

New Testament Underpinning of Premarital Counselling: A Reverberation Therapy for First Child Entry

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Abstract

This study aimed at identifying some of the challenges faced by parents when the first child is born and to proffer solutions that may assist intending and married couples to adjust during this period. A total of one hundred structured questionnaires were randomly distributed within the Babcock University community, Ilishan Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria. Sixty five completed questionnaires were retrieved. The respondents comprised both genders, married and single individuals who are intending to marry within a year. Respondent's data were represented and subjected to descriptive and comparative analysis using student's t-test and chi-square (SPSS 17.0) to establish the significant difference between groups. A value of $P < 0.05$ was considered significant. One way ANOVA was also performed. The survey revealed that majority (94%) of the respondents received premarital counseling. About 60% of the respondents indicated that they planned to conceive a baby immediately after getting married. The study indicated that 62% of the respondents had their first baby as planned. However, three-quarter of this group of people are those who planned to get pregnant immediately after marriage. Respondents who plan to wait for less than a year (64%) were fully prepared for their first child, while majority of those who planned to wait for about 1 to 2 years before conception (53%) were fairly prepared for their first baby. The study also revealed that among other assessed parameters, increased expenditure (60%) and a reduction in social activities (37%) are the most common challenges that couples experienced at the conception stage. Upon arrival of the first child, our findings revealed that the couple experienced greater challenges with increased financial expense, workload at home, less sleep and reduction in coping ability with duties at work and home. Finally, this study revealed that both those who received premarital counselling and those who did not faced the same challenge at the arrival of the first child. However, those who received premarital counselling in the context of 1 Peter 5:2-3 were better adjusted for the challenges.

Keywords: Premarital counseling, parents, first child and challenges

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1. Introduction

Shepherd in context of 1 Peter 5:2-3 embraces all things a shepherd would do for a flock of sheep such as protecting, guiding and feeding. The function is accompanied in a wide variety of ways including preaching, counselling, being a godly example and correcting appropriately and in measure. The bible nowhere anticipated independent Christians in instructions but it always assumes the body has counselors given by Christ to provide guidance and teaching in its totality including families. Family wholeness is fundamentally important to the well-being of both the individuals who constitute them and of society as a whole. Sometimes, the wholeness of family can be affected by the degree of couple's preparedness for transition into parenthood and the challenges posed by arrival of the first child in the home. This research attempts to identify the potential challenges at home brought about by the first child and equally suggest solutions to the challenges. Many years ago, investigators concluded that the first birth could be described as a 'crisis' for the parents, whereas others reported that the first birth results no more than a slight and temporary disruption of family life.

Many studies dealing with transition to parenthood identified changes in the marriage that occur when children enter the relationship. Changes in the marriage can occur in the areas of the division of labour, companionship, and time for leisure activities. Potential stressors of parenthood include fatigue and feelings of inadequacy (Felming, 1990), physical demands of infant care, emotional responsibilities for the infant, a fussy baby and feeling tied down. These stressors might influence parents' abilities to cope with day-to-day events and greatly alter their abilities to handle unusual events. Despite negative changes that they sometimes bring to a marriage, children also have been found to deter unhappy couples from contemplating divorce.

The effect of living in a household with unhappy parents may lead to negative behaviour in children. Awareness of the impact of children on the marriage might lead individuals to see the child rearing experience as a positive and worthwhile part of their lives.

This study examined the challenges the arrival of the first child could have on Parents. It specifically measure the extent at which issues on childbearing and rearing is covered at the premarital counseling in context of 1 Peter 5:2-3. Assess couples' level of preparedness for the arrival of their first child. Quantified the impact of premarital counseling about childbearing and rearing on the preparedness of the couple for the first child. Compared couples' preparedness for their first child in relation to their planned waiting period and measured the challenges that

couples go through during the conception and after the birth of their first child. The study covered single individuals who are intending to marry within a year and married individuals in Babcock University community.

