



***Premarital Counseling Guide
for Same Gender Couples***

*A Planning Resource from the
Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns*

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The Point of It All

Unitarian Universalism has taken a stand since 1984 that we recognize the unions of same gender couples. In 1996 we affirmed the right of same gender couples to be able to participate in marriage. Indeed, many Unitarian Universalist ministers, chaplains, and religious leaders have been performing commitment/holy union ceremonies since at least the 1970's.

What the institution of marriage means has long been a matter of debate. It has meant many things over the past—from patriarchal rights, to property, to love, to society's structure of how we take care of one another over the years. Regardless of this debate, many same gender couples want to be married and have their own reasons for doing so.

When I became Director of OBGLTC—then OLBGC—I was encouraged by the previous director to put forth energy into the marriage issue. This was good advice, though I think my tactics were different from what Meg imagined.

Upon reflection, I wanted not to organize people over the right to marry—though that has merit—but to support institutionally the marriage of same gender couples. If same gender couples were in fact going to be married by the ministers, chaplains, and religious leaders of our institutions, then I, as the institution, could do something to support both the couples and the celebrants.

Supporting marriage for all couples, same or different genders, means supporting not only the marriage ceremony but their lives after it and in preparation for it as well. The most effective way I could think of supporting marriage for same gender couples was to create this guide as a way of institutionalizing Unitarian Universalism's support for marriage—before the ceremony, during, and after.

The point of premarital counseling for any couple is to help them focus on what they are doing and to create clarity about how they do it. The processes—their communication styles, their histories, their goals and how they will pursue them—are far more important than any decisions.

These materials are created to help the minister, chaplain, and religious leader focus on the processes of the couple. They cover a wide variety of topics and will provide a good basis for a conversation. They should be able to help provide clarity for the couple about what they believe, desire, and, most importantly, the ways they relate to each other.

Also, another point of this guide is that it creates a climate where a same gender couple knows that later on when difficulties in the relationship arise, the institution of the church is a place where they can turn to for help, which—depending on your skills and time—could range from a referral to counseling. Thus, with this continuing support, we can truly say we support the right for same gender couples to marry.

As you use this guide, know that it is a guide and that you have expertise that will benefit you. Trust your instincts and yourself. Make modifications and changes as you need, and if you have questions, call a colleague or call the Office. Avoid trapping yourself into one way of doing things.

The following materials are for your benefit. They are not created to lock you into an institutional mindset that there is one way of doing premarital counseling. Use them in ways that will assist you and, more importantly, the couple you are marrying.

In faith,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Keith Kron". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "K" and a stylized "Kron".

Keith Kron
Director
Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns

written Winter 1997

Things to Know About the Guide

UNDERLYING BASIS

The premarital counseling guide for same gender couples comes from understandings of Edwin Friedman's work in family systems theory and *Generation to Generation* (Guilford Press, 1985) in particular. Also, the work of Dr. Sandra Brown (San Francisco Theological Seminary), Dr. Shirley Lange, and Kris Elliott (both UU and therapists) has influenced this work.

CULTURE

Please remember that there are cultural differences between heterosexuals, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. This is also true of European-Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latino/as, and Native Americans. One way you can best use the guide is to know your own cultural understanding and be willing to research or ask for information about cultures other than your own. This guide was created with an anti-racist, anti-heterosexist, anti-sexist lens. Its implementation in a similar way depends largely on you.

SPEAKING OF YOU. . .

You are strongly urged to take some time and answer any questions you might ask for yourself. Write them down. Know your biases and feelings. Do not allow them to get in the way of the couple. They are not marrying you. Pay attention to yourself in the sessions, and, if you state your biases, own them as your own. Remember, more than likely, the couple sees you as the expert, and you have considerable influence. Use it wisely.

GET THEM TALKING TO YOU AND EACH OTHER

The sessions should balance between getting them to give basic information to you and to each other. Also, watch how they talk to you and to each other for similarities and differences. Then mention these patterns or incongruities for their thoughts. When you get them talking to each other, notice how they give and receive information and reflect back the verbal and nonverbal communication they have with each other. Listen for ownership of feelings and thoughts, blaming, projection, self-esteem, and self-knowledge. Also, pay attention to verb tenses. If the couple uses different verb tenses (one uses present tense while the other uses past, for example), notice this aloud and ask about it. This may indicate they are in different understandings of their relationship.

