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The Marriage Sage Circle Ritual: An Intervention Connecting Engaged
and Marriage Communities Within Seventh-day Adventist Churches

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INTRODUCTION

I am the Family Ministries Director for the Northeastern Conference of Seventh-day Adventist (Adventist) church, headquartered in Jamaica, New York. This association of churches in the Northeast is comprised of approximately 200 churches. Among my numerous responsibilities, I train church leaders on family matters pertaining to marriage, parenting, men, women and singles' issues. I present seminars and workshops; I conduct marriage and singles retreats; and I counsel with couples and families and/or refer them to other Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) therapists in our network.

Church life is accepted as central to the life of the members I serve. This is the most significant and influential community in their lives. The majority of the population of Seventh-Day Adventists that I serve is immigrants from the West Indies, Central America and South America and Africa and their American-born offspring, with a smaller number being non-immigrant African Americans. Other members originate from China, Vietnam, Brazil, Spanish and French speaking countries of the Caribbean and South America. Participating in the human experience and flavored by their cultures, they bring the range of family functionality and dysfunction displaying such attributes as wholeness, attachment issues (Brisch, 2002; Bowlby, 1953), trauma (Briere & Spinazzola, 2005; Moreau & Zisook, 2002), isolation issues (Copeland & Bowker, 2014), inter-generational tensions, and other defenses, (Burgo, 2012). The church members have established a firm practice of every Sabbath morning, participating at church in small group discussions on church and Bible teachings. After this discussion, termed Sabbath School, members enter into the main worship service of the day which can last for at least two hours. With church activities representing the center of spiritu-

al as well as social activities for the members, most worshippers then remain at church for the regular potluck and lunch provided. This is the time when bonds are formed and social interaction is at its pinnacle. Later in the day on a Sabbath, some members remain for additional Bible classes while the youth conduct their own programs. It is not uncommon for some members to remain yet longer at the church for social activities that end later in the night. A smaller number of members will return on Wednesday night for prayer meeting, and on Friday night for vespers and other activities. It is these people, in the context of their nuclear family and the church family that I serve.

Background and Context

The foundation of God's purpose and directive for marriage as taught by Seventh-Day Adventists is the redemptive, healing love of God for humanity as demonstrated between spouses and the family. For this fundamental reason, marriage and family life is deemed of paramount importance for attention by the church. Church members are indoctrinated thusly and accept and seek guidance from the church. Church members, who have been taught weekly that what they think is the truth on many theological and daily living issues, are practiced in receiving guidance from church personnel. As a result of indoctrination, members' belief and trust in the assumed Divine wisdom and power of church leaders and personnel lead them to choose church personnel for help and guidance over secular professionals.

The Seventh-day Adventist churches that I serve are still fortunate to have a strong representation of all age groups and generations attending. This has been a strong point of the churches. The Adventist educational and medical institutions have served to further promote the Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle. The church has also provided programs for all age groups, making it easier for all its members to be invested in church life. With the representation of all ages, the church leaders are challenged to care for the needs and interests of all ages, and helping each generation appreciate each other.

Fowler (2009), in his discussion of pastoral care has, addressed some of the characteristics and needs of different generations and different age groups in the congregation. In particular, the issue of marriage, divorce, and relationships is an issue that is seen from differing perspectives among the age groups and generations in the church, although all groups agree that happy and functioning families are the ideal that they strive for. The Seventh-day Adventist church historically valued the marriage sacrament as paramount in the lives of its families. However, the number of those who are “divorced and remarried has increased most significantly,” (Sahlin, 2010, p. 4). Although Barna (2008) found in his study that Americans have grown comfortable with divorce as a natural part of life, Seventh-day Adventists continue to see divorce as “a grave infraction and have somewhat been more inclined to look negatively on single adults who are divorced,” (Sahlin, 2010, p. 67). Nevertheless, the divorce rate in the church has steadily grown over the past 35 years. In his recent study of Adventist families in North America, Sahlin (2010) found that, “One in four of the first marriages reported in this study ended in divorce,” (p. 25). This study seems to indicate that married Adventist members have been subject to many of the issues that face couples of other denominations, but maintains a lower divorce rate (Barna, 2008). The research conducted by The Barna Group (2008) with adults selected from across the United States of various faiths, discovered that among those who have married, one out of three (33%) have been divorced at least once.

Consequently, the breakdown of marriage and families is a great concern for the leaders and members of the Adventist church, and are more concerned today than in the past.

Sahlin (2010) reported that,

“Over the past 15 years the percentage of Adventists in North America who are concerned about the breakdown of Adventist families has increased significantly. In the 1993-94 survey, less than two-thirds of the respondents felt that there was a trend toward more breakdowns of Adventist families, while in the most recent survey this view had increased to more than three-quarters of the respondents. Fully 96 percent of

Adventist adults in North America are “deeply concerned about maintaining strong families” (p.67).

While various measures have been employed to help to lessen the likelihood of irreparable marital discord, premarital counseling conducted by the clergy has been the primary measure. From the early days of the church, the founding members have compiled guidelines on how to choose and treat a mate (White, 1930, 1952). Currently engaged and newly married couples are not as inclined to consult these writings as did couples of the past. Whereas youth of decades ago routinely attended group functions sponsored by the church on Saturday afternoons where such topics were addressed, the youth of today in the church are not as eager to attend (Dudley, 2000; Gillespie, 2004). Dudley concluded that “those who choose to disconnect perceive the church as irrelevant, because they don’t discern their church as attempting to provide them with relevant and targeted programming,” (p. 6).

