




# Exploring the efficacy of premarital counselling in church settings: A qualitative study



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**Background:** What a couple does in preparation for marriage is a critical determinant of the success of the marriage. It is believed that, that period helps sustain marriages because it gives couples knowledge and skills that can help them in the marriage as well as facilitate their decision-making process. Despite availability of premarital counselling (PMC) services worldwide, many marriages still end in divorce.

**Objectives:** The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore pastors' perceptions regarding premarital counselling in Pentecostal churches in Gaborone.

**Method:** This research adopted a qualitative case study where four pastors from four Pentecostal churches in Gaborone were purposively selected to share their views of PMC in church. The findings were analysed using thematic analysis.

**Results:** The study's findings established that there is a need for pastors to go through relevant training to be equipped with skills that can help give direction to their services and that congregants should be taught about the benefits of PMC.

**Conclusion:** Based on the findings, it was concluded that although PMC is a powerful tool for a successful marriage and reduction of divorce rates, it needs to be strengthened.

**Contribution:** The study will help to show the need for PMC in Pentecostal churches and also emphasise the most suitable time to commence PMC sessions before one gets married.

**Keywords:** premarital counselling; Pentecostal church; pastors; perceptions; marriage.

## Introduction

### Background of the study

Marriage is revered in almost all communities and societies; however, what is done before people get married determines its success (Sigamoney 2023). From a biblical perspective, marriage is established by God. It is through marriage that communities, societies and nations are founded. As a result, properly planning and preparing people for marriage is practised in many societies. Some countries such as USA have increased the popularity of premarital counselling (PMC) by encouraging couples to participate in PMC programmes (Salley 2022). These programmes have proven to increase marital satisfaction among couples, thus showing its effectiveness (Stahmann 2000).

Premarital counselling is supported both in religious and traditional cycles. Religious leaders and elderly married people within families are responsible for ensuring that the would-be couples are prepared for marriage. A majority of churches demand that people preparing to get married should undergo PMC before they can legalise their marriage. The teaching of marriage in church is from a Christian or biblical perspective (Gregoire 2023). Studies such as by Bawa (2018) underscore the positive impact of PMC, which incorporates biblical principles, on enabling satisfying and successful marriages. A lack of PMC is found to be one of the main causes of instability of Christian marriages as revealed by Collins (2007). Collins's emphasis on the failure of marriages is attributed to what is done when people decide to get married. This article critically explores PMC in church with a focus on its effectiveness in church settings globally, regionally, and specifically within the context of Botswana.

Global perspectives on PMC underscore its significance in promoting marital stability and satisfaction (Arafani 2017; Baker 2019; Hughes et al. 2020; Minzenmayer 2018; Navabifar, Atashpour & Golparvar 2020; Ratson 2024; Salley 2022; Stahmann 2002). Arafani states that it is through PMC that the counsellor can help the would-be couple to come up with a clearer and a more realistic view

of the person they plan to marry. Ratson argues that during PMC, couples are able to identify each other's weaknesses that could become bigger problems during marriage. Furthermore, PMC also gives would-be couples the opportunity to learn about each other. Taking time to know and understand each other would help reduce partner's discovery of unbecoming behaviours after marriage. However, despite the widespread adoption of PMC, challenges persist. They include among others; the lack of standardised approaches and comprehensive follow-up plans (Tuffour 2017), couples' failure to utilise the services before they get married (Duncan et al. 2018) as well as giving more emphasis on the wedding preparation than PMC (Foote 2014; Joseph & Subhashini 2012). Tuffour specifically highlights the lack of consistency in how PMC programmes are structured and delivered across different church settings. This writer rightly argues that inconsistency can lead to variations in the quality and effectiveness of the counselling provided to couples. Furthermore, the lack of thorough follow-up plans implies that there is no structured strategy in place to assist couples after they finish their initial counselling sessions. Follow-up plans are crucial for ensuring that couples receive ongoing guidance and support as they confront the difficulties of marriage life.

Moreover, there are doubts about the effectiveness of PMC programmes when they are conducted by clergy members as opposed to trained counsellors (Stanley & Manthei 2004). This raises questions about the qualifications and expertise of clergy members in providing counselling services to couples preparing for marriage. Research suggests that PMC programmes led by trained counsellors may offer more comprehensive support and address the complex issues that couples may encounter as they embark on married life (Knutson, Olson & Innovations 2003).