INSTINCTS

There is no one way of doing counseling. Friedman talked about following his gut on questions and eventually he found something worth talking about. He often asked questions that went nowhere, but eventually hit on something. Watch body language as a clue—shifts, smiles, clenches, eye movements, and inattentiveness. Then ask about them. More than likely the partner is aware of them, too, and you are modeling that it is good to ask about them. Remember that you are modeling in the way you do things and that the couple is watching and learning from you.

Notes on Each Session

Session 1—Getting Acquainted

This session is about beginning the process.

The first section is basic information about why the couple wants to get married and have chosen you. You might also ask what they want the event to be called—wedding, holy union, commitment ceremony.

The second piece is for them to know about you and what you expect from them. This is a good place to be very clear and to state what you can and are willing to do.

The third part is to check their thoughts on the actual event itself and how you fit into it. What plans have they already made? Where? What expectations do they have of you? Of themselves?

The fourth piece consists of basic questions about them, their histories, their hopes. The cross-questioning here is a good way for them to understand how much they know about each other and the way they interact with each other. If they communicate in ways that are different from you, name that and check their comfort levels.

The assignments explore their emotions, their family history and, if you like, a Myers-Briggs inventory (not included, but can be found in *Please Understand Me* by Kiersey and Bates). The genogram sheet is merely a guide and I encourage you to have them freehand a diagram of their family, finding some way to note divorces, deaths, alcoholism, and other important life events. You may want to provide them

with a sample. Genograms can be very valuable and are, in my experience, the most helpful tool I use. They are of great interest to the partner and provide rich and illuminating conversation.

GIVE EACH PERSON YOUR BUSINESS CARD WITH PHONE NUMBER!

Session 2—Communication

This session is about who they are and how they got there.

If they did the Myers-Briggs, go over the results, noting similarities and differences and how this may affect their relationship.

Spend most of your time on the genogram. This is good stuff. Ask them to explain their genograms to you and to each other. Look for patterns, which often reappear again and again. These patterns might be loss, abandonment, escape, self-destruction, commitment, any number of things. Notice these aloud after the partner has explained the genogram and get feedback. Feedback comes in many forms, ranging from resistance to smiles. Do the same for the other partner. Encourage them to ask questions of each other. There is a high interest here on the part of the partner to learn more. Listen for conflicts, affirmations, communication styles, and relationship histories to people and things. After both have presented and discussed, notice and ask for similarities and differences they had in their families.

After that, discuss the emotions checklist. Ask each partner what emotions they have and have not observed in their partner and if they have tendencies to do certain things when they feel this way.

Go over the four assignments and tell them to think about the wedding itself for next time and what they want and do not want in it. You might ask them for an order of service, especially if you have samples for them to look at and compare. Set the next meeting date.

Session 3—Commitment, Change, and Service Planning

This session is about exploring some of the common issues couples face and beginning to plan the service.

The first part is just a check-in to see how the couple is doing as the big day approaches. Allow some time for this and ask a few probing questions.

The second part is about some of the major issues couples face. Ask for where they agree and disagree with each other. What responses did they have to reading each other's answers? If they seem too alike, you probably need to check out whether they see themselves becoming one person instead of two people in a marriage. Ask how they plan to balance their individual needs and the needs of being a couple. Another option is to try to introduce some conflict at this point, particularly if you have seen little or none, to see how they handle it. If they get in conflict with you, step back after a bit and ask how this differs from how they handle conflict with each other. Remind them conflict will occur and is a part of every relationship and that knowing how they

each deal with conflict is very helpful to them.

The third part is about planning the service. Talk with them about what they want and what you are willing to do. This is also a good time to watch how they interact with each other in this conversation and to reflect that back to them. Sketch an outline of the service and make assignments for various pieces among the three of you. Ask about who is coming.

The fourth piece is a set-up for the last session. It is a preparation also for after the ceremony. Remember, even if the couple has been together for a long time, the actual ceremony is a rite of passage and is often a big shift in family relationships for the couple and their families. Listen for tensions and anxieties and be willing to be a little directive here. To paraphrase Edwin Friedman, leadership is therapeutic. Be ready to suggest ways to do de-triangulation, which often is at stake when a new partnership is formed and formally recognized. A good question to ask when someone is complaining about their family is, "So, what are you willing to put up with?" If a person is complaining about the partner's family, ask the complainer the same question but ask it about the partner and not the partner's family. Listen for imbalances and watch for nonverbal cues here.

