

Before the Vows: Integrating Theology, Psychology, and Pastoral Counselling in Premarital Formation within Ghanaian Christian Contexts

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Abstract

Marriage occupies a significant place within both Christian theology and African communal life, yet preparation for marriage can become overly focused on wedding arrangements, moral instruction, and prescribed marital roles while giving insufficient attention to emotional maturity, family-of-origin influences, communication, conflict, expectations, and relational self-awareness. This qualitative phenomenological study explored how Christian premarital counselling may be strengthened through an intentional integration of theology, psychology, and culturally responsive pastoral care within Ghanaian church contexts. Twenty participants were purposively selected from three urban and two semi-rural churches: five Christian counsellors, five pastors involved in marriage preparation, and ten individuals comprising five couples who had recently completed or were undertaking premarital counselling. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions, and review of selected church premarital materials and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Three principal themes emerged: **faith as formation, relational self-awareness, and covenant understanding**, accompanied by the subthemes of family-of-origin healing, communication, and communal support. The study proposes a **Theological–Psychological Integration Framework (TPIF)** for premarital counselling centred on covenant identity, self-awareness, family systems, emotional and communication competencies, conflict transformation, sexuality and intimacy, financial stewardship, extended-family boundaries, and continuing marital mentorship. Consistent with Ghanaian research demonstrating the broad range of issues addressed in religious premarital counselling, and with international evidence suggesting that structured relationship education can improve communication and relationship functioning, the article argues that Christian marriage preparation should move beyond advice-giving toward intentional relational formation. Premarital counselling, in this understanding, becomes not merely preparation for a ceremony but a pastoral ministry of helping two people enter covenant with greater spiritual maturity, relational wisdom, informed consent, and realistic hope.

Keywords: premarital counselling; Christian marriage; pastoral counselling; family systems; relationship education; Ghana

1. Introduction

Couples may spend months preparing for a wedding and surprisingly little time preparing for a marriage.

The difference is more than rhetorical.

A wedding requires arrangements. Marriage requires formation.

A ceremony can be rehearsed. A covenant must be lived.

Clothing can be fitted, invitations printed, photographs planned, and reception arrangements completed within weeks. Yet learning to communicate honestly, manage conflict, negotiate finances, understand sexual expectations, establish healthy boundaries with extended family, recognise emotional wounds, and sustain commitment across changing seasons of life requires a much deeper preparation.

Marriage stands at the intersection of Christian theology and African communal identity. Within the biblical tradition, marriage is portrayed as a relationship of companionship, covenant faithfulness, mutual responsibility, intimacy, and enduring love. Within Ghanaian society, marriage also joins families, creates networks of responsibility, carries cultural meaning, and affects the wider community.

These two dimensions—Christian covenant and African relationality—provide rich resources for premarital counselling.

They also create complexities.

Young couples may enter marriage carrying expectations shaped by family, church teaching, gender norms, social media, economic pressures, previous relationships, childhood experience, sexuality, and differing understandings of what husbands and wives should be.

Marriage therefore brings together more than two personalities.

It brings together **two stories**.

Two family systems.

Two emotional histories.

Two sets of expectations.

Two approaches to money.

Two experiences of authority.

Two understandings of intimacy.

Two ways of managing disagreement.

And, within Christian marriage, two spiritual journeys seeking to form one covenantal life.

Research conducted in Ghana confirms that religious premarital counselling already addresses a wide range of concerns, including medical screening, beliefs and values, expectations, knowledge of one's partner, roles and responsibilities, sexuality, parenthood, financial management, communication, and conflict (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020).

The challenge is therefore not to suggest that Ghanaian churches do nothing.

Many do considerable work.

The deeper question is how premarital counselling can become more systematically **formative, evidence-informed, psychologically sensitive, culturally grounded, and theologically mature.**

The present study explores that question within selected Ghanaian Christian contexts.

Its central argument is simple:

Premarital counselling should prepare people not merely to make vows, but to become increasingly capable of living them.

2. Premarital Counselling as Formation Rather Than Formality

Premarital counselling is sometimes treated as an ecclesiastical requirement.

