churches, the Dean of the Seminary of the Italian Adventist University, and the ADV Publishing House Committee. The hope is that a joint document will be drafted to make explicit the concrete steps that the above parties intend to implement to achieve the objectives of this research.

In conclusion, it is essential to reiterate that the emphasis on the educational process should not end at the marriage ceremony. On the contrary, the effort in preparing for married life (*marriage*) should be greater than that in preparing for the marriage ceremony (*wedding*).

From this point of view, a pastor should perceive himself—as an alternative to the widespread perception of the one who prepares the marriage ceremony, as if he were a *wedding planner*—rather with the idea that includes a broader educational and preventive approach, that is, as a *marriage planner*.

Forli, December 12, 2022

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Place of Birth: Sesto San Giovanni, MI (Italy)

Marital Status: Married to Anna Calà, with 2 sons

EDUCATION:

2018-2023 Doctor of Ministry in Family Ministry, Andrews University, MI

2005 MA in Family Counseling, University of Padua, (I)

2002 Post-graduate diploma in “Family Interventions”, University of Padua, (I)

1990-1991 MA in Religion, Andrews University-extension campus Newbold College, Bracknell, Berks (GB)

1985-1990 BA/MA in Education, University of Florence, (I)

1985-1990 Degree certificate in Theology, Italian Adventist University, Florence, (I)

ORDINATION:

1998 Ordained, and holding ministerial credentials, to the Seventh-day Adventist Gospel

EXPERIENCE:

2014- Director of Family Ministries, Italian Union (I)

2006-2019 Director of Education Department, Italian Union (I)

2005- Adjunct Professor, Italian Adventist University, Florence (I)

2005-2010 Executive Secretary, Italian Union (I)

2000-2005 Associate Youth Director, Italian Union (I)

1993- Senior Pastor, Italian Union (I)

1991-1993 Intern Pastor, Italian Union (I)