CHAPTER I

IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS

My interaction with the church leaders and members in the congregations I serve has revealed a significant need in these churches. Engaged and newly married couples in the churches have repeatedly indicated to me that they feel isolated and not integrated into the fellowship of the congregations. They have recounted not feeling supported by more mature couples in the church, also not fitting into the single scene as readily as before their partnering. Engaged couples have reiterated their dilemma in receiving many exhortations about what they should be doing and what might be appropriate and "acceptable behavior in the sight of God," from older couples and members in the churches. They have received many "don'ts" but not many "this is how I survived this situation." As Fowler (2009) described it, each generation has its own characteristics, unique motivations, goals and ways of solving problems that are, of necessity, different from the other generations. The engaged and newly married couples were not very interested in a list of prescriptions but a mentor, guide or encourager among the more mature members in the churches. The need of the newly married and engaged couples was not originating so much from any relationship or individual psychological dysfunction, but more for support and belonging and less isolation from the other married couples in the church. Dudley (1992) substantiates that there is a felt separation of generations in the church and consequent lack of relatedness. The generations all have suffered the loss of differing perspectives, which make for richer and fuller life satisfaction and well-being (Gillespie, 2004).

Relatedly, with people moving around geographically, there is lack of continuous family support and mentoring of young couples by their families or original communities. With less relocation occurrences by families in the past, there was more stability and support

for new couples. At present, with families relocating more often, there is less stability and support for new couples who might be far from their families of origin. In her book *Hold Me Tight*, Sue Johnson, (2008) points out that:

“We are increasingly living in social isolation... Most of us don’t live in supportive communities with our birth families or childhood friends close at hand. We work longer and longer hours, travel farther and farther distances, and yet have fewer and fewer opportunities to develop close relationships. Most often, the couples I see in my office live in a community of two. The majority of people in a National Science Foundation survey reported that the number of people in their circle of confidants was dropping, and a growing number stated that they had no one at all to confide in. Inevitably, we ask our lovers for the emotional connection and sense of belonging that my grandmother could get from a whole village,” (pp. 14, 15).

In my conversations with engaged and newly married couples, they report feelings of isolation and lack of support in the church community. Their needs are not acknowledged and fully met. This puts a stress on the psychological wellbeing of the individuals involved. There are relationship breakups in the church that might have been avoided with some basic counsel from experienced married couples, and others who have covered this ground before. In addition, church members generally feel that they have failed when they have to admit to challenges being faced in their marriages. They suffer alone when they could share their burden, and not feel like a failure in their spiritual life. The psychological wellbeing and quality of life are compromised for all members of the church when this sense of failure resides among them. It is a well-established psychological principle that stresses from lack of communication, and lack of confidence that there is available support, intensifies the problem of aloneness and isolation, (Johnson, 2008).

Relatedly, there is condemnation of new couples who have difficulties in their marriage and those who divorce because the church has not sufficiently invested in the new couples. The older couples could serve as replacement for absent family support instead of contributing to the stresses of the younger couples. This might reduce the shaming and condemnation younger couples report receiving from older couples. The interaction between mature

and new couples could afford a possible rekindling of the first love and attending excitement and pleasures of mature couples. In this way, both groups involved are given a chance to grow in their own relationships and in relationship to the wider church community. Relatedness could resultantly be strengthened.

Relevant to these factors, in many cases, the married couples are just not aware and equipped to listen empathically, and give effective feedback in individual and group settings. This, again, is a significant opportunity for personal and corporate growth.

In essence, the need of the engaged and newly married couples in the church is to feel more bonded and less isolated from mature couples and others in the congregation, and to feel more support.

Alfred Adler (2010), a psychotherapist from the psychodynamic school of thought, addressed these very concerns of the engaged couples in his theory developed in the early 1900s. Confirming these concerns as legitimate and significant needs, he contended that individuals need to feel unique and express their individuality, but always in the context of a caring, cooperative, encouraging community for optimum development of the individual (Corey, 2012). He suggested that such psychological dynamics as self-esteem versus inferiority, self-development and goal directed activity thrive in a feeling of belonging and empathy, mutual respect and cooperation and interdependence. This is exactly what seems to be missing in the perception of the engaged/newly married couples and what could potentially be developed between them and more mature couples.

Goals to Address Identified Needs

Fostering the Seventh-Day Adventist theology that God's forgiving, redemptive, and healing love for humanity is to be demonstrated in the relationship between spouses, family and members, and in the context of addressing the needs of couples in the various generations outlined above, the goals of this project are to:

1. Bring the two groups together for direct, cordial, and constructive exchange and sharing, in an effort to reduce the sense of isolation and aloneness of engaged/newly married couples in the church, promoting the principle of relationships among members as a reflection of God's loving attitude toward humans;
2. Encourage God's healing, forgiving and redemptive love through more trust, safety, bonding, mutuality, and relatedness behaviors between mature-married and engaged or newly married couples.
3. With the possibility of an outcome for mentoring between the generations, foster mature-couples and engaged/newly married couples sharing helpful tips and experiences, which would result in them reporting more confidence, and hope for their individual relationships and also for their place in the congregation.

Description of Project

To accomplish the goals listed above, the institution of a marriage ritual that I will call the *Marriage Sage Circle Ritual* will be established. Individual sessions with the engaged/newly married couples and mature married couples will be facilitated in order to ascertain their understanding of what constitutes healthy and unhealthy marriages; to explain the process of the ritual; and to allow for the engaged/newly-married group to formulate questions that they may want to ask the mature couples in the circle event. Using a composite list from Gottman (1994, 2001, 2012, 2015), Hendrix (2008), Hendrix and LaKelly Hunt (2013), and Olson, (2008), supported by biblical principles, each individual couple would be exposed to what constitutes healthy versus unhealthy marriages, so that they can explore where they might find themselves, based on these standards. A culminating session where both groups meet would introduce the engaged and newly married couples to the mature-married couples in the congregation. With my role as facilitator, mature, engaged and newly married couples

from the church would sit in a circle to celebrate the commitment made by the engaged and newly married couples, to exchange tips, ideas and experiences of partnering. A culminating ceremony would follow, ending with a prayer of blessing on the new couples.

Justification for the Project

This activity could be one instrument of growth and change for the congregation in that it would facilitate the coming together of the various isolated individuals, couples and generations. The hope is that this ritual could enhance the life of the congregants in many ways.