Give the assignments and discuss them. Be clear about who has agreed to do what and set the next date.

Session 4—Goin’ to the Chapel

This session, presumably the last before the rehearsal, is about looking closer at patterns and change and making final arrangements for the wedding.

The first part is about change and trauma and going over the sheets. While it would be easy to focus on the specific events, I urge you to pay closer attention to how each person deals with trauma and change. Name this process as you can and ask how this process has appeared in the rest of their life. If they site no trauma, try the words “significant life event” instead, particularly at an early age. You may want to talk about denial if this goes nowhere, but do so gently in an invitational way that encourages the person to reconnect when memories return. Ask how things have changed in their relationship since they started dating and how they have dealt with that.

The second part is about the wedding itself. Make final preparations and agreements. Confirm dates, assignments, and understandings. Discuss the day itself, the time before and after.

Finally, talk about how you as the minister, chaplain, or religious leader can be a resource in the future, whether it be to talk, to refer, or to listen. Give the final two handouts and let them know you’ll check in with them by phone soon.

The *Same-Sex Wedding Guide* can provide you with a sample partnership contract and six sample ceremonies. It can be purchased from the OBGLTC for \$10.00.



OVERVIEW

Sessions

There are four sessions, not including the rehearsal and the wedding itself.

- Session 1—Getting Acquainted
- Session 2—Communication
- Session 3—Commitment, Change, and Service Planning
- Session 4—Goin’ to the Chapel

You may decide to add sessions as needed. This may be particularly true if the couple is newer to the relationship. One way you might lengthen the conversation is to spend more time on the handouts. Use your judgment. My personal recommendation is to begin seeing the couple at least six months prior to the marriage. The four sessions would occur every six weeks or so. This may vary on factors such as how well you know the couple, how long they have been together, and their history.

PREVIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

If either or both members of the couple have been involved in significant previous relationships, I would encourage you to take an entire session to focus on them. Have each relationship be talked about from what the partner involved in the relationship experienced. Have the new partner share her/his perceptions of how this relationship affected both not only the partner, but how it will affect their new relationship as well. Have them do this not with you but with each other.

ABUSE

If issues of abuse come up, and the individual(s) are not in therapy or have not done therapy elsewhere, refer those person(s) out to an expert.

QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES

There are three different ways to ask questions. 1) You can ask a question and receive an answer. 2) You can ask a cross question—asking one person to say how s/he believes her/his partner thinks and then check out if it is right (“John, what would Andy say his talents are?”). This is also very effective. This is very effective, whether the person answering the question tries or not, gets the answer right or partly right, or is wrong. If you do this, and I recommend it, emphasize that there are no judgments on your part. You are asking the questions to help them and to know what assumptions they hold. 3) The other way to ask a question is to have them tell the answer directly to their partner and not to you.

HANDOUTS

There are nine handouts. Feel free to duplicate them and give them to the couple as homework assignments. Encourage the couple to do them individually, share them with each other, and then bring them in to talk about them with you.

Session I—Getting Acquainted

Opening Questions:

- 1) How did you meet?
- 2) Why do you want to be married?
- 3) Why do you want the ceremony?
- 4) Why do you want a UU minister performing the ceremony?

Information from minister.

Credentials. Fees. Background. Expectations.

About the ceremony and date.

Ask about

Plans
Expectations
Minister's Role

Getting to Know the Couple—for them and you.

Cross Question: What expectations does ____ have of you? (Repeat and clarify after answers are given.)

What expectations do you have of yourselves?

Tell me about yourselves:

Family, parents, children, coming out, religious history, work.

Cross questions: Why was ____ first attracted to you? How has that changed? (Repeat and clarify).

Five years from now: how do you see your relationship?

Assignments

(optional) Myers-Briggs
Emotions checklist
Genogram

Set next meeting

Emotions

What do you tend to do when you feel these emotions and ideas?

Anger
Joy
Sadness
Confusion
Frustration
Conflict
Lonely
Alone
Jealousy
Afraid
Shy
Out of control
In control
Bored
Lost
Sick
Overworked
Stressed
Love
Attraction
Insulted
Impatient
Selfish
Embarrassed

What does your partner tend to do?

How do you react to your partner when he/she does this?