The couple wants a church wedding.

The church requires counselling.

Sessions are completed.

A form is signed.

The wedding proceeds.

Such a process may communicate useful information but still fall short of genuine formation.

Relationship-education research offers support for more substantial preparation. Hawkins et al. (2008), in a meta-analysis involving 117 studies, found positive effects of marriage and relationship education on relationship quality and communication skills, although the authors also noted important limitations regarding diversity and long-term outcomes. Halford and Bodenmann (2013), reviewing studies with longer follow-up periods, similarly concluded that structured relationship education can help some couples maintain relationship satisfaction, although effectiveness varies across programmes and populations.

More recent reviews likewise suggest that couple and relationship interventions can improve communication and relationship satisfaction, while emphasising heterogeneity in programmes and outcomes.

The evidence therefore calls for balance.

Premarital counselling is valuable.

But attendance alone does not guarantee a successful marriage.

The quality, content, duration, timing, facilitator competence, couple characteristics, and willingness of partners to engage meaningfully all matter.

This distinction is pastorally important.

Counselling should not promise:

"Complete this programme and your marriage will succeed."

It should offer something more responsible:

"Let us help you understand yourselves and the covenant you are considering so that you enter marriage with greater awareness, skill, honesty, and preparedness."

3. Covenant Theology and Christian Marriage

Christian premarital counselling requires a theology of marriage substantial enough to sustain couples after romantic intensity changes.

Covenant provides such a framework.

Marriage understood as covenant differs from a purely transactional relationship. Transaction asks:

"What am I receiving?"

Covenant also asks:

"What am I promising?"

This does not mean that covenant requires staying in every circumstance regardless of violence or serious harm. Christian covenant theology must never be used to preserve abuse.

Rather, covenant emphasises fidelity, mutual responsibility, truthfulness, service, accountability, and enduring concern for the welfare of the other.

Ephesians 5:21–33 is often central to Christian marriage teaching. Yet its interpretation requires pastoral care. The passage begins with the relational ethic of mutual submission in verse 21 and places marital love within the self-giving pattern of Christ.

Consequently, Christian premarital counselling should not use covenant language merely to prescribe authority.

It should use covenant to teach **responsibility**.

Power within Christian marriage is morally accountable.

Love is not domination.

Submission is not permission for abuse.

Forgiveness is not the elimination of boundaries.

Covenant is not captivity.

Theologically responsible marriage preparation therefore asks couples not only:

"Do you love each other?"

but:

"How will you exercise power when you disagree?"

That question can reveal more about marital readiness than many romantic assurances.

4. Marriage as the Meeting of Two Family Systems

Bowen's family systems perspective offers a particularly useful insight for premarital work: individuals enter relationships as members of emotional systems rather than as isolated selves.

People learn intimacy before they marry.

They learn conflict before they marry.

They learn what fathers do.

What mothers do.

Whether anger is expressed or avoided.

Whether affection is verbal.

Whether money is shared.

Whether apologies are offered.

Whether secrets are kept.

Whether men cry.

Whether women challenge authority.

Whether disagreement threatens belonging.

These early patterns do not determine the future, but they influence expectations.

The pastoral counsellor therefore needs to ask:

"What was marriage like in the home where you grew up?"

"How did your parents resolve disagreements?"

"Who controlled money?"

"How was affection expressed?"

"What happened when somebody was angry?"

"What did your family teach you about husbands and wives?"

"Which parts of your family story would you like to carry into your marriage?"

"Which parts should stop with you?"

Such questions transform premarital counselling from moral instruction into reflective formation.

5. The African Extended Family: Resource and Boundary

The African communal understanding of marriage offers important strengths.

Couples rarely marry entirely alone.

Families provide identity, wisdom, practical assistance, childcare, financial support, cultural continuity, mediation, and belonging.

But the same relational closeness can generate tension when boundaries remain undefined.

Who has authority over decisions after marriage?

How often can family members intervene?

Who receives financial support?

How are competing parental expectations negotiated?

What happens when a spouse feels secondary to the extended family?