There would be a reduction of isolation among members and groups of members; a greater sense of wellbeing resulting from tips shared and problems addressed, and sharing of common concerns and triumphs. This bonding, giving and receiving in lives of the individuals and couples and groups involved would be expected to further enhance the greater growth and benefit of the entire family life of congregants. Friedman (2011) suggests, “a family approach to life-cycle events also enhances the holiness inherent in the tradition, because religious values are far more likely to be heard when family process is working toward the success of the passage, rather than against it,” (p. 163).

Foster, Weigand, and Baines (2006), in their research, reported that rituals were found to improve attention and actual performance in sports activities, increase emotional stability, and general confidence in individuals. They reported that people turn to rituals when the outcome is important to them but uncertain. In addition, the study revealed that people experienced less grief in bereavement when they participated in grieving rituals. The findings of this study support the notion that the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual could possibly address the needs of young couples who might be apprehensive about the important step and journey of marriage. Young couples who seek confidence and stability in the initial years of a new marriage might gain some support from the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual.

Legare and Souza (2012), in their research, report that rituals have been found to be

more or less effective based on the number of steps in the ritual, the specific time of day and the date of rituals among other specifications. These requirements were dependent on the differences in various cultures. Rituals are thought to be a link between one generation with the preceding generations who initiated and practiced the rituals. Rituals have long been practiced as a mode of contacting and connecting with God and spirituality. Jesus said in Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." This text has been used by the Adventist church as a clarion call for the practice of various gathering rituals in the church. The continuity and stability that the ritual evokes act as a stabilizing and connecting force. Rituals help the individual participate in a community bonding experience which lends safety and support to the individual. Rituals create habits and a groove in the psyche which are associated over time to comforting and strengthening the individual. These attributes contribute to the effectiveness of rituals.

CHAPTER II

CLINICAL AND RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLES

Theological Relevance

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church teaches that in the beginning God created perfect humans and world for them to inhabit. Their behavior, however, caused the introduction of an imperfect world with the accompanying miseries, death, and destruction. The SDA church further teaches that God in His love, since that time, has set a plan to reestablish us into our original state. That reestablishment will be accomplished with the return of Jesus. Until Jesus returns, God has put forth various guidelines through Scriptures and other means to assist humanity in successful living in an imperfect world and prepare humans for a world made new. One of the means for successful living was God's introduction of the institution of marriage as a model and reminder of His loving, forgiving, and nurturing stance toward humanity. It is upon this theological foundation that the church has placed supreme emphasis on marriage and family.

The Seventh-day Adventist church believes that marriage was instituted in the Garden of Eden. The Genesis 2:16-24 account, describes God asserting that man should not be alone and that man would thrive with a helper and companion. So He created Eve from Adam's rib. It further describes Adam declaring that Eve was "flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone," leading to the exhortation that a "man should leave his family and be joined to his wife and they then become one". This is one of the seminal tenets in the theology of the church. The SDA church has adopted this passage of scripture as the foundation for the marriage of men and women in the church. The church further promotes the belief that since Eve was taken from Adam's side, the relationship between them should be a partnership with each mate supporting each other for the good of the relationship and the family. This is in contrast to

the earlier beliefs that man should be the authoritarian leader with the wife playing a submissive, meaning inferior role. The observation of contemporary Adventists is that the egalitarian role of women in marriages in this age more closely resembles the mandate set forth in the Edenic marriage. The Adventist interpretation of the Biblical submissive wife does not detract from her unique identity and does not diminish her equality of autonomy and function in the marriage. From that marriage in Eden, the church supports principles for a happy marriage which include such practices as open communication, loyalty between partners, fidelity, conflict resolution, and effective parenting which are all centered in strong spiritual practices, (White, 1952).

We teach that the union of a man and a woman in marriage is a reflection of God's union with His created beings. Ephesians 5:25 declares "Husbands love your wives as Christ loves the church." Because Adventists believe that God is love, and God made all beings, and in our ideal state, our being is love, love is the foundation on which a marriage stands. Hosea was commissioned by God to marry a harlot to signify the nature of God's love for us, humans who have been unfaithful in our expression of godly loyalty and love (Hosea 1:2). Hosea's forgiveness, unconditional and redemptive love is God's blueprint for us in our own strong marriages as SDA Christians. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13: 7), is a mantra for many Adventist homes.

The SDA theology on marriage also includes guidelines as to how a marriage should be conducted such that it is sustained with strength and happiness over time. The principles that serve this end include conflict resolution which is derived from the text: "Be angry and sin not. Do not let the sun go down upon your wrath" (Ephesians 4:26.) Another principle which aids the satisfaction of marriages in the SDA church is effective communication as admonished in the text "Let no corrupt communication come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up" (Ephesians 4:29).

Other favorite Adventist texts that echo some of the principles of fidelity and sexual conduct are "Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan won't be able to tempt you because of your lack of self-control", (1 Corinthians 7:5); "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh," Genesis 2: 24).

In the Adventist theology, the first command for the newly formed marriage in Eden was to "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. As for you, be fruitful and increase in number. Multiply on the earth and increase upon it"(Genesis 1:28; Genesis 9:7). Adventist theology teaches that children are entrusted to parents as a special blessing, and parents have a sacred responsibility to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," (Ephesians 6:4). With regard to the principle of effective parenting, a favorite text, especially among Seventh-day Adventist youth, is "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," (Ephesians 6: 4); while the favorite text of parents is "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it," (Proverbs 22: 6); and the well-worn text for church leaders is "and you shall teach [the commandments] diligently unto your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise," (Deuteronomy 6: 7). The theology of marriage, therefore, in the SDA church, directs men and women to be joined together and become one flesh, nurturing children, God's gift to them, all on the firm, unchanging foundation of love, which is God.