2. Marriage

Marriage is a sacred institution established by God in the Garden of Eden. It was enjoyed to the fullest by our first parents before the fall. However, its flares and beauty were marred at the advent of sin into the world. Since then mankind has struggled with the broken pieces of marriage institution. Many people go into marriage with the hope of getting the best out of it, but end up not getting anything other than frustration. Some people go into marriage with the mindset of retaining their right on issues, without contemplating compromise. Individuals in this category would have forgotten that marriage is an institution where each person is supposed to love the other unconditionally and with selfless love. This could account for the reason why the relationship that exists between husband and wife was likened to that of Christ and the church. Christ being the husband and church the wife.

Marriage comes to us with several responsibilities. These responsibilities will either make us happy or miserable depending on how prepared we are. Therefore, it is of importance that every young folk aspiring to enter this institution someday should acquire the practical knowledge that will equip them for the challenges thereof. Such knowledge include home and finance management, stress coping skill and communication skill are a matter of necessity before marriage, as these will make love pair less dependent on third parties from outside the home(White,1983).

2.1 Family Wholeness

In marriage, the man and woman were supposed to be one flesh. God created marriage to be a heterosexual union between a man and a woman and not the homosexual union and lesbianism people practice these days. This heterosexual union is elevated as a symbol of the bond between deity and humanity. Through the union, humanity was to experience unity and procreation. This in accordance to God's will should lead to blessed family tie which is the most tender and sacred of all human relationship. In order to compliment the heterosexual union, marriage was design to be a monogamous union between a man and a woman. Thus, polygamy was not God's ideal.

Through the blessed union, a home is to be built, a place where love, peace and harmony are the other of the day. In such homes, God is willing to entrust children into the hands of the parents. These children grow and thrive in the atmosphere of married love and unity in which he or she was conceived and has the benefit of a relationship with each of the natural parents. Those children are living embodiment of the parent's oneness. In the family cycle, deep and abiding needs for belonging, love and intimacy are met in significant ways. With God's blessings bestowed into the family, he also intends that its members will help each other in reaching complete maturity and wholeness. Family that is filled with love, honour, intimacy would showcase to the world the love between Christ and his church.

2.2 Challenges in Marriage

However, despite God's lofty plan for humanity to enjoy marriage and have a blessed family, the intrusion of sin perverted many things. God's ideal for marriage and family has been destroyed. Furthermore, the increasing complexity of the society and the enormous stresses which fall on relationship also has contributed to the larger part of crisis in various homes of today.

Some of the challenges facing families today are: Lack of communication between spouses, lack of communication between parent and children, lack of quality time spent together, lack of intimacy, financial embarrassment etc. Aside all these, it has been proven that the advent of the first born into the family often impose stress on the parents such that if they are not prepared, it could cause a lot of trouble. In fact, the challenge starts from conception, all through the pregnancy period till the day of delivery. The challenges faced this period are as follows: Emotional challenge – the mother becomes too emotionally attached to the baby at expense of her husband's need, the husband having a feeling of emotional disengagement from the home; psychological challenge – case of unwanted pregnancy when the husband or wife is not ready to have a baby, sometimes the feeling of abandonment could develop in either partners; physical challenge could involve temporal reduction in closeness (physical touch), additional work load responsibility in the home, the husband not assisting at the nursing stage; social challenge which could involve reduction in social or group activities, Work-Home syndrome; Spiritual challenge could involve the level of family relationship with God could either be increased or decreased, the above mentioned factors could be a great challenge in the home.

3. Premarital Counseling

Marriage was formerly known to be a unit of the society and the quality of the man-to-woman connection was secondary because community pressure would hold it together, but things have changed such that couples are left on their own. Focus has shifted from a community to a nuclear family so that one person, rather than many meet all the needs. Thus, causing a gradual shift from a survival mode to self-actualization; placing demand on one's

partner for deeper levels of intimacy. Presently, there is youth addicted culture that promotes romantic ideals of love rather than images of couples who have matured after years of finding their way together; and throw-away society that reinforces the belief that one can have what he want by giving up what he has (Foote,2009).

Premarital counseling is a type of therapy that helps couples prepare for marriage and ensure that they have a strong, healthy relationship –providing opportunity for a better chance for a stable and satisfying marriage. Premarital counseling can also help couples identify weaknesses that could become bigger problems during marriage (MFMER, 2009). Premarital counseling can provide guidance so that each person can mature to their fullest potential within the boundaries of a vital, fulfilling relationship. Through counseling, a couple can explore their dreams, their fears, their differences, and come to a greater understanding of what is sourcing their choices and behaviors.