Creating a Genogram

Creating a genogram involves three levels: 1) Mapping the family structure;
2) Recording family information; 3) Delineating family relationships.

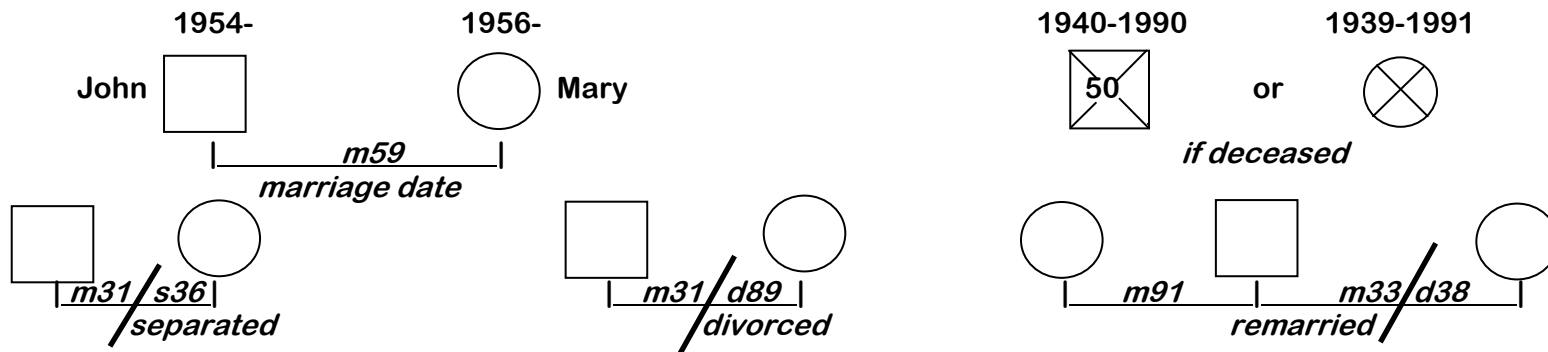
GENOGRAM SYMBOLS



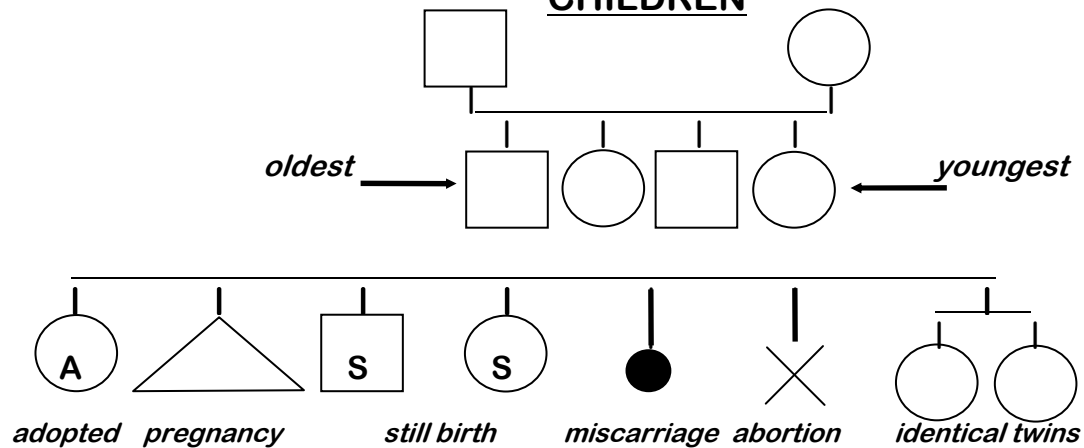
male



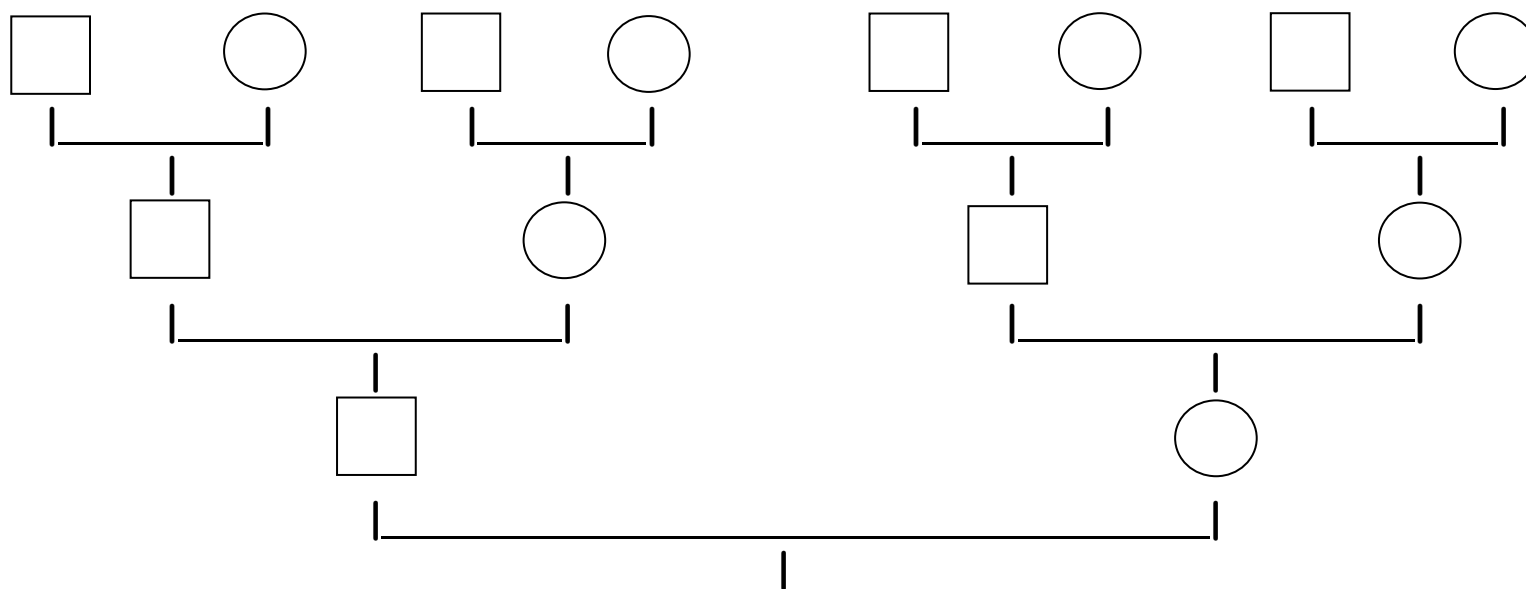
female



CHILDREN



My Genogram



Session 2—COMMUNICATION

Opening

Do a quick information bit about the Myers-Briggs, if used.

- 1) Explain types.
- 2) Show similarities and differences between the two people and where potential difficulties might occur.
- 3) Check and see if this matches with what they know about each other.

Ask the couple to explain their genograms.

- 1) Listen for patterns. Listen for trouble spots.
- 2) How did their families handle:
 - conflict
 - affirmation
 - communication
 - relationships
- 3) After both people have explained their genograms, ask what similarities and differences they noticed and what questions and concerns they might have. Let them talk to each other.

Discuss the emotions checklist.

Assignments

Implicit Contract Expectations
Who Am I?
Developing the Marriage
The 10 Commandments

Set next meeting

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

(What were you taught both implicitly and explicitly about these, and what do you believe now?)

1. Money

2. Success

3. God

4. The Role of Women/Men

5. Marriage

6. Complimenting and Praising

7. Sex

8. Showing Affection

9. Expressing Anger

10. Children

Who Am I?

What do you take for granted about yourself? These questions are designed for you to take a different kind of look at yourself—for your benefit and your partner’s benefit. You might also find you discover things about yourself.

What will never change about me?

What parts would I like to change about myself?

What are some of my strengths?

What are some of my weaknesses?

Who are some of the special people in my life?

What are some of the special events that have shaped my life?

What are my talents and interests?

What are my dreams—including the ones I do not share?

What have I learned about myself so far?

How do I hope I will grow in the future?

How do I expect getting married to have an impact on my life?

IMPLICIT CONTRACT EXPECTATIONS

How have you and your partner agreed to handle the following issues?

1. Management of household responsibilities
2. How to spend money
3. Ownership of property and financial resources
4. The role of church and spirituality in your lives
5. The role of relatives (parents, kids, extended families, previous relationships) and friends
6. Education and professional development
7. Ways of expressing affection and/or sexuality
8. Development of independent interests and relationships
9. Use of free time/vacations
10. Management of personal health and appearance
11. How the children in your lives should be treated/nurtured/disciplined
12. Other important issues:

Would you like to change the way you handle any of these as a couple? Which one or ones?

