

Sorting Through the Complex Marrying Population of the 21st Century

Part One of a Three-Part Series: Marriage Preparation in the New Millennium

by K. Jason Krafsky

A few years ago, I heard a sociologist state that family trends have changed more in the last three-to-four decades than in the previous three-to-four centuries.

If you think about it, nothing reflects the unprecedented changes to the marriage and family landscape better than a wedding. The following scenarios are becoming more and more common:

- the bride walks down the aisle with someone other than her father because he abandoned her family when she was young;
- the wedding party is made up of the sons and daughters of either the bride or the groom;
- the ring-bearer is the son of the groom and his former girlfriend;
- the mother-of-the-bride is holding the eight-month old baby of the bride and the groom;
- the groom's mother and father cannot sit in the same row as one another because neither of them gets along with the new spouse of their ex-spouse.

While a wedding is notoriously stressful for the bride and groom, it can be even more so for the minister officiating the service. For the pastor, orchestrating the marriage ceremony amidst complicated relationships is only part of the issue. The real stress point occurs months before trying to determine how to conduct marriage preparation for the couple who is part of today's complex marrying population.

- The woman's got a child from a prior relationship, and neither the bride- nor groom-to-be has ever been married.
- The man shares custody of his two kids from his first marriage, and his fiancée didn't have kids with her first husband who died in an accident.
- The man and the woman have a two-year old daughter together, and have decided to get married.
- The bride-to-be has been twice divorced, and the 38-year old man has never been married.

I've met pastors who refuse to perform weddings because just the thought of trying to provide marriage preparation to any of the above scenarios causes too much personal stress. Others have just abandoned providing premarital education.

Their reasoning goes something like this: *"Do they really need marriage preparation? I don't think it makes much of a difference anyway because they are so 'in love' and they don't listen. I think working with them after the wedding is a lot more effective."* (Never mind that they have no programming or ministry strategy in place to meet the even more complex issues after the couple is married).

Within the last several years, I've diagnosed that if a minister feels stress, frustration, or exasperation in relation to premarital ministry, it is usually a sign of one of four stress points: (1) they don't have a comfort level with the complexities of the current marrying population; (2) they use outdated, irrelevant or ineffective marriage prep methods or materials; (3) they are deeply perplexed on how to handle the growing cohabitation trend; (4) or all of the above.

This is the first of a three-part series to help church leaders get a grasp on the issues, get a hold of their emotions, and overcome “(4) all of the above.”

So, let’s start with the first issue creating some strain. Who is this complex marrying population of the 21st Century?

While there are a myriad of relationship scenarios that can and do play out, all of today’s marrying couples can be categorized into one of four groupings:

- (1) Couples establishing a first-time marriage;
- (2) Couples creating a first-time marriage and family;
- (3) Couples seeking a remarriage;
- (4) Couples forming a stepfamily.

Within the four major groupings of marrying couples, there are several couple types that help define the couple (and their probable premarital needs) even more. Overall, there are twelve different couple types which are described within each grouping.

Couples establishing a first-time marriage

A majority of today’s engaged couples fall into this grouping which is why most marriage preparation programs are geared towards first-time marriages. In the months before their wedding, these couples can greatly enhance their future together by learning about communication, conflict resolution, marriage roles, finances and budgeting, sex and intimacy, and spiritual issues.

Overall, there are four different types of first-time marriages.

(1) **Conventional & Ready:** Marriage has always been viewed as a key transitional step into adulthood. This couple meets today’s conventional wisdom of getting married after graduating from college or (for those that didn’t attend or finish college) after getting started in their trade. With the median ages of first-marriage reaching all-time highs (age 25 for women and 27 for men¹), this couple lands inside (or just outside) the averages. Marriage is the next natural milestone in their life’s journey.

(2) **Young & In-Love:** This couple is able to vote, able to serve in the military, and may be just old enough to drink a beer. Roughly between the ages of 20 and 24, *Young & In Love* couples may or may not: be living on their own, have a steady income source, be reliant on their parents. Military service, trade school, college, entry-level work, unemployment, or working transitional jobs are common for this group.

(3) **Teenaged & Determined:** In the late twentieth century, Western society increasingly discouraged teenagers from getting married. In the entryway of the twenty-first century (2000), there were 891,000 married 15 to 19-year olds.² This represents almost five-percent of all 15 to 19-year olds. This couple-type is swirled in more controversy than all the others combined. Feeling the heat of a disapproving culture, the heat of passion, the heat of immigration, or the heat they feel from parents may be what fuels the fire for this couple’s determination to get married.