How should couples respond when families disagree about childbearing, residence, finances, or religious practice?

Premarital counselling in Ghana must therefore neither reject extended-family involvement nor romanticise it.

The objective is **healthy interdependence**.

Marriage creates a new relational unit without requiring abandonment of family belonging.

Genesis 2:24 captures this movement symbolically in its language of leaving, cleaving, and becoming one flesh.

The couple remains connected.

But the covenant requires a new boundary.

6. Relational Self-Awareness and Temperament

The source study employed temperament concepts, including the Arno Profile System (APS), as part of some participants' premarital self-reflection. Couples described such conversations as helping them develop language for differences in social needs, decision-making, affection, communication, and responses to stress.

This aspect of the study should be interpreted carefully.

Temperament language can be pastorally useful when it helps couples become curious rather than accusatory.

Instead of:

"You are impossible."

a partner may begin asking:

"Why does this situation affect you differently from me?"

That change matters.

However, temperament typologies should **not** be treated as psychiatric diagnoses, fixed identities, or scientifically sufficient predictors of marital compatibility.

No assessment should tell a couple:

"You should marry because your profiles match."

or:

"Your marriage cannot work because your temperaments conflict."

The more responsible pastoral use is descriptive:

"This framework may help us begin a conversation about your relational needs and patterns."

Where formal assessment is required, counsellors should also consider instruments with established psychometric evidence appropriate to their population and purpose.

The goal is self-understanding, not labelling.

7. Emotional Intelligence and the Practice of Love

Christian marriage has sometimes been taught primarily through moral imperatives:

Love your spouse.

Forgive.

Be patient.

Do not be angry.

Submit.

Communicate.

The difficulty is that couples may agree with every principle while lacking the skills required to enact them under emotional pressure.

Consider forgiveness.

A person may believe in forgiveness while lacking the emotional regulation necessary to have a difficult conversation without becoming abusive.

A spouse may believe in communication but withdraw whenever conflict activates childhood fear.

Another may know 1 Corinthians 13 by memory but still interrupt, accuse, threaten, manipulate, or stonewall.

Theological conviction therefore benefits from emotional competence.

Marriage and relationship education research has consistently paid attention to communication skills, with meta-analytic evidence indicating that structured programmes can improve aspects of couple communication, though effect sizes and durability vary (Blanchard et al., 2009; Hawkins et al., 2008).

Christian counselling can interpret emotional intelligence as part of practical discipleship:

listening before responding;

naming feelings responsibly;

regulating anger;

expressing needs without accusation;

receiving correction;

showing empathy;

repairing relational injuries;

and knowing when a conversation should pause.

Love needs theology.

Love also needs skills.

8. Purpose of the Study

This study explored the lived experiences of pastors, Christian counsellors, and couples involved in premarital counselling within selected Ghanaian churches.

It sought to answer three questions:

1. How do participants understand the purpose of Christian premarital counselling?
2. What psychological, relational, spiritual, familial, and cultural concerns emerge during marriage preparation?
3. How can theology and psychology be integrated responsibly within a contextual model of premarital formation?

9. Methodology

9.1 Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological design was used to explore the meanings participants attached to premarital counselling and marriage preparation.

Phenomenology was appropriate because the study sought to understand lived experiences rather than establish population prevalence or causal effects.

The research therefore asks how participants experienced and interpreted premarital preparation rather than whether a particular intervention statistically improved subsequent marital stability.

9.2 Participants

Twenty participants were purposively recruited from three urban and two semi-rural churches.

They consisted of:

- five Christian counsellors;
- five pastors involved in premarital or marital ministry; and
- ten individuals comprising five couples who had either recently completed premarital counselling or were approaching marriage.

Participants ranged from 25 to 55 years and represented Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Evangelical settings.

The use of pastoral, counselling, and couple perspectives enabled the study to examine marriage preparation from both provider and recipient viewpoints.

9.3 Data Collection

Three forms of data were used:

1. semi-structured interviews;
2. focus-group discussions; and
3. review of available premarital counselling materials.