How will you state your priorities?

Which of these are most important to you?

When You Are Married

Think about the following areas and decide where you and your partner will need to keep working and where you are now content with the way things are.

1. Enjoying fun and recreational experiences together
Development needed (circle one): much some little none
I circled this answer because

2. Meeting each other's needs for warmth, gratitude, and affection
Development needed (circle one): much some little none
I circled this answer because

3. Sharing interests and encouraging creative expression
Development needed (circle one): much some little none
I circled this answer because

4. Being open with feelings—both positive and negative
Development needed (circle one): much some little none
I circled this answer because

5. Having and enjoying friends (and relatives) together and/or separately
Development needed (circle one): much some little none
I circled this answer because

6. Mutual enjoyment of sexual relations
Development needed (circle one): much some little none
I circled this answer because

7. Sharing spiritual life and discussing the meaning of life together
Development needed (circle one): much some little none
I circled this answer because

8. Satisfactory accomplishments of household tasks
Development needed (circle one): much some little none
I circled this answer because

9. Giving encouragement to each other in daily work, chores, and new ventures

Development needed (circle one): much some little none

I circled this answer because

10. Observing birthdays and other important rituals

Development needed (circle one): much some little none

I circled this answer because

11. Help each other decide priorities in activities and spending

Development needed (circle one): much some little none

I circled this answer because

12. Participating in local, community, and national issues

Development needed (circle one): much some little none

I circled this answer because

13. Balancing work and home

Development needed (circle one): much some little none

I circled this answer because

14. Other marriage strengths I would like to develop further:

When you are done, trade this sheet with your partner. Discuss each item, give examples and explanations for your answers. Listen carefully to what your partner has to say. Remember, while they may differ from what you believe, they are your partner's values. When responding, speak for yourself.

Session 3—Commitment, Change, and Service Planning

Opening

How is the couple doing as they get closer to the wedding?

Review homework assignments.

What similarities and differences did you all find after completing:

The Ten Commandments

Who Am I?

Implicit Contract Relations

When You Are Married

Service Planning

What hopes do the couple have for the ceremony?

Who is showing up and how do they feel about it?

Sketch an outline, discussing flow, intent, and order.

Set priorities for next time you meet.

Change

How do you deal with change?

What changes are ahead for you after the ceremony?

Assignments

Change

Trauma

Final Service Preparations

C H A N G E

1. What rituals, whether they be every day, every week, or every month, are important to you?
2. How do you tend to respond when these rituals are disrupted or changed?
3. How do you respond when you are asked to change them?
4. What have been the most positive changes you have had in your life?
5. Have there been changes you have regretted? Why?
6. How do you deal with change? What do you tend to feel and do?
7. How prepared do you feel to deal with changes when they occur?
8. What are some of the big changes that have happened on the inside of you? How do you know when they have happened? How do others know?
9. How does your partner deal with change?
10. How will the two of you deal with change in your relationship—both together and separately? How have you dealt with it so far?

T R A U M A

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE THE BIGGEST INFLUENCE ON YOU—BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE?

RECALL AN IMPORTANT MOMENT FROM YOUR CHILDHOOD THAT STANDS OUT CLEARLY IN YOUR MIND. THE EVENT COULD WELL BE ONE THAT YOU LEARNED A LOT FROM OR FROM WHICH SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN YOUR LIFE HAPPENED. WRITE OUT THE EVENT AS MUCH AS YOU CAN REMEMBER. INCLUDE WHAT YOU FELT AS YOU WRITE WHAT HAPPENED.

HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH TRAUMA? HAS IT CHANGED OVER THE YEARS?

OH, BY THE WAY, HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT. . . .

1. How do you expect your family to view your relationship? Is it clear to them?
2. Have you considered creating a durable power of attorney document in case one of you gets sick? Health and life insurance?
3. What about your living arrangements? Will they change? How? Do you own or rent the place where you live? Are there any changes that need to be made because of the marriage?
4. What about ownership of things? Of things you own now? Of things you will buy together?
5. What have you done about wills for yourselves? If one of you dies? If both of you die at the same time? What would you prefer to have happen?
6. What about children? Do you want them? If yes, how? What are you willing to do?
7. What should the children call you—whether they be from a previous relationship or situation—to what should the nephews and nieces call you?
8. What will you do if things change in your relationship? What does the word “divorce” mean to you?
9. Any insurance matters you need to attend to?
10. What agreements between the two of you would you like to be clear on before the wedding?
11. Any thoughts on changing one or both of your names?
12. What do you need to do now? After the wedding? Next year? In 5 years?