(4) **Older & Independent:** This couple has waited ... for a long time. It may be by choice or by lack of opportunity, but because they delayed marriage, both the man and woman have (typically) finished college, established their careers, bought a home, etc. Now, somewhere in their thirties or forties, they are now

“ready.” Or are they? Different from most of the other first-timer marriages, this couple has the added challenges to figure out what to do with two houses, two savings accounts, two career tracks, and two life experiences.

Couples creating a first-time marriage and family

The schoolyard K-I-S-S-I-N-G taunt of “*first comes, love, then comes marriage, then comes a baby in a baby carriage*” is not as prescriptive of the natural order of love-and-marriage as it used to be. Not very surprising in a day-and-age when the median age of first marriage is at an all-time high, the national marriage rate at an all-time low, and unmarried childbearing has reached an unprecedented high.³

There are two types of couples who are not only looking to start a life together, but start a family too!

(5) **Pregnant & Pressured:** With out-of-wedlock births at an all-time high, one might wonder, “*what is the ‘pressure’ this couple is facing?*” The pressure to “make things right” and get married is so twentieth century. The pressures for today’s couples are more complicated due to the choices they have: stay together or break up, marry or not marry, marry before or after the baby is born, terminate the pregnancy or keep the baby, and/or raise child or put the baby up for adoption. To compound the matter even more, they are likely receiving incessant lobbying by their friends and family members.

(6) **Him, Her and Their’s:** The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study found that half of unmarried parents are living together at the time of the child’s birth and another one-third are romantically involved but not living together.⁴ Regardless of their living arrangement, these newer parents have two interconnected needs: learning how to have a healthy couple relationship, and acquiring parenting skills to raise their child.

Couples seeking a remarriage

Almost four-in-ten weddings conducted today are a remarriage for one or both of the parties: the groom, the bride, or both of them have been engaged and married before.⁵ Some found themselves widowed and others found themselves divorced. Obviously, the needs and issues for this group of couples are more complicated than first-timer marriers, but not quite as complex as if there were kids from a prior relationship involved.

There are three types of remarriage couples.

(7) **Remarriage Due to Death of a Spouse:** According to the U.S. Census Bureau, four-percent of men and twelve-percent of women have ever been widowed.⁶ While a majority of widows are age 65 or older, remarriage is much more likely for younger widowed adults and widowed men.

(8) **Remarriage Due to Divorce:** Twenty-one percent of adult men and twenty-three percent of adult women have ever been divorced.⁷ On average, first marriages that end in divorce last eight years.⁸ Within ten years, up to three-quarters of divorced women remarry.⁹ When ever-divorced people do remarry, the median duration between divorce and remarriage is roughly three years.¹⁰ To sum up the data: a lot of previously divorced people get married again.

(9) **Couple Reversing Their Own Divorce:** With roughly one-million divorces occurring each year, it's not surprising that some couples have second thoughts after the dissolution certificate is signed. The decision to remarry one's ex-spouse can be shocking news to everyone: extended family, children, friends, and even the couple themselves. And while it may sound like an endearing story of reconciliation, the longer the couple have been apart, the more issues they need to resolve before they say "I do" for the second time.

Couples forming a step family

Hollywood portrayals of step families have been as unrealistic as the depiction of alien invasions. *The Brady Bunch*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Eight is Enough* all fell short of reality and set up unrealistic expectations for a generation of step families.

In 2004, an estimated 4.7-million step-family households with children under the age of 18 existed.¹¹ With the high volume of children born out-of-wedlock, the high rate of divorce, and the high likelihood of remarriage, it is no wonder that stepfamily trends are on an upward trajectory. Before and after walking down the aisle, these couples will walk over a minefield of obstacles and challenges as they start a marriage and a step family.

There are three types of couples that form a step family when the wedding vows are exchanged.

(10) **Him, Her and Them:** In 2003, the single-mother family groups surged to 26-percent and single-father family groups climbed to six-percent totaling ten-million single mothers and two-million single fathers.¹² The growing trend of never-married single mothers or fathers getting married for the first time is due to the burgeoning 37-percent of births being to unmarried mothers.¹³ For this couple type, the child is biologically related to either the man or the woman, but not both. Getting married may be a step toward stability for the child, a step out of poverty for the single-parent family, and a step into step family life for everyone involved.

