



# Marriage preparation practices in black South African churches: Experiences of married Christians



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The alarming disparity between South Africa's marriage and divorce rates highlights a critical need for effective premarital counselling (PMC), especially given the research gap concerning the specific approaches used within the South African church context. The latest marriage and divorce statistics reveal that the divorce rate in South Africa is two times higher than the marriage rate. This study addresses this by exploring the lived experiences of African Christians regarding marriage preparation. The study employed a qualitative, phenomenological design, gathering data from 13 participants ( $n = 13$ ) through semi-structured interviews. Osmer's practical theological guiding approach was employed. The Covenant Attachment Theory was utilised as a theoretical framework. Findings indicated that while PMC is generally perceived positively, *ukuyalwa* [traditional marriage instruction] is the prevalent form of preparation in black churches, underscoring the communal role in marriage preparation. Participants' views ranged from finding *ukuyalwa* helpful to being critical of its practicality, reflecting a desire among contemporary African Christians for the contextualisation of traditional practices to better meet modern needs. The results offer critical insights to enhance pastoral PMC in South Africa and advance the contextualisation of pastoral care. The study proposes practical theology as a framework for PMC and offers a model that could be used in designing PMC programmes in an African Christian setting.

**Contribution:** The article employs an integrated literature and empirical study to contribute to understanding lived experiences of African Christians regarding PMC and insights to enhance pastoral PMC in South Africa.

**Keywords:** premarital counselling in South Africa; premarital counselling; marriage preparation programmes; African Christian; *ukuyalwa*; marriage; pastoral care; counselling.

## Introduction

South Africa is currently facing a marital crisis. According to the latest statistics on marriage and divorce, South Africa's divorce rate is two times higher than the marriage rate. In 2023, 99 289 civil marriages were registered at the Department of Home Affairs (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA] 2025:2). This is a 11.2% decrease from the previous year. On the other hand, 22 230 divorce forms were received and processed by Stats (SA 2025:19). This is a 10.1% increase from the previous year (Stats SA 2025:19). This instability of marriage is a matter of concern because marriage performs a critical function, not only for individuals, but for both individuals and society at large. Divorce not only threatens the future of social institutions, but it also poses physical and psychological health risks to all members of the family system (Baloyi & Buffel 2021:5; Bramlett & Mosher 2002:3). Therefore, there is an urgent need to safeguard and strengthen marriage against the threat of divorce.

Multiple studies verify premarital counselling (PMC) as a useful method to strengthen marriages and prevent their failure (Adzovie & Debone 2021; Carroll & Doherty 2003; Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu 2019; Duncan, Childs & Larson 2010; Stanley et al., 2006; Udofia et al. 2021). Premarital counselling is associated with a 31% lower rate of divorce (Wilmoth & Smyser 2010:253). Premarital counselling could, therefore, play a key role in improving marital stability in South Africa.

Despite the established importance of PMC for marital stability, little is known about marriage preparation practices in South African churches. A thick description of the lived experiences of African Christians with regard to PMC is key to gaining an understanding and insight into PMC. It is critical to unravel the issues related to PMC in efforts to enhance PMC and prevent marriage failure in South Africa. South Africa is a pluralistic society encompassing a variety of ethnicities and religions, however, the study focuses on Christians who are black and of African descent

because the majority of PMC in SA is offered in churches (Christians 2022:57) and because black Africans make up the majority of the South African population (Stats SA 2023:7). This study bears significance on the pastoral care and counselling practice of practical theology. It takes a qualitative approach, employing a phenomenological design and Osmer's four tasks of practical theology. Although this article only reports on data drawn from semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews with married individuals, clergy were also interviewed as part of the study. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The Covenant Attachment Theory was utilised as a theoretical framework.

Firstly, this article conceptualises PMC before exploring marriage and preparation thereof in an African Christian context. Secondly, it describes the research project and reports on the research findings. The article concludes by describing practical theology as a framework for PMC and offers a model that could be used in designing PMC programmes in an African Christian setting.

### Conceptualising premarital counselling

Premarital counselling is a preventive intervention at the transition point of the beginning of a marital relationship aimed at giving couples a strong foundation for a stable and satisfactory marriage (Stahmann 2000:104). It provides couples the opportunity to self-explore and self-examine any problems pertinent to their relationship (Osei-Tutu et al. 2020:1). It also equips couples with necessary information and skills to address issues before problems develop as well as skills to assist them to resolve future conflicts (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu 2019:55). The main goals of PMC include easing the transition from single to married life, increasing couple stability and satisfaction, increasing couple intimacy, enhancing communication skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, increasing attachment and commitment to the relationship (Stahmann 2000:105). Christian PMC is particularly aimed at helping couples 'prepare for and build happy, fulfilling, Christ-honouring, and successful marriages' (Collins 2007:533). It focuses on teaching about marriage from a biblical perspective, assessing marital readiness and exploring possible problem areas. This article uses 'premarital counselling' as a generic term to denote any type of premarital preventive intervention used to prepare couples for marriage.