With regard to introducing the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual to the Adventist church, the Marriage Sage Circle merits its name by having sage or wise mature couples mentor engaged or newly married couples. In this case the "older women will train the younger women to love their husbands, and also to love their children," (Titus 2:4, New King James Version).

The Marriage Sage Circle Ritual will provide support to each participant, “to spur one another on to love and good works, not abandoning our own meetings, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other,” (Hebrews 10:24, New King James Version). The Bible admonishes against division, and encourages unity: “Remove all divisiveness, shun all form of malice,” (Ephesians 4: 31; “Let there be no divisions among you,” (1 Corinthians 1: 10). Adventists believe that God created the institution of marriage so that man and woman may demonstrate the oneness in relationship that He wants to have with His children. He intends that men and women in marriage be one with one another as Jesus, the Holy Spirit and God the father are one, “I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one,” (John 17:23, New King James Version). Supporting one another in this capacity will actualize or bring to reality the intergenerational oneness between individual couples, and the intra-generational oneness among the group, thus, fulfilling the principle or foundation of the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual.

Friedman (2011, p. 162), declared that "Rites of passage, were the first human efforts to deal with modern psychotherapy's major areas of concern: change and separation. They were the first modes of therapy, and originally, as well as today, they are really family therapy." The SDA church is replete with the observance of rituals, making members more receptive to the idea of the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual. On a quarterly basis, SDA churches, worldwide, observe the ritual of taking communion which includes foot-washing, drinking the communion wine, and eating the unleavened bread. Every gesture and every minute of that ceremony is deliberate and symbolic. When we wash each other's feet, we are conveying that we are willing to serve each other and that we care for the comfort and well-being of each other as much as the soul of each other in the church family. These rituals are also symbolic of humility and vulnerability. Every week the Sabbath rituals, beginning Friday and ending on Saturday at sundown, are observed. In many homes, worldwide, Friday is termed preparation day as in

Luke 23:54 where preparation for the Sabbath includes cleaning the house, getting Sabbath clothes ready, cooking the Sabbath meals, preparing ourselves for worship, and other such activities. Sundown finds many homes/families at worship. Sabbaths are usually full of church activities or rest (White, 1952). All these rituals are a reminder to members of God's family to care for each other (White, 1952). One-time rituals that are very important to Seventh-day Adventists include baby blessings, when the baby, before a year old, is brought to the church by the family and blessed in front of the congregation. The parents are dedicated by the pastor or elders of the church to be effective parents, and the congregation pledges to support the parents and larger family in bringing up the child. The baptism ritual is a time when the individual declares his/her intent to join the church family, and the members openly vote to welcome the individual into 'the family of God,' embrace physically and verbally the new member. The marriage rituals, including the sacred ceremony and the reception following, offer the community an opportunity to witness and pledge support to the new family being formed (SDA Church Manual, 2015). The Sage Circle could be the pre-marital ritual that the church employs to help engaged couples prepare for marriage. It's a welcoming and integration into the community of established marriages.

My position as part of the clergy and leadership in the church would also send a message to the congregants that the wellbeing, growth and enhancement of mature as well as engaged and newly married couples are of significance in the family life of the church. This project is well endorsed by Seventh-day Adventist church, whose doctrines include the enhancement of family relationships as one of the sacred duties of the leadership as well as the laity. This activity could well be a welcome addition to the repertoire of tools to enhance family life in the church. Freedman (2011) affirmed that "life cycles ceremonies capture the healing processes of therapeutic encounter better than any other forms of religious experience," (p. 162).

In light of this theology of brokenness and reconciliation, as alluded to earlier in this paper, the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual could serve as a conduit to repairing the brokenness felt by some couples in terms of isolation and condemnation from others in the congregation and from other generations of couples in the church. When the isolated groups are presented the opportunity to connect, a chance for wholeness, acceptance and belonging is available. When embraced there is a greater chance for the expression of trust, vulnerability, and reconciliation to take place.

Clinical Relevance

Gleaned from my exploration in the fields of counseling and psychology, I have developed a counseling philosophy that, simply explained, asserts that human beings are capable of personal growth and development in relationship. They thrive when in relationship to a nurturing environment. They grow when in relationship to other individuals. As espoused by family systems theorists, they change while in relationship to family. They improve in relationship to the wider society, as taught by Adler, in their contributing and being valued and also being nurtured. They grow in relationships through group experiences as outlined by Yalom. They develop in relationship to certain developmental crises described by Erikson, Shuiling & Likis (2013), relating to their place and role in the world. The idea of relating and relationships put forth in various theories of psychology are relevant to, and will be brought to bear on, this project. Adler's social context theory, where individuals are seen in the context of the family, the society, and the world at large, is a strong influence in this project. The family systems theory, as practiced by such therapists as Edwin Friedmam and Carl Whitaker, provides an umbrella under which this project will operate. Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, describing the tasks of individuals over the lifespan will also be considered when working with the different generations present in the Sage Circle.

Echoing Adler's social context theory once more, Friedman's (2011) family therapy emphasized that healing of couples is not only based on therapy with the couple in isolation. He suggested that the systems way of treating couples where the larger family, the church and the society are employed in helping the couple grow is more effective.

Whitaker (1981, 1988) in his practice of experimental family therapy also emphasized that not the individual or couple in the family, but the entire family is the patient, and that flexibility must be taught to the family while still recognizing the generations with their roles. His aim was to have the family, through their experiments in therapy, grow to make the family an integrated and less fused or fragmented whole. All these family therapists, emphasizing the individuals and couples within the larger context of the family, the church or the society, are effective complements to Adler's social context theory and Erickson's psychosocial stages of human development.