Individual interviews lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and explored the meaning of premarital counselling, spiritual and emotional preparedness, temperament or personality differences, and family-of-origin influences.

Two focus groups brought pastors and counsellors into dialogue concerning strengths, weaknesses, and challenges in church-based marriage preparation.

Relevant church curricula and counselling materials were also examined where available.

Sessions were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed, while field notes captured contextual and non-verbal observations.

9.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

The analytical process involved repeated engagement with transcripts, coding significant statements, clustering related meanings, and developing higher-order themes.

Four areas appeared repeatedly in analysis:

- spiritual and covenantal readiness;
- relational self-awareness;
- family influence;
- communication and emotional preparedness.

NVivo 12 was used to support data organisation.

9.5 Ethical Considerations

The source manuscript reports approval from International Theological Seminary, informed consent, confidentiality procedures, pseudonymisation, voluntary participation, and the ability of participants to pause or withdraw from interviews.

Because marriage discussions could involve painful family experiences and relational vulnerability, follow-up counselling referrals were made available where required. The researcher also employed reflexive journaling to remain attentive to the influence of personal pastoral assumptions upon interpretation.

10. Findings

Three principal themes and three supporting subthemes emerged.

10.1 Theme One: Faith as Formation

Participants consistently understood Christian faith as central to marriage preparation.

Yet a significant finding was the movement from viewing faith simply as shared religious identity toward understanding marriage itself as a context of spiritual formation.

One participating couple described discovering that marriage involved more than compatibility; it required character.

This insight shifts the premarital question from:

"Are we in love?"

toward:

"Who are we becoming as we learn to love each other?"

Faith therefore operated not merely as a doctrinal requirement but as a framework for commitment, sacrifice, forgiveness, responsibility, and meaning.

The source study records participants describing marriage increasingly as discipleship rather than simply romantic fulfilment.

10.2 Theme Two: Relational Self-Awareness

Participants also emphasised the usefulness of becoming more aware of differences in personality, emotional needs, communication style, and responses to closeness and conflict.

Temperament language was one tool used in this process.

Its principal value in participants' accounts was not prediction but **reframing**.

Difference became less easily interpreted as defect.

A quiet spouse need not be uncaring.

An expressive spouse need not be unstable.

A partner requiring time before discussing conflict need not be deliberately rejecting the relationship.

The deeper counselling movement was from:

judgement to curiosity

and from:

accusation to understanding.

That movement is valuable regardless of the particular assessment framework employed.

10.3 Theme Three: Covenant Understanding

A third theme involved participants moving from idealised expectations of marriage toward a more deliberate understanding of covenant.

Marriage became less about sustained romantic intensity and more about the practices necessary to preserve a trustworthy relationship.

Participants associated covenant with:

faithfulness;

responsibility;

service;

commitment;

forgiveness;

shared purpose;

and accountability before God and community.

Yet covenant should not be interpreted as perseverance without limits.

Healthy covenant includes truth, justice, safety, and respect.

No premarital programme should teach commitment in a way that creates future vulnerability to abuse.

10.4 Family-of-Origin Healing

Participants described increased awareness of unresolved family patterns.

Genograms and family discussions helped some recognise fears and expectations inherited from parental relationships.

The point was not to blame families.

It was to understand influence.

The question became:

"What have I learned about marriage that I have never consciously examined?"

This is one of premarital counselling's most important questions.

10.5 Communication as Relational Stewardship

Participants identified communication as more than speaking.

Listening emerged as equally significant.

Healthy communication involved learning to disclose without attacking, listen without immediately defending, disagree without humiliating, and repair after relational injury.

These findings align with relationship-education literature indicating that communication remains a central and potentially modifiable component of couple functioning.

10.6 Community and Mentorship

Participants also emphasised the importance of trusted older couples, pastors, counsellors, and supportive communities.

This finding fits the African relational context particularly well.

Marriage preparation need not be isolated to professional counselling sessions.

A healthy model can combine professional competence with wise communal mentoring, provided confidentiality, boundaries, safeguarding, and couple autonomy are respected.