There are mainly two types of PMC: information-based premarital education and skills-based training (Marks 2007:32). Information-based PMC is focused on conveying information and promoting an understanding of concepts related to marriage through lectures, demonstrations, and presentations (Wilmoth 2015:106). Skills-based PMC, on the other hand, is focused on teaching skills, providing guidance in practising relationship skills such as communication skills, conflict resolution, and problem-solving skills. Most of the PMC in religious settings is largely information-based. Research, however, supports skills-based marriage preparation as more helpful in influencing marital outcomes (Wilmoth 2015:106).

Increased marriage instability has led to the development of formal marriage preparation programmes. These programmes are a knowledge and skills-based training procedure aimed at providing couples with information and resources to improve their marital relationship (Carroll & Doherty 2003:4). They are aimed at creating awareness and understanding of potential problems, which may occur in marriage, as well as preventing or ameliorating such problems (Carroll & Doherty 2003:5). There are currently many marriage preparation programmes and inventories, predominately from the United States. Premarital inventories or premarital assessment questionnaires (PAQs) are a meaningful element of many marriage preparation programmes. They provide couples with individualised feedback about their relationship, helping them to identify strengths and growth areas (Williams 2011:314; Wilmoth & Smyser 2010:254). They are not meant to test whether a couple should marry, but instead are meant to facilitate a dialogue between the couple about their relationship (Williams 2011:314). The benefits of using inventories or PAQs include promoting couple-involvement, the couple's investment in the process, and eliciting information more efficiently (Wilmoth & Smyser 2010:255). Inventories also provide information that makes it possible for the facilitator to focus on specific issues that are relevant for the couple (Wilmoth & Smyser 2010:255). Widely used programmes and inventories include Relationship Enhancement Programme (RE); Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Programme (PREP); PREmarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement and Enrich (PREPARE/ENRICH); RELATIONSHIP Education (RELATE); Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study (FOCCUS); and Saving Your Marriage Before It Begins (SYMBIS). Larson et al. (2002) compare and evaluate PREPARE, FOCCUS, and RELATE; validating them as psychometrically sound without investigating their effectiveness. Studies on the effectiveness of PMC programmes used are scarce. The few studies that have been conducted reveal them to have a positive impact on marital quality (Busby et al. 2007; Joseph 2014; Markman et al. 2013). Christians (2022) has noted the use of some of these programmes by South African counselling organisations, assuming that the importation is due to a lack of locally developed and readily available programmes (Christians 2022:10). However, the extent to which any of these programmes are used in South African churches is unknown.

Premarital counselling is offered by clergy, mental health professionals (counsellors and therapists) and physicians who all take different approaches. Clergy focus on the exposition of Bible passages on marriage while mental health professionals concentrate on the couple's families of origin and issues within the relationship (Stahmann 2000:106). Physicians focus on health and sexuality, with an emphasis on medical screening which involves the testing of couples for genetic disorders, infectious diseases and other medical conditions that may affect the couple or their offspring (More 2021:6369).

## Marriage and preparation thereof from an African and a Christian perspective

Marriage in African Christian circles is a vital relationship with personal, social, and spiritual dimensions. In traditional African society, 'marriage is the focus of existence' (Mbiti 1969:133). The preservation of the clan and its culture is the driving motive of traditional African life, and marriage is essential for the preservation and extension of the clan through procreation. Hence, traditional African marriage is mainly aimed at procreation (Baloyi 2014:22). Children being at the centre of African marriage is largely supported by the payment of the bride-wealth [*ilobolo*], which is the custom of presenting a gift (traditionally cattle among Nguni tribes) to the bride's family. *ilobolo* signifies the compensation for and transfer of rights to the bride's reproductive and labour power together with the transfer of her offspring from one family to another (Mafela 2014:6). Marriage in traditional African society is understood as an avenue into the status of adulthood (Twene 2019:18). Marriage is perceived as a social duty, not a mere personal choice (Mbiti 1969:133; Twene 2019:19) and every responsible adult must undertake this duty. Traditional Africans therefore do not marry for personal fulfilment but marry to preserve the family line through procreation (Baloyi 2013a:168). Hence, single status in African communities is a disgrace and has several negative associations (Ndlovu 2021:44). A person who remains unmarried is considered a 'rebel', 'lawbreaker', and cast out as being 'abnormal' (Mbiti 1969:133). This perception is why polygamy characterises African marriage, as it offers every woman a chance to fit in with social norms by being married (Baloyi 2013b:171). Polygamy also remedies infertility, which threatens the continuation of the lineage.

Social change has, however, had an impact on the conceptualisation of marriage in African society. Among other influences, urbanisation and modernisation have resulted in the erosion of traditional African value systems resulting in contemporary Africans adopting individualism at the expense of a typically African communal family system (Ekane 2013:1). Marriage has become a matter of personal choice in urban Africa as contemporary Africans place a higher value on their independence and freedom (Ndlovu & Naidoo 2023:10). Contemporary Africans marry later in life, prioritising education and employment (Ndlovu & Naidoo 2023:9). Economic pressures that accompany urbanisation and modernisation discourage polygamy and change attitudes towards children. Nonetheless, marriage in modern-day Africa maintains its communal and intergenerational significance as the practice of *ilobolo* payment as the foundation and validation of African marriage persists among the changing living patterns in African society (Ndlovu & Naidoo 2023:11; Posel & Rudwick 2014:57).