Adler (1927) emphasized that it is imperative to view the individual in a social context. He highlighted the human need to belong and feel significant (Corey, 2012). It is for these major reasons that Adlerian theory is relevant to the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual. As stated above, the engaged and newly married couples in the congregations I serve have voiced a sense of isolation, with a resulting need to feel a belonging and a sense of significance in the congregation, in their new status as engaged or married couples. Central to Adlerian theory is the concept of community where individuals might receive encouragement, respect and a sense of significance to others. Adler suggested that problems arise for the individual feeling discouraged and not valued (Stein, 1998). Adler contended that the uniqueness of each individual was better promoted in a community that learned and practiced mutual respect which would generally lead to cooperation and encouragement which would foster belongingness, and highlight the interdependency of all. If these conditions are present, empathy is developed in each individual who then fosters the support of each other in self-

development and self-esteem, minimizing isolation and inferiority (Stein, 1998). These Adlerian principles are currently being employed by marriage therapists, some clergy who serve engaged couples, as well as more experienced couples who have encountered difficulties in their relationships (Britzman, 2014; Duba- Sauerheber, 2014; Pfefferle, 2014; Leggett, 2012).

Feminist developmental psychologists have also asserted that women, in particular, do develop their sense of identity from engaging in relationships. Development is delayed, they suggest, when the girls' relationships are suppressive or oppressive instead of cooperative or supportive (Shuiling & Likis, 2013; Collins, 2000; Lee, 1998). This suggests that women might benefit even more than men from participating in relationships offered by the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual.

With the congregation being a significant community in the lives of its members, the Marriage Sage Circle could be one method to help promote a feeling of belongingness, value, significance and encouragement and ultimately empathy and self-esteem for engaged as well as mature couples. These psychological dynamics therefore, might promote compassion, vulnerability, honesty, caring, self-expression and usefulness in the mature couples in the Marriage Sage Circle. These expressions might encourage the engaged couples to be more open to listening, receiving and trusting the more mature couples, minimizing their feeling of isolation and judgment and low self-esteem.

A convincing case is also made in the literature for the utilization of social relationships among individuals in a community. Arnell (2013) has voiced the experience of many professional individuals in churches. She asserts that religious ritual, the social aspects of church life, and inter-generational communication are sources of comfort, strength and stability for her. This is crucial for her, as a college professor, among secular colleagues. Arnell has documented what many have verbalized and valued over the years. Human beings need community for optimum well-being. Similarly, Maratos (2002) asserts in his study that cross-

generational experiences influence not only internal structures, but also the mode of thinking and the culture of the next generation.

Not only is it of significant benefit for the generations to have interactions, but there is greater benefit for older adults who invest their time in volunteering and mentoring the younger generation. Cacioppo's (2014) study revealed that the absence of positive social relationships posed such risk factors as health compromises and social isolation for older adults. Not only do positive social relationships have an influence on individuals but Warburton (2014) in his study, concluded that volunteering provides benefits for older adults and promotes generativity.

With regard to rituals, family rituals in particular, studies have shown that engaging in such practices lends stability and connectivity among families and groups of people. Histov (2014) recounts how family rituals contributed to the stability of the families in the Balkans during the upheaval in the decades of socialism. Marriage mentoring practices and rituals have been documented in various studies (Crawford, 2010; Bowers, 2003; Howard, 1999). These studies confirm that there is benefit from more seasoned and well-functioning couples mentoring newer couples.

Clinical Skills Employed

The Sage Circle is based on group therapy principles. Group therapy principles are helpful in addressing the needs of the congregation with regard to promoting less isolation of members, as well as relationship building among individual couples and among generations of couples. These principles, as outlined by Yalom (2005), suggest that the group has the potential to offer such benefits as community support; reduction of isolation since "I am not alone in my problem;" installation of hope; modeling and practice of desired behaviors; and individual as well as community growth and enhancement. Through the group experience,

couples will also be coached in utilizing effective basic listening and feedback skills. Facilitators, in their different roles, as dictated by the level of trust created in the group, will be able to model authenticity, as well as giving and receiving in the group. As is done in a therapeutic group, the facilitators will learn from the experience in each Marriage Sage Circle conducted, and with flexibility, plan for the differing needs of the varied couples that are brought together in future Marriage Sage Circles.

The usual stages of group psychotherapy might not occur in this short-term group experience. Some group experiences never lead to the passage through all the four stages of a group namely, forming stage, where people break the ice and get comfortable in the group; storming stage, where members try to find their place in the group; norming stage, where individuals begin to set rules and find their place in the group; performing stage, where group members actually contribute to the group and benefit from the experience; and adjourning stage, where members prepare to separate from the group. Some groups stay stuck at the forming stage while others remain at the storming stage. Some are able to approach the norming stage while some have difficulty in even the adjourning stage (Yalom, 2005). These occurrences in various groups inform this ritual experience in a group so that expectations are modified to include a breaking of the ice, an establishment of guidelines and an effort of establishing trust before the real work of the session is attempted. The blessing ceremony mentioned above would serve as part of the adjourning exercises. The Marriage Sage Circle Ritual will not be expected to rigidly conform to the stages of the group, as outlined by Yalom.

While the format of this ritual is within the group therapy context of sharing, the didactic activities, as well as the exchange between all participants are seen as a first step and an investment of the mature couples in the new couples. The new couples, in turn, could offer the idealism, enthusiasm and generational perspective which could be an enrichment of the mature couples' marital experience. This ritual is also intended as an icebreaker for young

couples who will hopefully see the mature couples as a source of support, or help. The Marriage Sage Circle Ritual is not intended to be a long term therapeutic group experience. In summary, the ritual is an introduction of the new couples into the church and an acknowledgement and welcoming of the new couples by the mature couples into the group of committed couples of the congregation.

Employing group facilitation and clinical communication skills, I would conduct the ritual to ensure that each individual, each couple and each generational group would feel safe enough, and free to confidentially express their needs and ideas and experiences. I would strive to ensure that individuals speak from their own experience and convey regard and respect and caring for each other in the group so that actual work might take place (See Appendix B).