11. The Theological–Psychological Integration Framework

From these findings emerges a revised **Theological–Psychological Integration Framework (TPIF)** for Christian premarital counselling.

The framework includes eight interconnected areas.

11.1 Covenant and Spiritual Identity

Couples explore:

Why are we marrying?

What does covenant mean to us?

How do we understand Christian marriage?

What are our expectations regarding prayer, worship, church participation, service, and spiritual leadership?

How will theological differences be handled?

11.2 Relational Self-Awareness

Couples examine:

personality;

emotional needs;

attachment patterns;

strengths;
vulnerabilities;
stress responses;
communication preferences;
and expectations.

Temperament frameworks may be used as exploratory pastoral tools where appropriate, but not as diagnostic or deterministic instruments.

11.3 Family-of-Origin Exploration

The counsellor examines:

parental relationships;
family boundaries;
conflict patterns;
abuse history;
addiction;
grief;
financial habits;
gender expectations;
family secrets;
and intergenerational patterns.

The aim is awareness rather than blame.

11.4 Communication and Conflict Transformation

Couples learn practical skills for:

active listening;
emotional regulation;

assertive communication;
repair;
negotiation;
apology;
forgiveness;
and respectful disagreement.

Structured relationship-education research supports including communication skills, although programme effects should not be overstated.

11.5 Intimacy and Sexual Expectations

Christian premarital counselling must create mature, non-shaming conversations about sexuality.

Couples should discuss:

sexual expectations;
affection;
consent;
sexual health;
previous experiences where voluntarily disclosed and clinically relevant;
fertility expectations;
contraceptive beliefs;
pregnancy;
infertility;
and appropriate help-seeking.

Silence is not purity education.

Unpreparedness can become a source of unnecessary marital distress.

11.6 Money and Economic Partnership

Couples should discuss:

income;

debt;

savings;

giving;

financial obligations to relatives;

budgeting;

ownership;

financial secrecy;

career expectations;

and decision-making authority.

The critical question is not merely:

"How much do you earn?"

but:

"What does money mean to you?"

Security?

Status?

Freedom?

Control?

Generosity?

Fear?

Family obligation?

Money conflicts often carry emotional meanings beyond the figures themselves.

11.7 Extended-Family Boundaries and Cultural Expectations

Ghanaian premarital counselling must openly address extended-family relationships.

Questions include:

Who may intervene in conflict?

How are financial requests handled?

Where will holidays be spent?

What happens when parents disagree with the couple?

Who participates in decisions about children?

How should cultural expectations be respected without undermining marital autonomy?

11.8 Continuing Formation After the Wedding

Premarital counselling should not end at the altar.

A structured follow-up at approximately three months, six months, and one year can provide space for couples to revisit:

sexual adjustment;

financial realities;

household responsibilities;

family boundaries;

communication;

conflict;

pregnancy or fertility concerns;

and spiritual life.

Premarital education may also increase later willingness to seek relational help, which can itself be viewed as a potentially valuable outcome rather than evidence that preparation failed.

12. A Pastoral Counselling Theology of Marriage

Christian counselling is strongest when neither theology nor psychology is asked to do the other's work.

Theology asks:

What is marriage for?

Psychology helps ask:

How do these two particular people function within it?

Theology provides moral vision.

Psychology illuminates human processes.

Culture provides context.

Pastoral counselling brings them into conversation.

This prevents two opposite mistakes.

The first is **psychologising marriage** until covenant, spirituality, moral responsibility, and sacred meaning disappear.

The second is **over-spiritualising marriage** until communication problems, trauma, mental health conditions, sexual difficulties, family systems, and emotional immaturity are interpreted only as prayer problems.

An integrative approach refuses both reductions.

Prayer matters.

So does listening.

Scripture matters.

So does emotional regulation.

Forgiveness matters.

So do boundaries.

Faith matters.

So does competent professional care.

13. When Premarital Counselling Should Slow a Wedding Down

One of the pastoral counsellor's most difficult responsibilities is recognising when preparation should not lead directly to marriage.

Premarital counselling is not simply designed to help every engaged couple reach the altar.