Different Christian traditions hold different perceptions about marriage. The idea of marriage as a covenant however remains an essential definition of marriage in many traditions (Vorster 2016:4). From this viewpoint, marriage

is a sanctified covenant revealing the relationship between God and His people (Ponzetti & Mutch 2006:224; Vorster 2016:5). Together with the purpose of companionship and procreation, Christian marriage also serves the purpose of mirroring the covenant between Christ and the Church. Marriage is a metaphor for understanding God's love. This strong connection between marriage and the gospel makes marriage esteemed, hence its recognition as a sacrament.

Marriage evidently bears significance for both an African and a Christian perspective. Both African and Christian communities recognise that marriage cannot be entered into without preparation, and both embrace marriage preparation as a key component of family socialisation. Because marriage in African society serves the purpose of preserving and extending the clan, African families have a responsibility to participate in the establishment and success of all the marriages within their clan (Mbiti 1969:133; Twene 2019:19). Indigenous marriage preparation in African communities involves advice-giving by senior family members (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu 2019:56; Osei-Tutu et al. 2020:204). *Ukuyalwa* [to be given instruction or advice] is an integral part of the marriage process and is considered key to the preservation of marriage in African communities. *Ukuyalwa* often addresses the couple on roles and responsibilities as husband and wife, as well as the expected behaviour of each spouse (Kapolo 2001:131; Moeti, Kolo-Keaikitse & Mokgolodi 2017:249). *Ukuyalwa* is also used to instil traditional principles and practices (Moeti et al. 2017:249). Although *ukuyalwa* is now strictly directed towards the bride (Chisale 2016:62; Makwanise & Masuku 2016:11; Montle 2020:163), it was not always the case. Historically, words of counsel were directed to both the groom and the bride (Kapolo 2001:131). In fact, in traditional African communities, PMC is a continuous process beginning in childhood up to marriage (Chisale 2016:58). Marriage preparation forms part of traditional initiation or puberty rites where young men and women are ushered into adulthood by being educated on topics such as sexual behaviour, marriage and family life (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu 2019:56). The erosion of traditional practices has led to *ukuyalwa* being solely directed towards women, inevitably promoting gender inequality.

The church has a long history of addressing couples before their wedding. Studies show that clergy are the predominant providers of PMC (Carlson, Daire & Hipp 2020:54; Christians 2022:57; Klausli & Gross 2021:178; Minzenmayer 2018:10). The majority of PMC is offered through churches as a prerequisite before being married by the church (Moeti et al. 2017:1; Williams 2011:315). Premarital counselling in the church is either facilitated by clergy and/or mentors. Pastoral PMC is not only aimed at relationship enhancement but is also aimed at teaching a theology of marriage. Thus, the approach adopted involves a lot of lecturing. It is not unusual for the content to be solely based on the views and understanding of the clergy providing the counselling (Marks 2007:46; Mbunga 2010:67). In such instances, there is

no standardised curriculum or approach. There are also no rules concerning the number of sessions, the duration of each session nor the approach of counselling (Bawa 2018:235).

Premarital counselling practices may differ across different religious denominations (Murray 2006:78). This is a result of diverse professional training practices, theological orientations, institutional regulations, cultural influences, and/or regional traditions (Murray 2006:78). Premarital counselling is an integral component of pastoral care, which, to be effective in any context, must seriously consider people's specific contexts (Magezi 2007:658). Effective pastoral care in an African context must therefore reflect the African understanding of life, moving away from individualistic Western approaches towards a more systematic model that addresses patterns, structures, and social relationships (Louw 1997:392).

Although clergy have both the opportunity and capability to facilitate marriage preparation (Wilmoth 2015:103), they have a history of being poorly prepared for their role as premarital counsellors (Summers & Cunningham 1989:327). Clergy have been found to provide PMC without any training in PMC (Jones & Stahmann 1994:181). This causes them to rely on their personal views and experiences as the primary source of knowledge (Marks 2007:46; Mbunga 2010:67). Although clergy in the United States report that they make use of assessment tools or PAQs as part of their marriage preparation (Wilmoth & Smyser 2010:253), data from Africa reveal that the majority of PMC services offered by clergy and religious lay counsellors is unstructured (Christians 2022:64; Moeti et al. 2017:4; Osei-Tutu et al. 2020:205). Nonetheless, it remains advantageous for the church and clergy to provide PMC because of the access they have to a high percentage of couples who want to enter marriage, their belief in the value of marriage and desire to prevent marital distress, the strong educational tradition and because of the level of community involvement in churches (Marks 2007:44, Wilmoth & Smyser 2010:253).

In many African churches, marriage preparation is not exclusively a pastoral duty. Premarital counselling is also provided by gendered groups in the church (cf. Chisale 2016:64; Dlamini 2022:5). Similar to the current practice of *ukuyalwa*, the PMC from church elders focuses on grooming the wife (Dlamini 2022:5). The integration of *ukuyalwa* in the church points to how African churches uphold the African communal duty of preparing couples for marriage. It exemplifies how African indigenous marriage preparation can be enculturated by the church for the strengthening of marriages.