Following the Adlerian guidelines for helping people, the plan is to ensure that all members of the circle feel supported and encouraged. The Marriage Sage Circle Ritual will not be a forum, for interpretation and judgement of what is said by anyone, nor will it present a direct challenge for individuals to change their behavior. While acknowledging these limitations, it is hoped that individuals might find experiences, ideas and attitudes from the group that will stimulate self-growth and change in the future. Therapy is not the goal of this ritual.

Utilizing Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, the identified generations will be coached on the possible needs and goals and characteristics of the generations with whom they will interact in the Marriage Sage Circle. I would always point out that, according to Fowler (2009), individuals that comprise the couples in their twenties are facing the dilemma of developing initiative when just beginning life, and attempting new things, versus shame and doubt, when in their uncertainty, they are tempted to resort to less positive methods in negotiating these new experiences. Fowler further explains Erikson's next stage, termed industry versus inferiority, where individuals making up couples in their thirties are grappling

with the need to be competent and not seem inferior in their skills and personal lives. Individuals in their forties face what Erikson termed the stage of identity versus identity confusion where individuals are beginning to strengthen their identity and roles in society, versus worrying about what they might become or where they will end up in life. Intimacy versus isolation is the term given to describe the dilemma individuals in their fifties are striving to resolve in accepting themselves and accepting others which leads to intimacy and less isolation. Later, in the sixties, individuals are faced with the dilemmas of generativity versus stagnation, meaning letting go and giving way to the younger generation, retiring and balancing leisure with useful activities. Generativity is an important aspect of passing on wisdom from one generation to another. Individuals in their seventies are in the process of taking stock of how they lived and finding meaning and resolution to their experiences, thus experiencing integrity versus despair from a 'wasted' life. These psychological forces and dynamics are generalizations and will only be used as guidelines for interaction with the groups. It is recognized that each individual and each couple will have a different rate of development within the categories described above. These ideas will inform the attempt at understanding and relating among and between the generations.

Parallels Between Theological and Clinical Principles

Essentially, the teaching of what constitutes the achievement of a healthy marriage for the Seventh-day Adventist church parallels the principles as outlined by such researchers and theorists as Gottman (1994, 2001, 2012, 2015), Hendricks (2008, 2013), Olson, Olson-Sigg and Larson (2008).

Gottman (2015) describes “masters of marriage.” These couples demonstrate and enjoy healthy and strong relationships in marriages. These masters of marriage adhere to seven principles of making their marriages work. They are: enhancing love maps, or nurturing each

other; nurturing fondness and admiration between partners; turning physically and mentally toward each other instead of turning away; allowing partners to influence each other; exploring the two kinds of marital conflict which are solvable and unsolvable problems; overcoming gridlock; and creating shared meanings.

Such internal family systems experts as Schwartz (2008) purport that individuals are capable of healing themselves. The project, however, is more grounded in the teaching of Harville Hendricks and Helen Hunt. Hendricks and Hunt (2008, 2013) have suggested that marriage can be a spiritual journey of individuals to find wholeness and healing through the relationship. They contended that marriages fail or are weakened when each partner expects from the other partner to be made whole from their early disappointments, wounds and hurts. They further suggested that the secret to strong marriages is an understanding that romantic love is not a strong foundation for a marriage, but that each partner giving to each other instead of trying to get their way is a more successful practice. They suggested that conflict is 'growth trying to happen' so that couples should not abandon each other in conflict. They taught that negativity in a partner is invisible abuse and actually a wish in disguise. Communication being a major tool for healing in their teaching, they explained that 'it is not what you say but how you speak' that is significant in healing or severing the bond between couples. Hendrix and Hunt's work relies heavily on the idea that the family of origin plays a significant part in the forming of the personality and preferences of each individual. These preferences and personalities, when coupled with another personality of differing experience, inevitably require attention if the couple will live harmoniously. That attention is the work of family therapy. In a very small way, the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual offers one opportunity to begin or continue the attention to be paid.

Olsen, Olsen-Sigg and Larson (2008), suggest standards for a strong versus weak marriage relationship. The standards are discussed in terms of strong versus weak communi-

cation skills; effective versus ineffective stress reduction skills; efficient versus inefficient conflict resolution skills; sound versus unsound financial skills that are based on common goals; conscious versus thoughtless sexual satisfaction and affection fulfillment; deliberate versus thoughtless and conforming teamwork and flexibility in roles; planned versus conforming spirituality enhancement between partners; effective versus ineffective parenting skills; deliberate versus neglected honoring personality styles within the partnership; and effective versus ineffective skills in achieving individual and common goals and dreams.

So important is marriage and family to the church, that a department for marriage and family ministry is firmly established to minister to the families of the church. Books on family life have been published by the founding members of the church. Courses of study from the Bible have been distributed to the members as guidelines and exhortation for the members. The academic institutions of the church all offer degrees in marriage and family life. In summary, the church has ensured, by its structure and programs, that marriage and family is addressed consistently, continuously and substantially in every church.

These principles are also promoted in the teachings of the church regarding marriage and family through such church publications as *Messages to Young People* (1930), *The Adventist Home* (1974), written by Ellen G. White, a founding member of the church, promote most of these ideas in the chapters of the books. With translations in numerous languages, *On Becoming a Man* (1951), and *On Becoming a Woman* (1968), have been read for decades by almost all Adventist youth throughout the world. These books guide young people in matters of love and marriage and starting a family. Wittschiebe's book, *God Invented Sex* (1974), delighted and instructed Adventist youth for decades also.

With regard to my early clinical pastoral expectations, they can be summarized as the demonstration of God's healing, forgiving and redemptive love through the expression of the

principles of effective and compassionate communication, healthy sexual expression, sound finance practices, honoring of personality styles, interdependence between family and friends, effective conflict resolution with trust and commitment

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Marriage Sage Circle Ritual Procedures

In conducting this Marriage Sage Circle Ritual to address the needs of the couples in the congregation and to accomplish the goals outlined, the following steps were taken:

I contacted some pastors in the New York City and Long Island areas to solicit their support in having their churches participate in the Marriage Sage Circle project. They were very receptive of the project and thought that it was a worthwhile endeavor that would benefit marriage ministry in their churches. Two churches qualified to participate because they had engaged couples and/or newly married couples who were willing to participate. Although both pastors participated in the ritual, one pastor was single, the other was married. The married pastor and his wife hosted the ritual in their church.