3.1 Some of the issues premarital counseling addresses include:

(1) Realistic expectations of romance and compatibility: Many couples confuse romance with compatibility and intimacy. When the emotional excitement of new love subsides and our real selves are revealed, some couples are woefully unprepared for the reality of marriage. Keeping the romance alive is a skill that must be learned if marriage is to survive.

(2) Personality issues and habits: Little things such as grooming or sleeping habits or big things such as alcohol abuse or a bad temper can create incredible tensions and pain in a marriage. Many couples recognize annoying or downright bad habits before marriage but are afraid to address them out of fear. Many people enter marriage believing that matrimony will magically change someone’s bad habits. It won’t. Addressing them up front can save years of heartache and sleepless nights.

(3) Communication style: How couples communicate feelings of love, anger, hurt and their needs is closely related to how each was raised. Additionally, how couples communicate during times of stress is often very different than their normal style. Too often the stress style of an individual’s temperament does not emerge until after the wedding.

(4) Financial management: The man wants a BMW and the woman wants to save for a house. Differing financial goals and spending and savings habits can be a source of tremendous tension in a marriage.

(5) Social activities: What couples do in their leisure time has tremendous impact on their marriage. When stress is high, couples with differing recreational interests will often retreat from each other. Unless openness to new activities is achieved, or compromise is negotiated, conflict is inevitable.

(6) Sex and intimacy: Sex is perhaps the number one source of conflict within marriage, partly because it is so difficult to discuss. Differing needs, desires and frequencies can lead to feelings of hurt, rejection and disappointment. Counseling is very effective in helping couples communicate feelings regarding their need for affection and intimacy.

(7) *Children and parenting style*: Discipline, levels of affection, bedtime rituals, etc. are seldom discussed before marriage because kids don’t usually come into the picture for a few years. Yet differing parenting styles can become a major source of conflict.

(8) *Sharing chores and responsibilities*: Although no one likes to talk about it, cleaning toilets, vacuuming, doing laundry, changing diapers, taking out the garbage and doing the yard work are all part of marriage. Couples who successfully negotiate these chores and share responsibility have significantly less conflict (Edward, 2011).

Marriage continues to be the most popular voluntary institution in our society and the basis for stability in raising healthy children, so every effort is needed to be prepared for it so that the marriage can succeed

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographic details of respondents are presented in Table 1 below:

Gender			Age Group			Level of Education			Years of Marriage		
Male	38	58.5%	Below 30 years	9	13.8%	SSCE	2	3.1%	< 5years	25	38.5%
Female	27	41.5%	30 – 35 years	17	26.2%	OND/Diploma	5	7.7%	5 – 9 years	15	23.1%
			36 – 40 years	14	21.5%	BSc/HND/NCE	19	29.2%	10 –14 years	11	17.0%
			41 – 45 years	14	21.5%	MSc	35	53.8%	> 15 years	14	21.4%
			Above 45 years	11	16.9%	PhD	4	6.2%			
Total	65	100%	Total	65	100%	Total	65	100%	Total	65	100%

Table 1: Respondent Demographics

4.2 Findings

4.2.1 Premarital Counseling:

Our survey revealed that majority (94%) of the respondents received premarital counseling. This might be due to the emphasis laid on it by religious organizations in Nigeria. But, does premarital counseling cover all the necessary subjects? Based on our review of what couples need to be counseled on before marriage, the essentials of premarital counseling were grouped into eight (8) subjects. The 8 subjects as stated in the questionnaire are: Child bearing and rearing, Finance, Home keeping, Social life, Romance & Sex, Effective Communication, Extended Family & In-laws and Service to God/Spirituality. Figure 1 shows the extent to which premarital counsel covers these subjects. It was found that premarital counsel on how couples should manage their social lives is the least covered (57%), while most attention is given to issues of finances, 71%.