## Research methods and design

### Research project

In view of the aforesaid, the aim of this study was to explore and understand the marriage preparation experiences of married African Christians in South Africa.

Although some PMC programmes are based on multiple theoretical frameworks, such as family systems theory, Adlerian theory, and cognitive-behavioural theories, this study employed a covenant attachment approach. The covenant attachment theory is a new conceptualisation by Maxwell et al. (2020) designed for therapists and clergy working with Christian couples. It is a constructivist grounded theory that integrates attachment theory with the theological concept of covenant (Maxwell et al. 2020:111). The theory provides a thick description of the lived experiences of marriage preparation of African Christians to help enhance pastoral PMC in South Africa with the view to contributing towards preventing the failure of marriages among African Christians.

### Research methodology

The study utilised a qualitative research approach employing a phenomenological design to explore and interpret the complex lived experiences of married African Christians concerning PMC. This design was strategically chosen because its primary task is to identify and develop an understanding of the meanings participants ascribe to a shared phenomenon, prioritising 'understanding rather than explanation' (Fouché & Schurink 2011:308). The entire study was framed around Osmer's (2008) four tasks of practical theology: the descriptive-empirical task, the interpretive task, the normative task and the pragmatic task. Guided by Osmer's first and second tasks, the study described and analysed the experiences of African Christians with regard to PMC. In fulfilling the normative task, different approaches to PMC and biblical concepts related to marriage preparation were analysed and discussed to develop a model to enhance pastoral PMC in an African Christian context, which fulfils the fourth task.

A purposive sampling strategy was implemented to recruit 13 participants ( $n = 13$ ). This particular sampling method was selected because it is a useful technique in qualitative research in identifying and selecting information-rich cases for proper resource utilisation (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim 2016:2). The selection criteria ensured that all participants were black South African, practising Christians, and met specific experience thresholds: married individuals had to be between 1 year and 15 years into their marriage. Recruitment was then conducted through social media and word-of-mouth. Social media posters directed interested candidates to a webpage explaining all the details of the research study. Those who were interested in participating were invited to complete an online form. They were then supplied with a consent form.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews, with four conducted in-person and nine held virtually via Microsoft Teams. The interviews, which ranged from 35 min to 75 min, were recorded and supplemented with field notes. A crucial step in this process involved the researcher manually transcribing and simultaneously translating all interviews, as participants often alternated

between English and isiZulu or isiXhosa. The interview protocol focused on participants' perceptions of PMC's importance, the content and benefit of their preparation practices, desired changes, and recommendations for improvement.

The resulting data were subjected to thematic analysis within a Heideggerian phenomenological frame, which necessitated deep reflexivity on the part of the researcher to manage and acknowledge their own preconceptions and assumptions throughout the process. Data analysis was non-linear and reflective, following the six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Kiger and Varpio (2020). ATLAS.ti 24 software was used for electronic coding, which involved breaking down data through open coding and grouping codes into final themes using selective coding. This interpretive process was further shaped by Osmer's interpretive task, where emergent patterns were analysed in the light of existing literature on marriage and PMC.

Because the academic rigour of qualitative data analysis procedures is often questioned, the study ensured research credibility by adhering to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established by using well-known methods and assuring participants of honest, non-judgemental responses; transferability was achieved through providing a detailed contextual background of the data; dependability was secured by reporting the entire research process meticulously; and confirmability was maintained by acknowledging the study's limitations and the researcher's inherent biases. Finally, the two researchers, being a clergy member and university professor, acknowledged their emic role in the study and committed to continuous self-reflection to maintain neutrality and reduce the potential impact of their initial assumptions regarding the prioritisation and preparation of PMC in black South African churches.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the North-West University, Theology Research Ethics Committee (No. NWU-00885-23-A6). Ethically, the study was deemed minimal risk because the only possible risk involved the potential of discomfort or inconvenience, which is not greater in and of itself than that ordinarily encountered in daily life. Strict measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality of all private information.

## Results and discussion

The findings discussed in this article answer Osmer's (2008) questions of 'what is going on?' and 'why is it going on?' The study's findings through thematic analysis revealed that married Christians hold a positive perception of PMC. They perceive it as helpful in creating awareness, ensuring readiness for marriage and gaining a better understanding of one's partner. This positive perception of the role of PMC is consistent with the findings of another study conducted in

South Africa that found that married individuals have a positive perception of PMC (Christians 2022:102). The majority of married African Christians in this study did not receive PMC from their pastors but underwent *ukuyalwa* by mothers and fathers in their church. Some of the participants who underwent *ukuyalwa* had negative perceptions of it, finding the advice they received to be toxic, irrelevant or one-dimensional. The content of the PMC is aimed at providing information rather than teaching skills and is communicated through advice based on personal experiences and biblical teachings. Most of this advice and teaching concerns matters related to the couple's relationship, such as spirituality, sex, communication, conflict, lifestyle adjustments and marital roles. Relationships interlinked with the marriage relationship are also discussed. Participants were given guidance on dealing with children, family, in-laws and friends. Married individuals were also addressed concerning financial management. A few participants were advised about household duties, and only one participant was given guidance on marriage contracts. It is apparent that PMC in black South African churches is information-based rather than skills-based. Information-based approaches are deemed less effective in comparison to skills-based approaches, which are empirically proven to be more helpful in influencing marital outcomes (Wilmoth 2015:106). It is therefore crucial for PMC to incorporate exercises aimed at teaching relationship skills.

