

## Pre-Marriage Education

Jennifer Mason- Centacare Brisbane

### Expectations

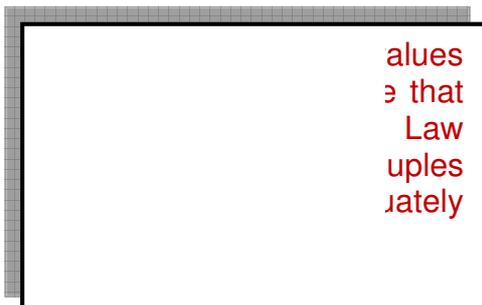
When a couple walk through the door for their first Pre-Marriage Education (PME) session at Centacare Catholic Family and Community Services (CFCS) Brisbane, it's apparent that they are experiencing a degree of trepidation and sometimes reluctance about what they are about to undertake. Couples may be thinking a range of things: *Why do we have to do this?... What on earth can we get out of this? It's going to be really bad... What would these people know?... They're going to try to bible-bash me... We don't need to do this; we've known each other for five years etc.*



This is in stark contrast to the sorts of things they say in their evaluation forms at the end of their last session- which are often: *I'm surprised, it was really good. I didn't want to come but I've really learned something... That was really beneficial; I want to make sure we apply some of this in our lives... It wasn't what I expected; it was great to be involved... I'd really recommend it to friends and family, to anyone considering marriage.*

So, what happens in between that leads to such a different point of view? Are a couple really required to come to PME anyway? What benefit can and does PME provide for couples? And how can we ensure that we are providing the best possible PME program for couples?

What follows is a brief overview and history of pre-marriage education; a discussion on the effectiveness of PME and some practical tips and strategies for deacons to encourage best practice in the field.



Pre-Marriage Education (PME) has been an important - albeit little known - ministry within the Catholic Church for many years; and is part of the Church's ongoing investment in marriage and family. The Church so values preparation for marriage that the Code of Canon Law states that "all couples should be adequately prepared for marriage"

The Pontifical Commission on the Family correctly notes that PME occurs in a number of ways – firstly as a child grows into a family and observes his/her parents and extended family in their intimate relationships, during schooling especially within the context of Catholic schools, during the formal delivery of a specialist program prior to marriage. Thus, when couples make the decision to marry and attend a formal PME program they bring with them years of formation and experience, and it is at this key life stage that the PME provider can have a significant role and impact on a couples life.

## A little history

Formal programs in PME since the Second World War have included “Pre-Cana” weekends (named with reference to the wedding feast of Cana) where groups of engaged couples would meet together with priests and religious to discuss the vocation of marriage and Engaged Encounter, were the forerunners in the field of PME. One of the most recent evolutions of the parish based programs has been the Australian “Embrace Love” and “Celebrate Love” programs developed in 2004. These programs follow similar threads and use similar processes as Engaged Encounter, with leader couples discussing their marriages and their faith journeys. Throughout Australia in parishes and agencies such as Centacare group programs for marriage education seek to educate and empower couples towards a healthy and successful marriage, and work to enliven couples’ understanding of the sacramental nature of the vocation they undertake. PME programs combine knowledge and insights from the sciences of psychology, sociology and theology to achieve the best outcomes for couples.



In 1985 Sr Barbara Markey from Omaha Diocesan published the FOCCUS Program. This inventory based, discussion PME program invites couples to consider their relationship in-depth by F-facilitating O-open C-couple C-communication U-understanding S-study. The program was originally developed by Sr Markey to be used as a precursor to a group program; enabling couples to identify their individual and couple strengths and weaknesses and work with specific awareness around these areas. Throughout Australia and the world it is often used as a stand alone PME program; and is licensed and, in Australia, administered under the auspices of the Catholic Society for Marriage Education (CSME). Under CSME’s control, nine national trainers provide training for relationship educators, counsellors, priests, deacons and lay parish members to train them to be registered to provide FOCCUS as a facilitator. Training includes current ideas and practices in relationship education (as opposed to counselling frameworks), research and understandings on contemporary marriages in Australia and program delivery.

## So what is the role of the Relationship Educator?

It is not the role of the educator to tell a couple “what to do and how to do it”, but to encourage open, frank and insightful reflection and discussion between the couple.