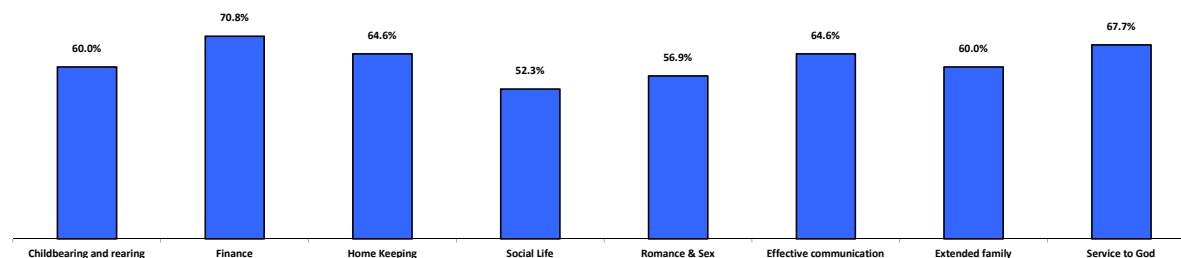


Figure 1: Subjects Covered in Premarital Counseling

4.2.2 Waiting Period before Conception

About 60% of the respondents indicated that they planned to conceive a baby immediately after getting married. This shows that many couples prefer to conceive immediately after marriage. This may be as a result of the pressure from parents, the eagerness to have offspring and the uncertainty of the side effect of using birth-control medications. On the other hand, about a quarter of the respondents indicated that they planned to wait for about 1 to 2 years before having children. All respondents in this group (1 to 2 years waiting period) are educated (B.Sc. & M.Sc.). One may infer that the level of education they attained influenced this decision -people in this category often take on jobs that are time demanding and they often need some period of time to finish their postgraduate studies.

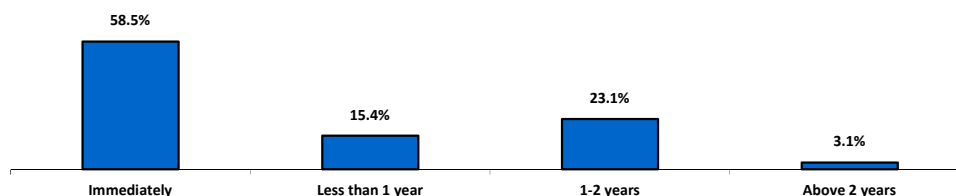


Figure 2: Couple's Waiting Time before Conception

4.2.3 Conceiving at the Planned Period:

About 62% of the respondents stated that their first baby was conceived at the planned time. However, 3/4 (three-quarter) of this group of people are those who planned to get pregnant immediately after marriage.

Conceiving according to plan directly affects the couple's preparedness for the changes that the arrival of the first child may cause. Figure 3 below compares this level of preparedness with the planned waiting period before conception. Majority of the parents who plan to wait for less than a year (64%) were fully prepared for their first child, while majority of those who plan to await for about 1 to 2 years before conception (53%) were fairly prepared for their first baby.

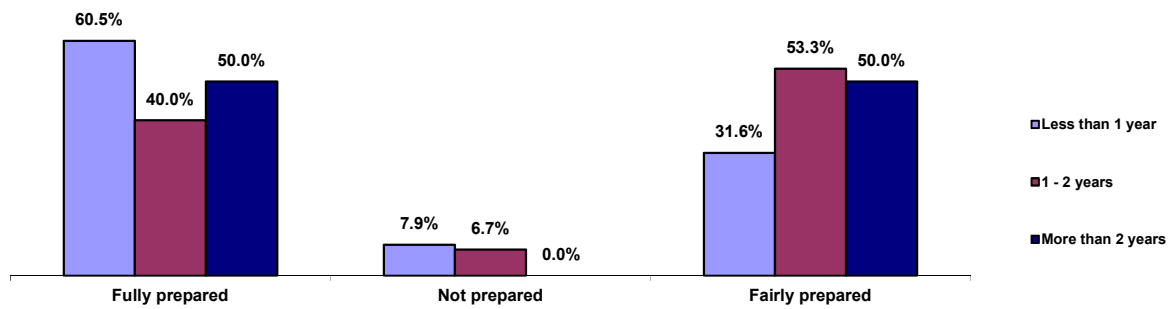


Figure 3: Comparison of Couples' Waiting Period before Conception and their Level of Preparedness for their 1st Baby

4.2.4 Challenges Faced During Conception of First Child:

This study covered 6 possible challenges that couples could face during the conception of their first baby. The 6 challenges as stated in the questionnaire are: reduced quality time; decline in domestic responsibilities; withdrawal from financial responsibilities; reduced social activities; and increased expenditure. In figure 4 below, we can distinguish increased expenditure and a reduction in social activities as the most common challenges that couples experience at the conception stage.