## The provision of pastoral premarital counselling

The married Christians who did undergo PMC from their pastors found it helpful. They indicated that the teachings and skills gained through the counselling benefited their relationship by influencing perceptions and behaviours. One participant explained how the homework they would get when they did not reach a consensus during a session meant they were 'forced to learn to have difficult conversations on our own' (Participant 5, female, Western Cape). Another participant registered the helpfulness of counselling once they were married because they felt better prepared. They felt as though they had 'a cheat sheet in an exam' (Participant 9, female, Kwa-Zulu Natal). One of the participants explained how PMC helped to make it easier to reach out to their pastor for counselling when facing marital problems:

'Whenever we have challenges, we are able, even now fifteen years in marriage, to still go and say "hey there is this thing" and they give us further counselling in that way.' (Participant 7, female, Mpumalanga)

Literature points to how PMC helps couples familiarise with counselling, making couples who undergo PMC more likely to seek help at earlier stages of marital distress (Carlson et al. 2020:54; Williams 2011:319). This makes it easier to resolve problems and avoid divorce because many couples will only seek counselling when they are highly distressed – if they will even seek help at all (Williams 2011:323).

The participants who received pastoral PMC either had sessions with their pastor or another couple or participated

in group counselling conducted by their pastor. In some cases, the pastor's wife was also involved. The sessions lasted between three and ten sessions over a period of 2 months to 6 months. The sessions ended before the wedding with no follow-up session after the wedding. In some cases, questionnaires and exercises were used in the sessions. The perceived helpfulness of PMC is related to the format of the sessions, the length of the sessions and the use of PAQs. Couple sessions are more advantageous than group sessions. Although group sessions allow couples to contrast their relationship with others (Stahmann 2000:112) and get feedback from not only the counsellor, but from other couples too, the specific needs of a couple may not be addressed because of time constraints, programme design or the domination of one couple or theme (Stahmann 2000:112). Some couples may also experience challenges with interacting freely in a group setting. Couple sessions, on the other hand, allow the counsellor to focus attention and energy on one couple instead of having to deal with group dynamics (Stahmann 2000:112). The topics the counsellor addresses can be personalised to meet the couple's specific needs and context (Stahmann 2000:112). Also, the couple can focus on their issues without being sidetracked by the issues of others.

Williams (2011) recommended that for PMC to be beneficial, the couple should attend eight to nine sessions (Williams 2011:320). Timing is equally important after the marriage has been officiated, as the 6-month to 12-month period after the wedding presents a window of opportunity for couples to learn and practice marital coping skills when they really need them (Moeti et al. 2017:5). The postnuptial follow-up session is therefore an essential part of PMC (Stahmann 2000:112). The use of premarital inventories and PAQs also positively related to the effectiveness of PMC (Stahmann 2000:112).

The findings of this study point to how PMC is not universally provided by clergy in black South African churches because most of the married individuals interviewed in this study were not provided PMC by their pastors. Although exposed to *ukuyalwa*, African Christians place a high value on PMC by clergy and lament the lack of its provision. One participant grieved not being provided PMC by their pastor because they believed that 'it would have been better if you got it' (Participant 12, female, Mpumalanga). It is therefore important to expedite the provision of pastoral PMC among African Christians in South Africa. Not only because African Christians value it but also because PMC in the church is part of Christian discipleship (Collins 2007:532). It presents an opportunity to teach and train Christians to honour Christ in how they conduct themselves in marriage, especially because their earthly marriage is meant to mirror the covenant between Christ and the Church. In this way, Christian marriage is a witness and reflection of the gospel to the world. PMC is also beneficial for the church community at large, seeing that healthy marriages are foundational for the health of a church. Hence, PMC is an integral part of pastoral care and counselling. This makes it essential to encourage the widespread provision of pastoral PMC in black South African churches.

## The prevalence of *ukuyalwa* and its usefulness

Participants indicated undergoing *ukuyalwa* either from their families, their in-laws or members of the community. It took place either on the day *ilobolo* was completed, or on the day before or after the wedding. The counsel they received focused on assuring consent and readiness for marriage. Participants were also prepared for marriage through *ukuyalwa* by church mothers and fathers. In some churches, *ukuyalwa* is the sole means of marriage preparation, while in other churches it supplements pastoral PMC. Participants indicated that *ukuyalwa* either took place in a church service with both church mothers or fathers or a meeting or bridal shower with the groom meeting with the church fathers and the bride with church mothers. In one instance, the meeting was only held with the groom. This prevalence of *ukuyalwa* points to how African churches uphold the African communal duty of preparing couples for marriage.