Whether a lay person, an ordained minister or an educator in an agency based program, the role of the educator remains the same - to walk with couples through a process to enable couples to reflect on the quality of their relationship and their decision to marry. Relationship educators have the unique privilege of joining the couple’s lives, hearing their story and journeying with them towards the Sacrament of Marriage. The relationship educators

role includes assisting where necessary couple’s skill building - particularly in key areas such as communication and conflict management; and understanding the foundations of their relationship in such areas as the influence of their family of origin and their shared and different values and beliefs in a range of areas. Therefore the particular skills necessary to be an effective and competent educator include an ability to relate to couples, a non-judgemental empathy, highly developed communication skills, an understanding of the ‘world’ of the couples and proficiency in program delivery in whatever format the program is being delivered.

Relationship educators need to be aware of the importance of actively seeking to improve and deepen their own knowledge and skill base regarding relationships, current social trends

and developments in the field. This includes being engaged in professional development workshops, reflecting on their own practice skills through debriefing and supervision processes, being aware of their own personal “emotional triggers” and recognising their own personal limitations so as not to overstep their competence in working with couples. Membership in CSME (Catholic Society for Marriage Education) and subscription to key industry publications such as “Threshold” and “Family Matters” (from Australian Institute of Family Studies) are highly encouraged for those involved in working with couples. Deacons in particular need to have an appreciation of the nature and extent of the confidential nature of PME programs, particularly FOCCUS, and recognise potential ‘conflict of interest’ areas. One such area maybe where through the FOCCUS program a couple may disclose their intention not to have children in their future marriage, and the implications that such knowledge may create if the Deacon is the wedding celebrant.

### Does PME work?

This question has interested and engaged a number of researchers in Australia and overseas. The academic debate regarding how the efficacy of PME is measured - and in fact what we are measuring is a complex one steeped in academic and research complications. The question may be as easy and obvious as “Does participating in a PME program mean that a couple will have a successful marriage and prevent divorce?” Developing and undertaking reputable research is complex. Certainly we can ask couples to comment immediately after the programs are completed on how useful and relevant the course was, but really testing the efficacy of a program requires longitudinal studies with follow up interviews with couples over a period of years.



Associate Professor Michele Simmons from University of South Australia (and immediate past President of CSME) co-authored “Love, Sex and Waterskiing” (1992) (Harris, Rogers et al) and research results reported from this study indicated that approximately 6% of couples choose not to continue their relationship into marriage - or at least delayed their marriage as a consequence of attending a PME program. Workers in the field believe that this is a positive step in terms of couples taking the time to assess the quality of their relationship and its viability. More recently, Professor Kim Halford from Griffith University has been attempting to address this question through his research and in analysis of research from a variety of universities worldwide. He suggests that in sixty-five studies of PME effectiveness only eighteen have included follow-up of couples at six months after course completion and only two have included follow-up of couples two years after course completion. These studies have indicated that relationship education can enhance communication skills and enhance relationship satisfaction in couples where there is relationship distress, but the question of effectiveness in long-term prevention of divorce has not been adequately addressed.

### What should be included in a PME program?

There is certainly a body of evidence - both from research and from clinical experience of practitioners working in the field regarding what makes a “good” PME program. These sources recognise the importance of including both knowledge and skills training components in courses, regardless of whether they are group based or inventory based programs (such as FOCCUS, Prepare or Relate); and delivered in the context of an adult education framework. Knowledge components includes discussion and reflection by the couple on the importance of having shared and realistic expectations of marriage (a known risk factor pushing couples to divorce), and on the couples understanding and value of

commitment. Specific skills training on positive and effective communication and conflict management techniques; a shared understanding of mutual and individual needs for intimacy, affection and emotional support; an appreciation of personal qualities, personal preferences and values are also considered imperative. In programs provided in the Catholic context, education on the Sacramental nature of marriage and the implications for the life of the couple are also a key component of PME.



The Sacrament of Marriage invites couples to be 'life-giving' to each other, their children, their families, friends, church and wider community. It is a rich vision for a way of life often at odds with the values proposed by our western culture. The ministry of marriage and relationship education – is about sharing and encouraging this vision. Relationship educators seek to 'sow seeds' – in all kinds of 'soil' – mostly never learning whether these 'seeds' flourish or fail, but trusting in the Creators vision and care.

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To learn more about FOCCUS facilitation training, please contact your local Centacare office. Further information can be obtained on the CSME website at [www.csme.catholic.org.au](http://www.csme.catholic.org.au)