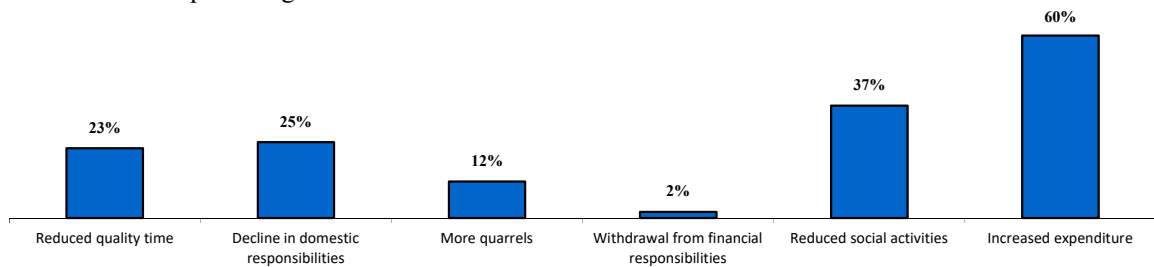


Figure 4: Challenges Faced by Couples during Conception of 1st Baby

4.2.5 Challenges Faced After the Birth of First Child: On the safe arrival of the first child, couples go through a different set of challenges. The challenges covered in this study are: Extra workload at home, Coping with duties at work and home, More spending, Less sleep, Temporal reduction in closeness, Reduced social / group activities and Reduced spiritual activities with spouse. Of the listed challenges, the challenges that were common to more than half of the respondents in the order of magnitude are: More spending, Extra workload at home, Less sleep and Coping with duties at work and home. This rate at which the identified problems occurred in the homes of the different respondents at the birth of their first child is represented in Figure 5 below.

One would expect that most couples should experience a temporal reduction in reduction in closeness at the arrival of the first baby. Our study found that though some couples experience this challenge, it is not very common to many couples. The overwhelming joy surrounding the arrival of the baby – which is common to both gender – brings the couple together at this time.

Also, 16.9% of the respondents experienced reduction in spiritual activities with their spouse. This shows that the birth of the first child hardly affects couple's spiritual activities in the home.

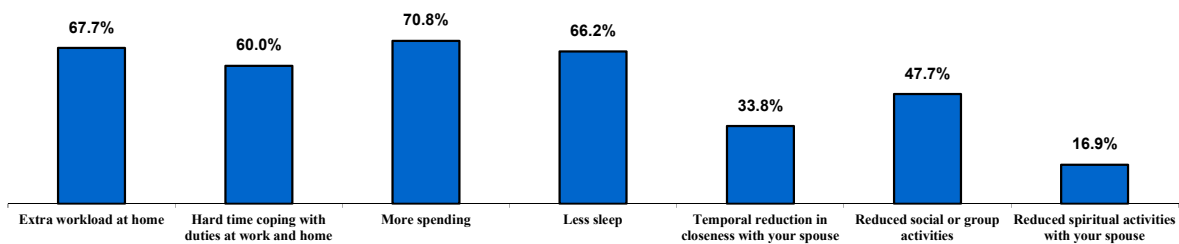


Figure 5: Challenges Faced by Couples after the birth of 1st Baby

4.2.6 The Difference in Gender Experience

In this study, the variations and similarities in challenges faced by men and women during conception and after the birth of their first child were examined.

4.2.6.1 During Conception – by Gender

Figure 6 represents our findings. While a higher percentage (71%) of male respondents complained about increase in expenditure as an anti-natal challenge, less than half of the female respondents (44%) selected it as a challenge. The reason for this may not be far-fetched. In this part of the world (Nigeria), husbands often bear a larger brunt of such expenditures. This can be supported with the 0% of male respondents and 4% of female respondents that selected ‘withdrawal from financial responsibilities’ as an anti-natal challenge. We may then infer that husbands remain devoted to financial responsibilities while the wives are likely to withdraw from some financial responsibilities so as to save up some money for the financial responsibilities coming ahead.