Participants held different views concerning the advice they received and its helpfulness. Some participants found *ukuyalwa* helpful, with one participant saying: 'They said quite a mouthful. I think church did assist me a lot in that' (Participant 4, female, Mpumalanga). This perception points to how contemporary African Christians still value communal practices, which are lived out not only in their families but also in their faith communities. Some married individuals were, however, critical of the usefulness of *ukuyalwa*. One participant was part of a meeting hosted by the church fathers for grooms-to-be. When asked about the benefits of the meeting, he said: 'I do not think that I gained that much from it ... the meetings with the fathers were not useful' (Participant 13, male, Mpumalanga). He instead found the one-on-one conversations he had with other men, particularly his mentor and pastor, more useful. This was not necessarily because of the setting, but because of the content. Although he commended the teachings on leadership in the home and masculinity in the context of modern society, he wished that there was a focus on creating awareness concerning 'common things that couples are often faced with.' This participant strongly wished he had been taught 'how to handle conflicts' (Participant 13, male, Mpumalanga). One of the participants affirms that the group setting is not the issue affecting the impact of *ukuyalwa*, but the content and how it is presented. She had three separate showers hosted by different women's groups in the church:

'I enjoyed the fellowship, and I appreciated the initiative, but in terms of actual impact, not so much. It was a little detached ... a lot of it was a little abstract.' (Participant 12, female, Mpumalanga)

Having grown up in the church, she knew what to expect and gained nothing new from the sessions because she already knew how 'elusive' believers tend to be. She wished there were more transparent and honest conversations instead of a 'safe' dialogue. 'What would have been meaningful was "this is what I experienced and because I experienced this, this worked or this didn't work"' (Participant 12, female, Mpumalanga). The effectiveness of *ukuyalwa* is evidently impacted by the content that is presented and how it is delivered. The advice provided

during *ukuyalwa* would be more impactful if it were to be more practical and transparent.

One participant highlighted how some advice was irrelevant because 'elders speak old things' (Participant 8, male, Mpumalanga). This points to how the age difference between the elders giving advice and the couple receiving it can render some irrelevant advice as a result of changed attitudes towards marriage. A participant recalls how '[t]he mothers, I remember when it was like, "you do not discuss your marital issues with anyone. You keep it to yourself," which I think is toxic' (Participant 10, female, Kwa-Zulu Natal). The advice of the mothers here is in line with the traditional African view that considers it an embarrassment to the family to expose one's marital problems to outsiders, as marital issues are only to be discussed within the family (Hellemann & Sipungu 2024:6; Makwanise & Masuku 2016:3; Ndlovu 2021:149). The participant does not subscribe to this view as younger generations perceive silence as a breeding ground for abuse and are open to seeking help for their marital problems outside of the family (Ndlovu 2021:150). This finding highlights the tension between traditional values and contemporary values that surfaces during marriage preparation. To ensure the effectiveness of *ukuyalwa*, it is therefore essential that efforts be made to ensure that the advice shared is contextual and relevant to the couple being counselled. Content should also be guarded against perpetuating gender stereotypes and promoting gender inequality.

Some participants also took issue with the lack of structure during *ukuyalwa* meetings: 'There was no agenda' (Participant 11, male, Mpumalanga). Anyone and everyone was open to sharing whatever they saw fit. As a result, differing views cannot be avoided: 'Nobody was corrected when they were wrong because everyone – all the men who were there were married so everyone came with their opinion' (Participant 11, male, Mpumalanga). This points to the weakness of marriage preparation when solely based on personal experiences. To ensure efficacy, *ukuyalwa* in the church should be structured and controlled against a set standard.

### Recommendations for enhancing premarital counselling in the church

In their recommendations for improving PMC in the church, married individuals emphasised the improvement that needs to be made to the content and process of marriage preparation as well as improvements that needed to be made by the clergy involved in PMC. Some participants complained that when the content is generalised, 'you find that maybe sometimes it is not applicable to you' (Participant 11, male, Mpumalanga). They suggested that the content covered in PMC be personalised and contextualised to be relevant to contemporary African Christians and to better meet the needs of individual couples. Magezi (2007) notes the importance of pastoral counselling taking people's contexts seriously for its efficacy (Magezi 2007:658). To be effective, PMC, as an integral part of pastoral counselling, must reflect

the African understanding of life. A cultural conceptualisation of marriage is therefore vital for African Christians to be adequately prepared for marriage in an African context. Issues of family involvement, living arrangements and traditional African beliefs are crucial subjects to address in PMC in African churches. Participants were also concerned with the content of PMC being relevant to the modern era in which couples exist. For the content to remain relevant, it must acknowledge modern egalitarian values, which greatly influence marital relationships in contemporary society.

As important as it is for PMC to be structured for it to be effective, it should not be limited to a programme with predetermined content but should also address concerns that the couple has and other deficiencies the clergy identifies. Premarital inventories or PAQs help to achieve this because they elicit information that makes it possible for the facilitator to focus on specific issues that are relevant for the couple (Wilmoth & Smyser 2010:255).