Sometimes responsible counselling raises concerns requiring attention first.

These may include:

violence;

coercive control;

serious dishonesty;

untreated addiction;

forced marriage;

severe financial concealment;

ongoing infidelity;

significant unmanaged mental-health difficulties;

major disagreement regarding children;

serious incompatibility of core values;

or fear of one's intended spouse.

The counsellor must never become so invested in preserving the wedding that the welfare of the couple is sacrificed.

Postponement may be wiser than preventable suffering.

And, occasionally, the most ethical outcome of premarital counselling is helping two people recognise that they should not marry each other.

That is not counselling failure.

It may be counselling at its most protective.

14. Implications for Ghanaian Churches

Ghanaian religious premarital counselling already demonstrates substantial breadth. Osei-Tutu et al. (2020) found that Christian and Muslim lay counsellors addressed issues ranging from expectations and values to sexuality, finances, communication, parenting, and conflict.

Churches can build upon this existing strength by making programmes:

more structured;

longer than brief ceremonial preparation where feasible;

skills-based as well as instructional;

gender-sensitive;

safeguarding-aware;

psychologically informed;

and linked to continuing marital support.

Programme completion should not be the primary objective.

Readiness should be.

15. Implications for Seminaries and Ministerial Formation

Pastors who conduct premarital counselling need more than personal marital experience.

They require training.

Ministerial formation should include:

marriage and family systems;

couple communication;

sexuality;

domestic violence;

mental-health referral;

confidentiality;

ethics;

assessment;

family-of-origin work;

financial conflict;

cultural expectations;

fertility and childbearing issues;

and crisis intervention.

Pastors should also know the limits of pastoral competence.

Some couples require referral to psychologists, licensed professional counsellors, physicians, psychiatrists, sexual-health professionals, addiction specialists, financial advisers, or legal practitioners.

Referral does not diminish ministry.

It protects people.

16. Implications for Christian Counsellors

Christian counsellors should resist using Scripture as a shortcut around emotional work.

When a couple is distressed, quoting:

"Love is patient"

may be true.

Counselling must then ask:

"What does patience look like when you are angry?"

"Forgive one another" is true.

Counselling asks:

"What needs to happen for repair, accountability, and trust rebuilding?"

"The two shall become one" is true.

Counselling asks:

"How will two people with different histories create shared decisions without erasing either person's dignity?"

This movement from biblical principle to relational practice is where pastoral counselling becomes transformational.

17. Discussion

The findings support an understanding of premarital counselling as **relational formation**.

Three dimensions appear particularly important.

First, **faith provides meaning**.

Participants understood marriage not merely as companionship but as covenantal vocation.

Second, **self-awareness provides relational insight**.

Couples benefited from language that helped them examine differences rather than simply judge them.

Third, **family and community provide context**.

Marriage occurs inside networks of relationships, histories, obligations, and expectations.

These findings resonate particularly well with Ghana-specific research. Osei-Tutu et al. (2020) demonstrate that religious premarital counselling in Ghana already engages medical, relational, sexual, financial, spiritual, and family concerns, suggesting that contextual premarital counselling is broader than simplistic doctrinal instruction.

International evidence also supports structured relationship preparation while urging caution about overpromising outcomes. Meta-analytic research has found improvements in relationship quality and communication from marriage and relationship education, yet studies differ in quality, population, programme dosage, follow-up, and effects. A longitudinal propensity-score analysis has even reported findings inconsistent with a straightforward assumption that premarital education always improves later marital satisfaction, underscoring the need for careful programme evaluation rather than blanket claims.

The most defensible conclusion is therefore not:

Premarital counselling guarantees strong marriages.

It is:

Thoughtfully designed premarital counselling provides couples with opportunities to develop knowledge, communication, reflection, and relational skills before marriage, but programmes must be contextually appropriate and evaluated responsibly.

18. Limitations

This study has several limitations.

First, the sample consisted of only 20 participants drawn from selected Ghanaian Christian churches. The findings cannot be statistically generalised to Ghanaian couples or African Christianity as a whole.