Session 4—GOIN' TO THE CHAPEL

Opening

How is the couple doing now and how are the other arrangements going?

Reviewing the Big and Little Things

Go over assignments

Change

Trauma

Have You thought About

The Wedding

Go over the service order

Talk about vows and how they are an exercise in what is important

Discuss bumps and conflicts in the process

Make final agreements on what will happen

Discuss what will happen before and after—rehearsal, family, reception, honeymoon, coming home married

Talk about your role in their relationship in the future—what kind of resource you can be.

Assignments

Final preparations

Reading list

Cycles in relationships

Cycles in Relationships

Denial _____ Confession

From keeping secrets, even from oneself, to being willing and needing to talk about things. Though many tend to believe otherwise, keeping secrets takes more energy than not keeping them and talking about them. Couples may well have a preference for one or the other, though more likely they use both. Time becomes important here. Denial and secret-keeping over a long period of time erodes trust. Big secrets generally start off as little ones. (Having an affair or withholding sex may have stemmed from the silence and denial of the hurt of “I don’t like it that we don’t kiss each other good-bye in the morning” and before that from “I do not feel listened to when I tell you what happened to me today.”)

Detachment _____ Commitment

From feeling separate, isolated, and distant to engaged, open, and in conversation. There is a difference between comfortable silence and noncommunication. Detachment can also be in the form of ambivalence and total acquiescence. Commitment includes relationship with partner and with one self.

Doubt _____ Faith

From confusion and being unsure to clarity and belief. The ability of the couple to believe in itself and each individual to believe in her/his partner and to trust them is one of the strongest binds a relationship has. Doubt has many faces—from questioning without listening, to triangulating a third party, to misdirected anger. Faith is about listening, trusting, and asking questions for clarity; not about judgment.

Despair _____ Hope

From anguish, desperation, and depression to a belief that there is a promising future. The vision for the marriage is jointly held and hope exists. When one can answer the question, “Is all lost?” with a “yes,” this is despair.

Suggested reading for the couple:

- Permanent Partners* Betty Berzon (Penguin Books, 1988)
- Gay Relationships* Tina Tessina (Tarcher/Putnam, 1989)
- Lesbian and Gay Marriage* Suzanne Sherman, ed. (Temple University Press, 1992)
- A Legal Guide for Gay and Lesbian Couples* Hayden Curry and Dennis Clifford (Addison-Wesley, 1993)
- Lesbian and Gay Parenting Handbook* April Martin (Harper Collins, 1993)
- Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* Suzanne Pharr (Chardon Press, 1988)
- Homophobia How We All Pay the Price* Warren Blumenfeld, ed. (Beacon Press, 1992)
- Staying Together* Tom Owen-Towle (Sun Flower, Inc., 1987)

Bibliography

(And suggested reading for clergy, chaplains, and religious leaders)

- Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* Edwin H. Friedman (Guilford Press, 1985)
- Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples* Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. (Henry Holt and Company, 1988)
- Couples: Exploring the Cycles of the Intimate Relationships* Barry Dym, Ph.D. and Michael L. Glenn, M.D. (Harper Perennial, 1993)
- Projective Genogramming* Florence Kaslow (Professional Resource Press, 1995)
- Equal Rites: Lesbian and Gay Worship, Ceremonies and Celebrations* Kittredge Cherry and Zalmon Sherwood, editors (Westminster John Knox Press, 1995)
- Constructing the Sexual Crucible: An Integration of Sexual and Marital Therapy* David M. Schnarch (W.W.Norton & Co., 1991)
- Internal Family Systems Therapy* Richard C. Schwartz (Guilford Press, 1995)
- Before the Wedding: Look Before You Leap* Michael E. Cavanagh (Westminster John Knox Press, 1994)
- Counseling Same Sex Couples* Douglas Carl (W.W.Norton & Co., 1990)
- Premarital Counseling: The Professional's Handbook* Robert F. Stahmann and William J. Hiebert (Lexington Books, 1987)