Despite these concerns, PMC in church settings has been acknowledged for its contribution to enhancing marital stability and satisfaction (Baker 2019; Minzenmayer 2018). Studies conducted in USA by experts such as Baker (2019) and Minzenmayer (2018) emphasise the favourable outcomes of PMC for couples. This form of counselling not only assists couples in laying a solid foundation for their marriage but also equips them with essential communication and conflict resolution skills thereby helping couples to improve their relationship and prevent the possibility of divorce. By addressing potential issues before marriage, couples can better navigate challenges and strengthen their relationship.

Concurrently, research in the United States suggests a positive link between religiosity and marital satisfaction among Christian couples, thus emphasising that the potential benefits of PMC is grounded in religious teachings (Lawrence 2014). Premarital counselling within church settings has been a longstanding practice aimed at equipping couples with the necessary guidelines and skills for a successful marriage. Biblical scriptures such as in the book of Proverbs 15:22 in New Revised Standard translation, Solomon states that 'Without counsel, plans go wrong but with many advisers

they succeed'. Moreover, Titus 2:3-8 implies that experienced elders should lead by example, help, instruct and teach younger generation about what marriage is before they get married. The above verses emphasises the importance of education given to those who need it by mentors. Conversely, Arauo and Lima (2017) point out ongoing issues of marital dissatisfaction and high divorce rates, revealing the limitations of current PMC interventions.

Region-specific studies in US have emphasised the importance of tailoring PMC approaches to address unique challenges, particularly within African cultural and religious intersections (Jones & Stahman 1994). These studies underscore the value of utilising culturally sensitive strategies to overcome communication barriers and promote understanding between partners (Wilcox 2020). Furthermore, there is a clear call for additional research to customise PMC programmes to suit the diverse cultural contexts found in various regions. Therefore, this article explores the pastors' perceptions regarding the provision of PMC in church.

## Statement of the problem

Despite PMC provision, many marriages end in divorce, and this problem in church cannot be overemphasised (Borowski & Tambling 2015). In Botswana, as noticed by Stockton, Nitza and Bhusumane (2010), PMC is offered in government offices, churches, and private clinics, and yet the divorce rate is alarming. Scholars such as Mbulawa (2012) and Comfort and Chinyeaka (2018) observed the prevalence of divorce in church. A similar finding is reported by Comfort and Chinyeaka. It is worth observing that more than 70% of the population of Botswana are members of the Christian religion. From the above revelation, therefore, a study of this manner was conducted to explore pastors' perceptions regarding PMC provision in church.

## Theoretical framework

The solution focused theory (O'Connell 2003) and prevention theory (WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care 2009) were used as a lens to explore PMC provision in church. As a result of the issues that married people come across in their marital journey, solution focused theory focuses on equipping couples with problem solving skills that could help them adjust easily in marriage and build a satisfying, and stable relationship. In addition, the theory of prevention, which has its origin in the 1970s in the health sector, is concerned with addressing health and social issues preventatively before they could develop and become entrenched into society as opposed to treating or managing the consequences once the problem has happened (WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care 2009). Similarly, as PMC involves preventive interventions to help stop problems before they occur in marriage, as Ratson (2024) puts it, it allows early detection of problems that could become bigger issues during marriage. Prevention theory is proactive as it helps couples to anticipate problems before they occur and seek the best solutions. Preventive approaches

are imperative as the adage says 'prevention is better than cure'. Marriage has challenges and through PMC the would-be couples are taken through teachings and lessons to impart necessary skills that can assist them traverse their way in their marriage. Through the provision of PMC before marriage, couples can have the opportunity to learn new and fulfilling behaviours that can accord them satisfying lives (Kariuki 2018).

### Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to explore pastors' perceptions regarding PMC in four Pentecostal churches in Gaborone, Botswana.

### Research objective

- To explore the pastors' perceptions regarding PMC provision in Pentecostal church.

### Research question

- *What are the pastors' perceptions regarding PMC provision in Pentecostal churches?*

### Study design

A qualitative case study design was adopted for this research to explore pastors' perceptions regarding PMC provision in church. The approach enabled the researchers to get a holistic picture of PMC provision in Pentecostal churches (Miles & Huberman 1994). A case study was used to acquire a clear descriptive account of the pastors' perceptions regarding PMC provision in church.

### Study setting

The study was conducted among selected pastors in one of the oldest four Pentecostal churches in Gaborone, Botswana.

### Study participants and sampling strategy

Four pastors who were purposively selected took part in the study based on their ability to contribute to the researcher's phenomenon of investigation (Creswell 1994). To be included in the study, participants needed to: (1) have been a pastor in a Pentecostal church for at least 10 years and above, (2) have been providing PMC to those who wish to get married (3) have theological training and lastly, (4) have willingness to participate.