Announcements were made in Seventh-day Adventist churches in New York City, and couples volunteered to participate. Two more engaged couples from two other churches (one each) contacted me and requested to participate in the project. However, their pastors were not available to participate. All four churches were located in New York City and Long Island. There were approximately 4 engaged couples (EC), 5 newly married couples (NMC), and 18 mature married couples (MMC).

I made arrangements with the host pastor and Family Ministries leader (who became my assistant for the ritual) to schedule the dates and location of the ritual. They provided me with two rooms for the preliminary individual group sessions, and the fellowship hall for the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual. All the rooms were spacious and suitable for the meetings.

Engaged and newly married couples, who contacted my assistant or me to participate in the project, were invited to attend four group sessions, and the mature married couples

were invited to attend two sessions. Date, time, venue, and other pertinent information for each group meeting and the culminating event of the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual were communicated to all individuals involved.

There is a well-established Family Life Ministry with a vibrant marriage ministry in the participating churches where programs such as monthly couples' club meetings, nights out, marriage emphasis weeks, marriage retreats, etc. are designed to support, enhance, and empower married couples in the church. The pastors were very involved in fostering such programs in their churches, two of which were personally involved in the ritual. The hosting pastor and his wife were very enthusiastic about having the Marriages Sage Circle Ritual conducted in their church.

The Marriage Sage Circle Ritual

All couples along with the facilitator sat in a circle, and prayer was offered after which couples were welcomed and introduced. A review of the ground rules was then conducted (see appendix B)

1. The facilitator set the stage with a statement of intent for the session, then introduced ten categories, one at a time, and invited the engaged and newly-married couples to ask their prepared question to the mature-married couples. The mature couples responded, and exchange among the groups ensued.
2. This segment lasted for approximately two hours, allowing participants sufficient time to share.
3. All mature-married couples were invited then to stand and form a circle placing the engaged and newly-married couples at its center.
4. A litany was read, engaging all subgroups within the circle: engaged, newly-married, and mature-married couples, clergy, church leaders, and facilitator.
5. A pledge of support was read by the facilitator and couples responded affirmatively.

6. A prayer by the hosting pastor was offered affirming the commitment of the engaged and newly-married couples to each other and to the wider group.
7. A circular symbol, a blue wristband, was given to all couples as a token of appreciation for their participation.
8. Light refreshments were served at the end of the ceremony, concluding the ritual.

During this time, the participants completed the L section of the K-W-L form (See Appendix A). This was their opportunity to evaluate their experience of the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual.

Assessment

The project would be deemed successful if the following were observed or reported from its proceedings:

1. A sense of openness, authenticity and intimacy in the exchange between engaged/newly-married couples and mature-married couples.
2. An exchange of useful information as a result of questions and responses between engaged and married couples,
3. Vulnerability and generosity as demonstrated by any personal experiences shared,
4. Spontaneous and written declarations of the benefits of the ritual from either engaged or married groups, or any offering of gratitude from any attendee.

CHAPTER IV

OUTCOMES

Preliminary Individual Group Sessions

Prior to the culminating event of the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual, individual group sessions with the engaged and newly married couples were conducted for a period of four weeks. For the success of the program, they were introduced to the procedures of the ritual, coached on the elements of group dynamics, and encouraged to formulate their questions for the ritual event. In addition, with the ideas of Hendricks (2008, 20013), Gottman (2015) and Olson, Olson-Sigg, Larson (2008), as well as Bible principles, they were guided into discussing and assessing their own understanding of what constitutes a strong marriage. The topics were derived from, but not limited to the following categories: 1) Spirituality; 2) Communication; 3) Conflict resolution; 4) Affection and sex; 5) Family and friend relationships; 6) Parenting; 7) Money matters; 8) Egalitarian roles; 9) Personality styles; 10) Keeping love alive. They were then invited to formulate possible questions for the Sage circle event.

During the same weeks, I met with the mature-married couples on Saturday nights at 6:00 PM for two sessions, and with the engaged and newly-married couples on Sundays at 4:00 PM for four sessions, each lasting approximately two hours.

I facilitated four sessions with the four engaged and five newly-married couples for four consecutive weeks. The various lengths of time the newly-married group had been married were: 7 weeks, two 3 months, 5 months, 6 months, and 14 months. I facilitated presentations and discussions on areas that aid in developing a strong marriage. The sessions were very educational for these couples, including the newly-married couples. Most of them, three newly-married and all the engaged couples, had not seen marriage counselors prior to those ses-

sions. On our initial session, the question was posed to all the couples: “What are the elements that you believe constitute a healthy and strong marriage?” There was silence in the room. Finally, one female participant responded, “That’s what we came here to find out.” We all laughed and I began the session. Here are some statements they registered as being important elements that build healthy and strong marriages:

- A shared belief system, desire to serve God
- Flexibility, your marriage today will not be the same in ten years from now. I must be willing to accept and embrace changes
- Forgiveness-Lord knows I need it and he needs it more
- “No matter what” mentality, I imagine that will be the only thing to keep us together
- The desire to do things to make my partner happy even when he does things I don’t like, such as, doing silly things and watching football
- Must have a team mentality
- Pray together
- Give and take
- Protective of each other
- Safety in the home: emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually
- Transparent communication with genuine motives and intentions
- Integrity of the couples

At each session, I shared basic information that pertained to the focused topics, provided questions for discussion for individual couples and for the collective group, and facilitated group discussions. The first topic of discussion focused around the theological grounding of marriage. Eventually, we delved into in-depth discussions that pertained to topics such as: personality styles, finance, egalitarian roles, conflict-resolution, family and friends, spirituality, sex and intimacy, love and romance, etc. Interestingly, the liveliest discussions revolved around the topics of personality styles, egalitarian roles, and conflict-resolution. I facilitated a candid discussion where women defined their roles and expectations of their spouses from a more contemporary feminist point of view and men outlined their expecta-

tions which leaned more to the older and more traditional roles. Each side concluded that their individual position need to be validated, but both need to work together in order to create a relationship that works effectively. With regard to personality styles, the discussion eventually led to the possible need to accept the difference in personality styles and ways of relating that might have been nurtured in their homes of origin. Various suggestions were offered from different couples on methods to resolve conflicts. The differing methods and views expressed were used as examples of ways to resolve conflicts.