One-quarter (1/4) of the male respondents complained about reduction in quality time. One may infer that there are times when the woman on getting pregnant may be insensitive to the fact that her husband still desire more quality time with her. On the other hand, some women also go through health challenges at this time and might have affected the quality time spent by the couple at the expense of the husband’s desire for more time.

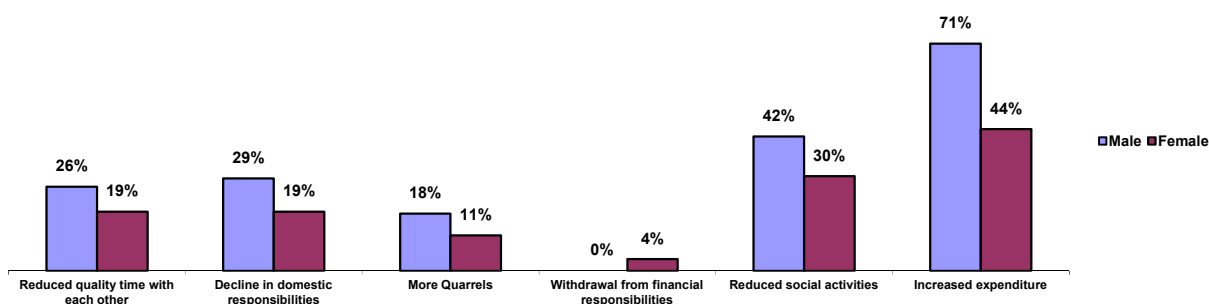


Figure 6: Challenges Faced by Couples during Conception of 1st Baby (By Gender)

Also, husbands seem to have more complaints than the wives during the conception of their first baby. This conclusion was drawn from higher bars representing the percentage of male respondents that selected the challenges in figure 6 above, while all the challenges recorded less than half of the female votes.

4.2.6.2 After the birth of first child – by Gender.

In the order of magnitude, most men complained about the following challenges: More spending (76%), Extra workload at home (68%), Less sleep (63%) and Hard time coping with duties at work and home (61%). In the order of magnitude, most women complained about the following challenges: Less sleep (70%), Extra workload at home (67%), More spending (63%) and Reduced social activities (52%).

From this analysis we can see that the mother of the child suffers more from lack of sleep while the father spends more. We can also see that husbands often times still attend social functions while their wives are discouraged to attend social functions due to the huddles of taking care of the baby outside the home.

It is interesting to note that both gender recorded a very close percentage of ‘Extra workload at home’ (68% male and 67% female). This shows that men are also involved in the home activities surrounding the arrival and care of first baby.

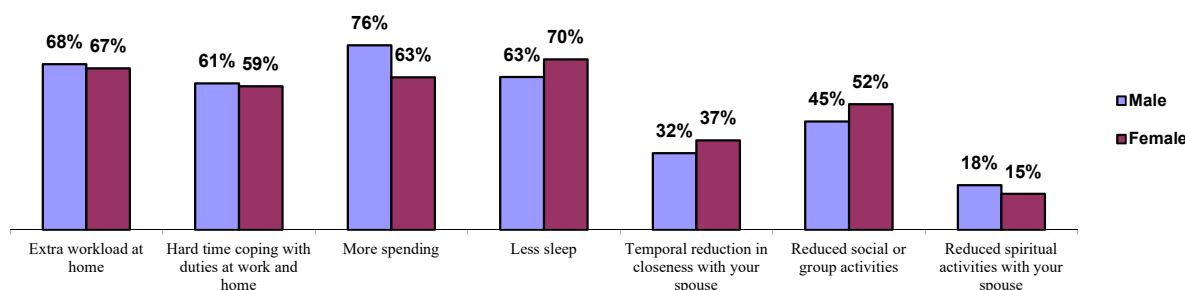


Figure 8: Challenges Faced by Couples After the Birth of 1st Baby (By Gender)