### Data collection instruments

In-depth interviews that took approximately 1h were the sole data collection method. A total of four interviews were conducted with four selected pastors in Pentecostal churches in Gaborone, which were carried out in the pastor's respective churches. The interviews were audiotaped with participant's consent and the participants were free to use the language of

their choice, which they were comfortable with and the recordings were anonymised using pseudonyms.

### Data analysis

Audio recordings of each interview were transcribed verbatim by the researchers before being analysed in line with Braun and Clarke's stages of data analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). Cohen, Manion and Marrison (2002) state that:

[D]ata analysis involves organizing, accounting for and explaining the data, in fact, making sense of the data in terms of participants definitions of the situations noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities. (p. 147)

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. Content analysis of transcripts was utilised and emerging themes were established. Firstly, the data were transcribed and translated into English. Secondly, the researchers closely listened to the recordings, and the transcripts were read and reread, until the common perceptions of the pastors became apparent. Thirdly, these common perceptions were coded, grouped, and regrouped into themes. Finally, the major themes were used to establish pastors' perceptions regarding PMC provision in church.

### Ethical considerations

Before conducting the research, there were ethical protocols that were followed. Firstly, permission was granted from the University of Botswana Office of Research and Development (ORD) for ethical review and approval. Secondly to gain entrance into research sites the other permit was sought from the Ministry of Nationality, Immigration and Gender Affairs. Thirdly, pilot testing the instrument was done before the commencement of the data collection process. The pilot exercise accorded the researchers to rehearse the interview guide and measure the duration of the interview. The final instrument used in the study was based on comments given during pilot exercise. Fourthly the participants were informed about the nature of the study as a way of obtaining their informed consent. Finally after the process was completed those who agreed to take part were made to sign the consent forms. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Botswana (No. UBR/RES/IRB/GRAD/023).

### Findings of the study

Following the analysis, four themes emerged from the study's findings: no training for PMC provision, no curriculum or standardised premarital education manual for preparing couples in church, couple's failure to complete PMC sessions or complete absence, and provision of post-marital counselling after the wedding.

### No training for premarital counselling provision

All the participants mentioned that they did not have relevant training or skills in offering PMC except that they relied on

the teachings from the Holy Bible to offer PMC. One of the narrations shared during the interviews was:

'I am trying to do what I can, the challenge is that I do not have any training in PMC' (Pastor 1, Male, Abundance Overflow, over 60 years old).

### No curriculum or standardised premarital education manual for preparing couples in church

All the pastors had unstructured guide that they followed to prepare people for marriage and this was based on the Bible. Inconsistencies in the approach and the duration of the sessions were observed among the participants. The PMC sessions ranged between 1 and 3 months. It was difficult to find out what determines the choice of topics; every pastor had their own topics they covered during PMC sessions.

### Couple's failure to complete premarital counselling sessions or complete absence

All the pastors raised a concern for couple's failure to complete all the required PMC sessions or complete absence from PMC sessions. Pastors disclosed that some of the reasons that lead to these inconsistencies are associated with wedding preparations as well as conflicting scheduled meeting with parents in preparation for the wedding. This may be interpreted as prioritising the wedding over PMC. Participants lamented late notification of wedding dates by the couples. Their main concern was that by the time notification is made they will be no time for the couples to undergo PMC. As a result, such couples get into marriage without being counselled. Some of the comments were as follows:

'Some only seek PMC when their wedding day is near and hence fail to attend all the required sessions.' (Pastor 4, Male, Faith Outreach, 41–50 years old)

'It is very difficult to deal with couples who are preparing to get married. Most of them do not finish the sessions, some do not even bother to seek counselling they only announce that they are getting married.' (Pastor 1, Male, Abundance Overflow, over 60 years old)

'I do provide PMC the main issue is the busy schedule of the people getting married, they do not actually honour the sessions as they should. They sometimes miss the sessions and state that they were attending family meetings.' (Pastor 2, Male, Alpha Followers, 41–50 years old)

'[S]ome come for PMC but never finish the sessions.' (Pastor 3, Male, Pastoral Overcomers, 41–50 years old)

'[S]ome couples do not even do the assignments that I give them, and stress that they were busy.' (Pastor 1, Male, Abundance Overflow, over 60 years old)