Second, the participants represented Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Evangelical environments; experiences in Catholic, Orthodox, historic mission, African Independent, Muslim, traditional, secular, and interfaith marriages may differ.

Third, because participants generally valued Christian faith and counselling, selection bias may have favoured positive interpretations of faith-integrated premarital preparation.

Fourth, social desirability may have influenced participants' accounts, particularly where pastors or religious expectations shaped ideas about marriage.

Fifth, this qualitative design cannot establish that temperament-based counselling, family-of-origin reflection, or the TPIF causes greater marital satisfaction or stability.

Sixth, the Arno Profile System was used within the study as a pastoral temperament framework. It should not be presented as a clinical diagnostic instrument or as an empirically established predictor of marital compatibility.

Finally, interviews with couples who had recently undergone premarital counselling cannot determine whether reported insights persist across many years of marriage.

19. Recommendations and Future Research

Future Ghanaian research should follow couples prospectively from engagement into the first five or more years of marriage.

This could examine whether specific aspects of premarital preparation predict:

communication;

relationship satisfaction;

conflict management;

help-seeking;

sexual adjustment;
financial cooperation;
family-boundary management;
psychological well-being;
domestic safety;
and marital stability.

Randomised or quasi-experimental studies would be particularly useful for evaluating structured Ghanaian premarital programmes.

Researchers should also compare:

church-led programmes;
professional couple counselling;
mentoring-based programmes;
online approaches;
and integrated models.

International studies suggest that moderate-intensity relationship education and online programmes can produce useful outcomes for some couples, but local validation remains necessary before assuming equivalent effects in Ghanaian populations.

20. Conclusion

Before a couple stands before the altar, there are conversations that should already have begun.

Not only conversations about colours, venues, photographs, and guest lists.

Conversations about anger.

Money.

Sex.

Children.

Faith.

Family.

Fear.

Power.

Boundaries.

Expectations.

Past wounds.

Apology.

Forgiveness.

And the kind of home two people hope to build together.

A wedding asks:

"Are you ready for the day?"

Premarital counselling asks a more demanding question:

"Are you preparing for the life?"

Christian marriage preparation therefore deserves to be understood as more than a requirement to be completed before vows are exchanged.

It is pastoral formation.

It is a place where couples can discover that love is not merely something they feel.

Love is also something they must learn to practise.

They learn to listen when they would prefer to defend themselves.

To apologise when pride would rather justify.

To establish boundaries without abandoning family.

To talk about money without secrecy.

To discuss sexuality without shame.

To recognise inherited wounds before reproducing them.

To seek help before a crisis becomes a catastrophe.

And to understand that covenant does not mean the disappearance of individuality but the responsible creation of shared life.

The Christian counsellor therefore stands at a sacred threshold.

The task is not to guarantee that two people will never struggle.

No honest counsellor can make that promise.

The task is to help them enter marriage knowing themselves more truthfully, knowing each other more realistically, understanding covenant more deeply, recognising risk more clearly, and possessing stronger relational tools for the inevitable seasons of adjustment ahead.

This is why theology and psychology need not compete in premarital counselling.

Theology tells couples **why love matters**.

Psychology helps them understand **how human beings give, receive, distort, protect, and repair love**.

African communal wisdom reminds them that marriage affects more than two individuals.

Pastoral counselling gathers these strands together and asks two people to consider, before the vows:

"Can we tell each other the truth?"

"Can we listen?"

"Can we disagree without destroying dignity?"

"Can we grow?"

"Can we seek help?"

"Can we build a covenant in which both persons are safe, respected, known, and loved?"

When premarital counselling helps couples wrestle faithfully with these questions, the Church has done something far more significant than prepare them for a wedding.

It has begun preparing them for a lifetime.

Ethical Statement

The source study reports approval from **International Theological Seminary**, together with informed consent, confidentiality, pseudonymisation, voluntary participation, the right to pause or withdraw, researcher reflexivity, and access to counselling referral when emotionally difficult material emerged. No additional ethics-reference number or institutional information has been introduced beyond what is documented in the source manuscript.

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