

# Couples need preparation for wedding & marriage, pastors say

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**By Ken Camp**

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ATHENS—Like many pastors, Kyle Henderson finds great fulfillment in conducting weddings and preparing couples for marriage. And he treasures thank-you notes he receives from couples—particularly the ones he refused to marry.

The wedding policy at First Baptist Church in Athens requires anyone who is married in the church to go through premarital counseling.

“Somebody has to sign off on it. That doesn’t mean it has to be me, necessarily, but every couple needs to go through a recognized premarital counseling program,” Henderson said.

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Paul Powell, longtime Texas Baptist pastor and dean of Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, advises pastors to schedule at least two pre-nuptial conferences with a bride and groom—one to plan their wedding and the other to talk about marriage.

"The couple should be reminded that the wedding will last only about 30 minutes. Hopefully, the marriage will last a lifetime. Both need careful and prayerful planning," Powell writes in *The New Ministers Manual*.

In the wedding-planning conference, Powell suggests discussion of church policies regarding weddings, appropriate music and other details related to the ceremony. The premarital counseling session should address issues such as faith, finances, in-laws, personality differences and physical intimacy, he recommends.

At First Baptist in Athens, if Henderson counsels a couple himself, he expects them to meet for three sessions and work through the PREPARE—Premarital Personal Relationship Evaluation—inventory.

The assessment tool—developed by David Olson, Joan Druckman and David Fournier and promoted by the Baptist General Convention of Texas

Christian Life Commission—helps couples examine their own personality traits and explore significant issues such as communication, conflict resolution, problem-solving and financial management.

The inventory allows Henderson to deal briefly with areas in which the couple shows strength and devote plenty of time to areas where the prospective bride and groom need help.

In some cases, it reveals a high probability for conflict—so much that Henderson may discourage the couple from marrying or even refuse to conduct their wedding.

“I’ve had to tell some couples I couldn’t marry them, and some have written me thank-you notes later when they’ve dealt with the issues we discussed,” he said.

Jay Hogewood, pastor of University Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, La., uses the same personal relationships inventory with couples whom he marries—not only to discover strengths and weaknesses, but also to spark meaningful conversations with each couple.

“The conversations that stem from there are valuable. We’re able to speak in fairly candid ways,” he said. Hogewood insists on a minimum of three conference sessions, and he may schedule as many as seven if necessary.

Hogewood never has refused to conduct a wedding, but he insisted he would if the inventory revealed warning signs of abuse or if a couple failed to show strength in every area on the inventory—particularly in communication and conflict resolution.

“If they are strong in those two areas, they can weather a lot,” he said.

Both Hogewood and Henderson help couples examine their families of origin and talk about how to blend family styles that may be vastly

different.

Beyond the simple mechanics of selecting Scriptures to be read during a wedding ceremony, they also talk in depth with couples about their spiritual commitments.

“Mismatched faith is a real problem,” Henderson said. Some may not share the same faith. Others may vary widely in terms of spiritual maturity and level of commitment.

Henderson typically devotes about 30 minutes of one conference session to discussing the wedding ceremony.

As much as possible, he encourages the couple to reduce stress by simplifying as much as possible—even to the point of making sure they understand they have the option to elope.

“It is so stressful. The wedding ceremony can be the most uncomfortable time for everyone involved, and I’ve witnessed so many meltdowns,” Henderson lamented. “I urge them to simplify whenever and wherever it’s possible.”

The trappings of the wedding often are more important to the parents of the bride and groom than to the couple getting married, he noted. So, instead of obsessing over the flowers, candles and ceremony, Henderson encourages the couple to focus on the commitment they are making to each other. Borrowing the Jewish custom of the Ketubah, he prints out the wedding vows and has the bride and groom sign them.

“It’s a way to help them get connected to their vows,” he said. In his ministry, he has encountered only a handful of couples who chose to write their own vows.

“Most wouldn’t know where to begin,” he said. “That’s just stress they

don't need."

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