### Provision of post-marital counselling after the wedding

In another development, the researcher further established from the participants the need for post-marital counselling provision to complement PMC. One pastor even indicated

that in his church, post-marital counselling is given to couples 6 months after the wedding. The participant expressed his view as follows:

'We provide counselling six months after the wedding' (Pastor 4, Male, Faith Outreach, 41–50 years old)

## Discussion

The critical literature review on PMC within church settings globally highlights its role in equipping couples with essential knowledge and skills for a successful marriage. While studies such as those by Baker (2019), Minzenmayer (2018) and Salley (2022) underline the positive impact of PMC on marriage by improving marital stability and satisfaction, challenges such as the lack of standardised approaches and comprehensive follow-up plans persist (Tuffour 2017). Tuffour's critique on the inconsistency in PMC programme structure and delivery across church settings emphasises the need for a more cohesive and supportive approach to counselling for couples. The above report is in agreement with what the current research established that there are inconsistencies in the duration of PMC and content discussed during PMC. It was established in the study that pastors had no structured curriculum to help them provide PMC. Furthermore, the pastors differed in terms of the duration of PMC provisions offered by them as the duration ranged between 1 and 3 months. This finding is discussed by Tuffour. Tuffour specifically highlights the lack of consistency in how PMC programmes are structured and delivered across diverse church settings. This researcher rightly argues that inconsistency can lead to disparities in the quality and effectiveness of the counselling provided to couples, which this study established.

Similarly, region-specific studies, particularly within African cultural and religious intersections, stress the importance of tailoring PMC approaches to address unique challenges. The study by Patel (2020) advocates for culturally sensitive strategies to enhance communication and understanding between partners. These findings align with research in Botswana, where studies by Madigele et al. (2020a) and Van Dijk (2013) underscore the significance of considering cultural and religious influences in shaping effective PMC programmes. However, the gaps identified in Botswana's church-based counselling, such as inadequate consideration of social, political, and economic challenges, as well as issues of cultural sensitivity and gender bias (Madigele et al. 2020a), highlight the need for a more holistic and inclusive counselling framework. Possibly, the tendency of missing PMC sessions and completely failing to attend sessions could be minimised, which this study established.

Furthermore, the complexities surrounding PMC in Botswana, including challenges related to gender bias and the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinities in church settings (Gabaitse et al. 2018), underscore the importance of addressing cultural norms and practices that impact relationship dynamics. By integrating insights from global perspectives on PMC efficacy with region-specific challenges



in Botswana, there is an opportunity to enhance counselling practices by adopting a multi-faceted approach that prioritises cultural sensitivity, gender inclusivity, and comprehensive understanding of couples' backgrounds. This holistic strategy can lead to more tailored and effective interventions that support healthy relationships and address the diverse needs of couples within the region. Possibly, issues such as couples' failure to consistently attend PMC sessions as established in this study may cease. It could be that couples need interventions that are tailored to address the diverse needs of people.

Additionally, missing of sessions was raised as a concern. This finding concurs with Norvell (2009) and Schumm et al. (2010) who argued that PMC attendance has been drastically affected by the lack of attendance emanating from busy schedules of potential clients as their focus is on planning for the wedding. Furthermore, Tambling and Glebova (2013) shed light on the aspect of excitement that is brought by the prospect of getting married, thus highlighting its impediment during PMC. The possible result is that couples enter into marriage not thoroughly prepared for the challenges ahead. The discussion in a study by Sullivan and Anderson (2002) further associated the lack of attendance in PMC with the absence of effective strategies such as convenient time management, proper planning, setting good priorities to encourage individuals to attend the sessions. Although effective strategies could serve to encourage PMC attendance, pressures that individuals face may continue to prevent them from attending the PMC programmes. Therefore, as Collins (2007) suggested, there is need for PMC counsellors to identify why people resist PMC and come up with strategies that can help overcome these challenges.

Previous studies by Sigamoney (2023) and Jones and Stahmann (1994) reported that religious leaders offered PMC without academic training. Jones and Stahmann emphasised the need for training as reading the Bible alone cannot sufficiently prepare people for marriage. Moreover, doubts regarding clergy members' efficacy in providing counselling services compared to trained counsellors, as raised by Stanley and Manthei (2004), suggest a need for enhanced qualifications and expertise for pastors in guiding couples through the complexities of marriage preparation. This raises questions about the qualifications and expertise of clergy members in providing counselling services to couples preparing for marriage. Research suggests that programmes led by trained counsellors may offer more comprehensive support and address the complex issues that couples may encounter as they embark on married life. Kirkbride et al. (2024) recognise the significance of the provision of counselling based on specialised knowledge. To have specialised knowledge is crucial, as Kirkbride et al. (2024) view a professional identity 'as a self-conceptualised frame of reference, developed via training, professional development and experience in practice intentionally used as a basis for conducting a professional role' (Kirkbride et al. 2024:65). Furthermore, in a study conducted among a selected alumni