(11) **Divorced with Kids:** Roughly 60-percent of all divorces are to couples with children.¹⁴ Five of every six custodial parents are mothers, and almost half of them were currently divorced or separated.¹⁵ A majority of these mothers (and the custodial fathers) choose to remarry, and when they do, the most difficult, challenging, and trying time for this step family will be before, during and after the wedding.

(12) **Widowed with Kids:** Six in one hundred adults (over age 15) are currently widowed.¹⁶ Half a million widows and widowers are between the ages of 15 and 44 years of age.¹⁷ The likelihood is great that those in this age bracket have children in the home, and will one day remarry. And when the surviving parent does remarry, the transition to step family life can be challenging.

While couples' relationships are more complicated today than fifty years ago, marriage preparation can be easier with this complex marrying population of the 21st Century. Why? The vast majority of today's engaged couples want (and desperately need) good, relevant, and helpful marriage preparation. In a business sense, the majority of customers want what you are selling.

This is why I believe that marriage preparation is one of the best outreach opportunities churches have today. If a church can help couples attain a healthy marriage relationship at the early stages of wedlock, it is likely the couple will be back. It might be right away, it might be after a child is born, or it might be when

they experience trouble in their relationship. They may walk through the doors of your church, or through the doors of another church. But because you linked them with God's principles on marriage, and helped them attain relationship skills for a healthy marriage . . . you have given them a wedding present they will never forget.

So, now you want to know how to provide premarital to the complex marrying population of the 21st Century. This information will be the focus of the next article, the second of this three-part series.

K. Jason Krafsky is the author of Before "I Do" – Preparing for the Full Marriage Experience (Turn the Tide Resource Group – www.FullMarriageExperience.com). As a marriage junkie, Jason supports his habit by training leaders on marriage issues, writing articles and books on marriage and family relationships, coaching communities, churches, and ministries on marriage strengthening strategies, and teaching couples about relationship issues (check out his blog at www.MarriageJunkie.com). Jason's ultimate fix comes from his wife Kelli. They live in the foothills of Washington's Cascade Mountains with their four children. Contact him at kjasonk@fullmarriageexperience.com, MySpace (marriagejunkie), or Facebook.

Copyright © 2008 by K. Jason Krafsky - Permission granted to use and reproduce with proper source citation.

¹ Kreider, Rose M., *Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 2001*. Current Population Reports, pgs 70-97. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C., 2005.

² Armas, Genaro C., "Census finds more American teens are getting married." Associate Press, November 8, 2002.

³ Popenoe, David, and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions 2007: The Social Health of Marriage in America*. The National Marriage Project-Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Piscataway, NJ, 2007.

⁴ Carlson, Marcia, Sara McLanahan, Paula England, Barbara Devaney, "What We Know About Unmarried Parents: Implications for Building Strong Families Programs." Building Strong Families In Brief – Number 3, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., Washington, D.C., 2005. (*The Fragile Families study was a study of 3,700 unmarried couples who gave birth between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large cities with populations of 200,000 or more in the United States.*)

⁵ Ibid, Kreider.

⁶ Ibid, Kreider.

⁷ Ibid, Kreider.

⁸ Ibid, Kreider.

⁹ Bramlett, M.D., and W.D. Mosher, *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States: Data From the National Survey of Family Growth*. Vital Health Statistics 23(22), National Center for Health Statistics, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services, Hyattsville, MD, 2002.

¹⁰ Ibid, Kreider.

¹¹ Kreider, Rose M., *Living Arrangements of Children: 2004*. Current Population Reports, pgs 70-114. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C., 2008.

¹² Fields, Jason, *America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2003*. Current Population Reports, pgs 20-553. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C., 2004.

¹³ Ibid, Kreider. 2008.

¹⁴ Ooms, Thedora, "Marriage Plus." Center for Law and Social Policy, an annotated version of an article originally published in a special issue of The American Prospect on "The Politics of the American Family," April 8, 2002.

¹⁵ Grall, Tomothy S., *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2003*. Current Population Reports, pgs 60-230. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C., 2006.

¹⁶ Kreider, Rose M. and Tavia Simmons, *Marital Status: 2000*, Census 2000 Brief. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C., 2003.

¹⁷ American FactFinder, *2006 American Community Survey*, factfinder.census.gov. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C., 2006.