Some participants also recommended that the content be more practical. Participants complained about the content being one-dimensional because of a focus on spirituality. Because the primary tool used in PMC in the church is the Bible, all the guidance offered has faith inclinations (Wango 2010:26) and can mean that the counselling content is from a 'one-sided, biblical perspective' (Christians 2022:63). The language can easily be 'sacred' and void of practicality as the following participants explain:

'It was like the Bible, Church, God, the Holy Spirit and we did not have another side where we talk about intimacy outside church, we talk about intimacy in another view, we talk about finances.' (Participant 9, female, KwaZulu-Natal)

Another participant emphasised the need to 'normalise being frank about the challenges that are in marriage' (Participant 12, female, Mpumalanga). This finding corresponds with married individuals from another study who opined that counselling offered by clergy in South Africa needs a more practical approach to address subjects that might be uncomfortable as well as issues that might arise in the marital relationship (Christians 2022:64). To ensure practicality, some participants expressed the content they wanted PMC to incorporate to be more effective. They suggested addressing common reasons why couples divorce and recommended the incorporation of personality tests. Participants also emphasised the importance of including premarital screening in the PMC process. Talking about the importance of the incorporation of HIV testing and its exclusion from their own PMC, one participant explained:

'I mean if you are with your partner, it is gonna be difficult for you to say let's do that test, but if it is recommended by the church that it be done and it be brought, then it assists.' (Participant 4, female, Mpumalanga)

There is a concern, however, that requiring couples' premarital screening results stigmatises people living with

HIV and can lead to people obtaining fake results (Nnaji et al. 2014:14). Churches are therefore advised to be educated on the rights of couples when formulating regulations about premarital screening.

Participants suggested that marriage preparation should start earlier through regular teachings about marriage instead of once a couple is set to get married. When the church waits until a couple says they want to get married to start preparing them for marriage, 'it is too late' (Participant 11, male, Mpumalanga). Another participant noted: 'It is not practical [to] want to compress all of this information in a 6-month programme' (Participant 12, female, Mpumalanga). The stress of the impending wedding can also be a hindrance, as explained by one participant: 'because maybe the excitement and stress, you might end up not hearing some things' (Participant 11, male, Mpumalanga). This finding points to how marriage preparation in the church should form part of the youth ministry programme.

Participants also recommended that clergy receive training for conducting PMC and to constantly upgrade their skills and knowledge in counselling. Some participants even suggested that churches outsource PMC services. For one participant, the need to outsource was based on the dysfunction in pastoral marriages, which affects effectiveness in preparing couples for marriage:

'Maybe the best thing right now for pastors to do is to refer couples to premarital counselling that they are not doing. Because being effective in the premarital counselling space demands that you have a functional marriage ... and being in pastoral spaces I haven't seen a whole lot of that.' (Participant 12, female, Mpumalanga)

For one of the participants, the need to outsource was based on the pastor's role, which can affect transparency during PMC:

'You know, also with our pastors, sometimes we cannot really be free with them. Ask them questions, you know? But when it is someone from outside, I think we'd be free ... sometimes we're scared of our pastors not in a way - so I think outsourcing people who have the expertise would really go a long way.' (Participant 10, female, Kwa-Zulu Natal)

Some participants also recommended the involvement of couple mentors in the marriage preparation process, particularly experienced, younger couples whose guidance would be more relevant.

### Practical theology as a framework for premarital counselling in the African Christian context

Practical theology relates to the interaction of theory and praxis with the key task of developing effective modes for Christian practice (Osmer 2008:176). Although not divulged in this article, the remaining two questions of practical theological practice, '*what ought to be going on?*' and '*how might we respond?*' were addressed in the study by analysing and discussing different approaches to PMC as well as

biblical concepts related to marriage preparation. These were then used to develop a model to enhance pastoral PMC in an African Christian context.

The study analysed PMC in an African Christian context by outlining the praxis (lived experiences) and theory (literature and biblical texts) of PMC in African churches in South Africa. The analysis revealed that both African indigenous and Christian epistemologies influence PMC among African Christians. Literature and empirical findings reflect the ministerial contextual realities as the amalgamation of African cultural marriage preparation customs and Christian marriage preparation traditions and the competing value systems between traditional patriarchal values and modern egalitarian values, among other issues. These ministerial contextual realities and the biblical principles about marriage challenge clergy involved in PMC to engage in ongoing critical reflection on, among other things, the conceptualisation of Christian marriage and the integration of cultural and biblical epistemologies.