pool of graduates of Covenant Theological Seminary in America, Buikema (2001) reported that the training received from the seminary did not equip ministers to be effective premarital counsellors. According to Buikema, although pastors went for theological training, their training did not accord them the skills to effectively assist individuals who needed PMC services. The pastors felt inadequate as PMC providers because of inadequate seminary education. As a result, Jones and Stahmann concluded that there is a need for additional education and training for clergy on PMC.

It is worth noting that the benefits of training have been outlined by various authors such as Northrop (2014) and Borowski and Tambling (2015) and Tambling and Glebova (2013). As Northrop puts it, training enables clients to have confidence in the service provider, and that trained, professional and experienced counsellors attract more clients (Borowski & Tambling 2015; Tambling & Glebova 2013). Moeti (2020) similarly found that clients' choice of counsellors is based on the training, professionalism and skills possessed by the counsellors; hence, the absence of these skills would hinder PMC participation. This could be the reason why some church people still fail to appreciate PMC provided at church by their pastors. The researchers of this study observed the same incompetency surrounding PMC providers in church. This challenges the quality of services offered by pastors. Based on the aforesaid finding, there might be a strong relationship between PMC participation and experienced pastor counsellors. One could possibly conclude that the lack of expertise could be the reason why the majority of church people do not value PMC provision provided in church settings.

Moreover, based on the finding regarding PMC in church it is important to mention that offering marital counselling after marriage should be explored and acknowledged. Thorough follow-up plans after the wedding can possibly help in ensuring that couples receive ongoing guidance and support as they confront the difficulties of marriage life.

Differing views surrounding when to offer marital counselling after the wedding to supplement PMC have been highlighted by researchers. Insights from Guldner (1971) and Henning (1983) and Moeti (2020) and Murray (2005) advocate for early marital interventions after the wedding to complement PMC interventions. According to Moeti is that 6 months view is ideal for post-marital counselling because this is the time when couples are responsive to interventions. Henning (1983) emphasised that this is a time that individuals may be able to effectively deal with issues that were not dealt with during PMC period. This finding agrees with the results of the current study that counselling that is offered 6 months after the wedding is a necessity. This could enhance PMC and provide those who missed PMC a chance to deal with their marital issues. It is worth noting that preparing for the wedding is a tedious process that impacts PMC attendance negatively as noted by Moeti (2020).

## Strengths and limitations

The findings of this study cannot be generalised across all churches in Botswana. However, it is important to notice that the findings of this study can serve as a guide to all religious leaders to see the need for providing PMC in church and to come up with strategies that can educate the congregants regarding the benefits of PMC as it has a potential to enhance satisfying and sustainable marriages.

## Implications and recommendations

Premarital counselling offered in churches plays a major role in equipping couples with the necessary guidance and skills for a successful marriage. The church, as an institution, has a significant role to play in helping couples to lead a satisfying and successful marriage life. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that:

1. An integrated PMC programme should be established that can address the diverse needs of couples.
2. Pastors should be trained on PMC.
3. All couples preparing to get married must be encouraged to participate in PMC.
4. There should be collaborative efforts by relevant stakeholders to review the content of PMC to make it more responsive to the demands of a successful marriage.
5. Churches and other religious bodies should continue to emphasise the importance of PMC to its members.

## Conclusion

Premarital counselling is a requirement for couples preparing to get married in church. This article established that if the pastors who are responsible for offering PMC could be trained and equipped, it would make them more effective in their PMC services. This article suggests that there is a crucial need to strengthen the provision of PMC programmes. Working with other service providers through adopting a multi-faceted approach that prioritises cultural sensitivity, gender inclusivity, and comprehensive understanding of couples' backgrounds could be considered. Most importantly, strengthening PMC in church would possibly reduce the high rates of divorce and increase stable marriages in Pentecostal 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.

### Authors' contributions

B.M. was involved in conceptualisation, investigation, methodology, formal analysis, validation, writing original draft, administration, reviewing and editing. T.J.M. was involved in formulating the study conception and methodology, investigation, writing the original draft, reviewing and editing. L.M. was involved in conceptualisation,

formal analysis, investigation, writing the original draft and reviewing and editing.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author B.M., upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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