Brief Analysis of 1 Peter 5:2-3

Poimen is a Greek word which is used nineteen (18) times in the New Testament Greek Bible. In Matthew three (3) times, Mark two (2) times, Luke four (4) times, John five (5) times, in Ephesians once, in Hebrews once and

in 1 Peter once. The basic meaning of *poimen* is “shepherd” or “Pastor”, indicating one who has committed self to the care, guidance, council, correction of others. The cognate verb *poimainein* is found more often in (John 21:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 9:7; 1 Peter 5:2; Jude 12), usually with a positive sense. Also, it has other shades of meaning, depending on the context in which it is used in the Bible text. For instance, *poimen* is used to describe “a herdsman” taking care of a sheep or as an overseer of an assembly teaching and directing (Mk 6:34; Lk 2:8; Jn 10:11) Also, it describes “teacher”, “evangelist”, “councilor” and “pastor” (Ephesians 4:11, 1 Peter 2:25; 1 Peter 5:2-11).

The word *Bosko* translated “feed” “tend” “pasture” here does not mean giving of pasture, but the whole concept of complete care, direction, counselling and portraying the duty of a Christian shepherd to promote in every way the welfare of those placed under his or her care (Matt. 8:30,33; Luk. 8:32, 34). (Moulton, 1978)

In his book *Generation to Generation* (1985), Dr. Edwin Friedman portrays the role of an effective pastor / shepherd in ministry to families as being like that of a coach, guiding the family through the seasons of marriage and family life. Another primary goal of premarital guidance is to alert the couple to the transitions they can expect within married life and to prepare them for the most immediate transition—moving from singleness to marriage. David Augsburger in his book *Sustaining Love* (1988) speaks of four marriages within a marriage—the marriages of *dream*, *disillusionment*, *discovery* and *depth*. Couples may vary in the number of years spent in each stage, but the pattern appears to be consistent among couples who stay together. Augsburger is not alone in his observations. Many experts in family living have noted common transition points and stages across the family life cycle—the birth of the first child, midlife, the emptying of the parental nest, retirement. As the seasons change, adjustments are absolutely necessary. Couples who are able to anticipate predictable transitions in the journey ahead and who are realistic about their expectations of themselves, each other, and their relationship throughout life’s various seasons will be less likely to abandon their covenant as the seasons change.

5.1 CONCLUSION

Although this study revealed that premarital counsel in the context of 1 Peter 5:2-3 on issues surrounding child bearing and rearing – which is the focus of this study – is often covered to some extent (60%). One would expect that this topical subject is thoroughly covered to a larger extent even before couples dabble into marriage, as this will aid their expectations, choices and plans regarding how to go about child bearing and rearing.

5.1.1 Some Useful Guidelines for Newly Wedded and Intending Couples

1. In-depth counsel on child bearing and rearing during premarital counseling.
2. Planning to have the baby immediately after marriage makes the couple well-prepared. But, couples should note that man proposes God disposes, you might need to wait on the Lord for this fruit of the womb as long as God wills.
3. Couples who plan to conceive immediately after wedding are more likely to be prepared to deal with the challenges posed by the arrival of the first child.
4. It is safer to wait at least a year before the conception of your first child if either of you is currently on a postgraduate program. However, be prepared to effectively manage the expectations of parents and in-laws.

5.1.2 Some Useful Guidelines for New and Intending Parents

1. You may decide to go for another session of counseling on Child bearing and rearing with a renowned and godly counselor. This is because there is every possibility that you might have forgotten the teaching you got at the premarital stage, and this is the time you need childbearing and rearing skills the most.
2. During the pregnancy period, Endeavour to cultivate the habit of saving extra money for the up-keep of the baby. This will lessen the financial burden at this period.
3. On the arrival of the child, couples should be prepared for the following: More spending especially on the needs of the baby, Extra workload at home, Less sleep and Coping with duties at work and home.
4. The woman should be prepared to attend less social function during pregnancy and even after the birth of the child for safety reasons.
5. The woman should be sensitive to the needs of their husband during pregnancy and after the birth of the child.
6. Though the husband desires quality time with his wife, he should endeavour to be more considerate, because the baby will also demand more attention.
7. Husbands should be prepared to assist their wives in home keeping responsibilities, because she will be overloaded with child care responsibilities.

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