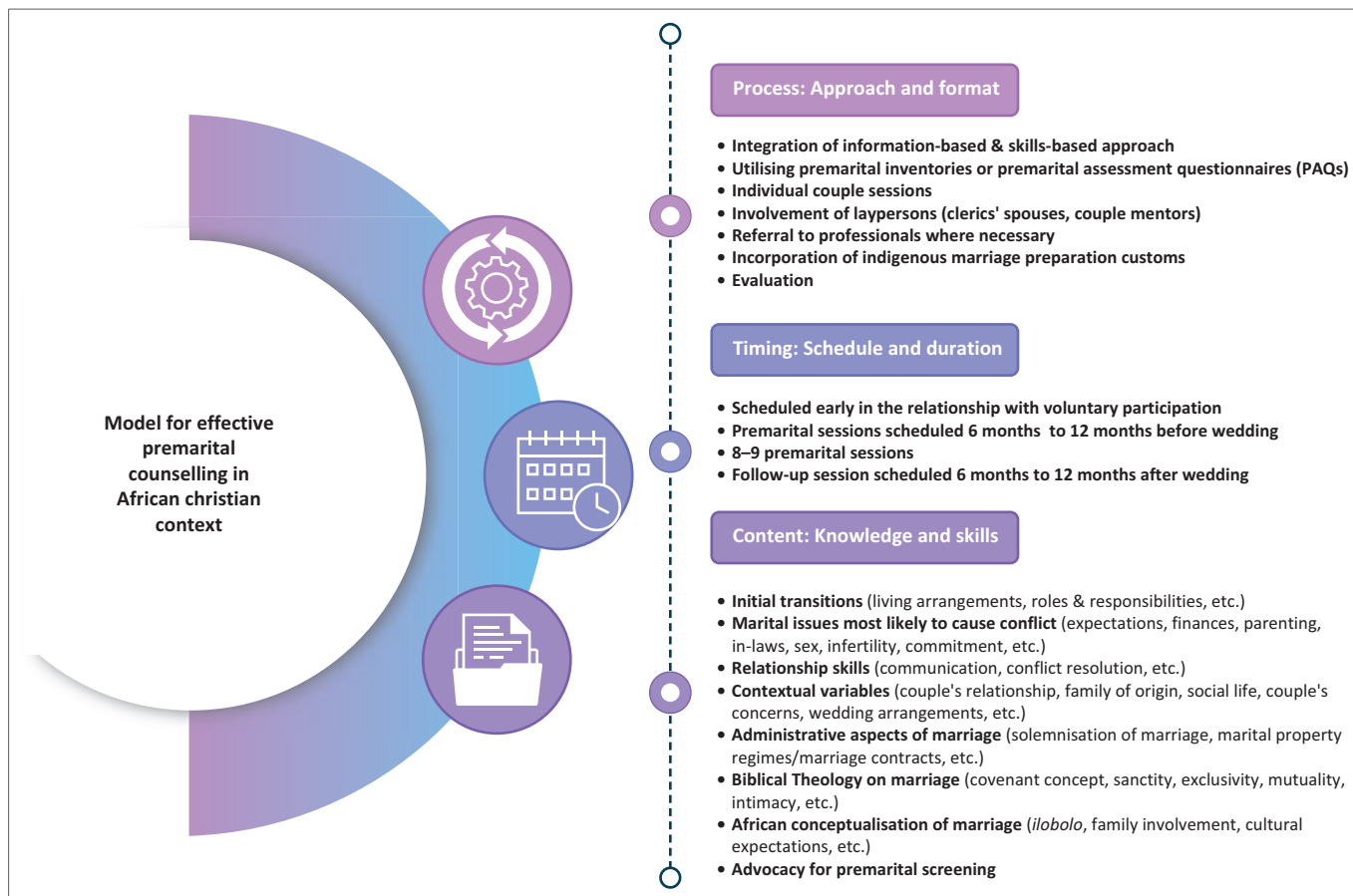
Practical theology provides tools for clergy to function in a complex reality. Clergy therefore need to: (1) continuously perform double exegesis between context and Bible text; (2) critically reflect on theory and praxis given real life marital situations; (3) apply reflexivity regarding the marriage situation; (4) appreciate the need to integrate contextual norms to ensure the epistemologies jointly inform the premarital couple; and (5) sensitively approach reality of epistemological tension between biblical principles about marriage and cultural knowledge. The implication for ministry practice is a design for premarital programmes that is context-sensitive, being sensitive to: (1) African epistemologies and value systems; (2) Christian epistemologies and value systems; and (3) modern value systems.

Figure 1 shows a context-sensitive design for PMC in African Christian churches.

### Limitations and future directions

The limitations of this study can be linked to possible future areas of study. These include:

- The study does not represent the wide range of confessions of Christianity in South Africa. The study only provided the experiences of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians. The participation of participants from diverse Christian traditions could lead to more nuanced results. Further research with participants from Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, and African Independent churches is therefore recommended.
- Because PMC is not strictly a pastoral duty in African churches, church members involved in preparing couples for marriage, such as the pastor's wife, church mothers and fathers, can be included as part of the sample in further studies.
- Because *ukuyalwa* is an indigenous marriage preparation method, it is not limited to African churches but is



**FIGURE 1:** A model for effective premarital counselling in the African Christian context.

conducted in family settings. Further research can investigate how *ukuyalwa* conducted in families can be consolidated with PMC processes.

## Conclusion

The study used a qualitative research method and interviewing as data collection technique to explore the PMC experiences of African Christians from Pentecostal and Evangelical traditions. Guided by Osmers tasks of practical theology, the study revealed that marriage preparation is a communal role more than a pastoral one as indigenous PMC was found to be more prevalent than pastoral PMC. The findings revealed a general positive perception of PMC. The few married African Christians who did undergo PMC from their pastors found it helpful and beneficial. Some participants perceived *ukuyalwa* to be helpful for marriage preparation, but some were critical of its usefulness because of teachings being impractical, sexist or irrelevant. Participants provided suggestions to ensure that PMC meets their needs. This demonstrates how contemporary African Christians appreciate traditional customs while also being critical of their impact, seeking their contextualisation to effectively ensure meeting current needs. This study offers an important insight into marriage preparation practices in African Christian settings and proposes a practical theological framework for the enhancement of PMC in South African churches.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## CRedit authorship contribution

Gugulethu E. Ndlovu: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Visualisation, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Vhumani Magezi: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

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