I met with the mature-married couples for two consecutive sessions. They had been married for a period of time between 10 years to 46 years. In these sessions, the couples were coached in communication skills, elements of group dynamics, and procedures of the ritual for the success of the program. They were invited to reflect on the same elements of strong marriages derived from Gottman, Olson, and Hendrix, as well as Bible principles that were introduced to the newly-married or engaged couples group. Although I used the same process from the engaged and newly-married group, the discussions in this group were flowing from the beginning. Initially, couples were hesitant to openly discuss the topics. Shortly after, they became more comfortable, and began to fully participate. When asked about the elements that make a marriage healthy and strong, the couples had various responses. Below are listed some of their responses:

- Choose what's best for both of you
- The importance of "chemistry"
- Marriage is based on love
- It's supposed to be a haven for safe sex & procreation
- It's hard work
- It takes compromise
- Effective communication
- Blessing of children

- Trust
- Praying together encourages closeness & transparency
- Loving and supporting each other
- Marriage should be a lifelong commitment
- God must be the center of marriage life
- Marriage is the best thing God created for men and women
- Marriage involves commitment
- Involves “good and bad times” (ups & downs)
- Effective communication is key
- Forgiveness is key
- Communication skills are necessary
- Honesty is the best policy
- God is first
- Each person knows their roles/responsibilities
- Selflessness
- Prayer
- Finance
- Intimacy
- Must be willing to let go of your old self
- Structure
- Affection and Appreciation
- Financial agreement
- Understanding

Observation of their responses indicated a solid understanding and commitment to the tenets of a healthy and strong marriage. Couples illustrated these tenets with their own personal experiences which they brought powerfully to the sage circle ritual. They expressed a variety of views on the topics. Both men and women equally participated in the discussions. There were couples who were well versed on the topics based on their own marital experiences, readings, and counseling. One female participant was a counselor who specialized in marriage and family therapy. She was the most expressive of the group and often attempted

to shift the nature of the group into group counseling. At each attempt, I gently reminded them that it would be more beneficial to the group to hear their personal experiences and insights instead of counsels.

During the group sessions, assessment form, K-W-L (See Appendix A) was handed out to all couples. The K-W-L form is a way for each participant to determine what they know, want to know, and actually learned from the ritual, and was a way for them to schematically monitor their learning as they went through the experience. At this stage, they completed the first two columns (K-W), while L was completed at the end of the ritual. Participants turned in the forms to the facilitator who used them as one form of assessment for the effectiveness of the program. All participants expressed having been positively impacted by this part of the ritual.

During the two sessions with the mature married couples, I addressed the theological foundations of marriage, I laid the ground rules for the ritual, and based on their understanding and agreement, I was assured that they were going to be respectful and kind sages to the engaged and newly married-couples. They demonstrated that they were ready to share themselves with the engaged and newly married couples in a supportive way.

The Marriage Sage Circle Ritual

The ritual took place in the fellowship hall of the church where social events are held. A table was set for the refreshments and further in the room a circle of chairs was arranged. There were eighteen mature couples, five newlywed couples, four engaged couples in attendance. The total number of participating couples was 28, including the facilitator and spouse. The entire ritual exercise went generally well in light of the expectations. In general, there was good exchange between participants. There were personal anecdotes. The exchange be-

tween mature and engaged/newly married couples was cordial and generous. Genuine and significant questions were asked and were met with sincere and intimate responses.

Following the circle conversation, I facilitated the closing ceremony with a litany that included all participants, a pledge, and a closing prayer by the hosting pastor. All couples were asked to complete the “L” segment of their K-W-L form. The activities preceded in a timely manner so that by 9:30 pm, the ritual was concluded after which refreshments were served. Altogether, the ritual lasted three hours.

Findings

The outcomes will be described in terms of the assessment expectations outlined in chapter one:

Expectation 1

I will seek to observe a sense of openness, authenticity and intimacy in the exchange between engaged and newly-married couples and mature married couples. This will give an estimation of the level of bonding and community that the ritual might create. This will address the isolation and paucity of emotional support and separation of generations that might be present in the congregation. Minimal observation of this authenticity and openness might require for later circles, possibly more effective measures to create a safer environment, among other interventions.

Throughout the exchanges of questions and answers, both mature and engaged/new couples shared personal and private, potentially embarrassing experiences, practices and traits when discussing the different questions. In one inquiry about balancing church life and married life, both newly married spouses making the inquiry described in detail what happens at home. Each gave his/her own version and gave a background of what happened in their

childhood home. Authenticity and openness was demonstrated in their recounting less than flattering practices in their childhood home and how they adopted or rebelled against the practices. The husband was very involved in church while the wife was not and voiced her resentment. She asked her husband, “Why don’t you work less at church?” The husband responded, “Why don’t you get involved at church?” An older couple shared their experience and concluded that what helped them is that they "partnered in church activities so she was not left alone at home.”

Mature couples added their "horror stories" about family worship in their homes and how they negotiated the conflict that arose early in their marriages about differing family worship and church attendance and participation practices. The husband of a mature couple declared that he had no intention of subjecting his children to 6:00 AM tedious morning worship as his father tortured him into attending. The wife was equally vehement of going the opposite direction and insisting on daily family worship. He consented to participate for the sake of the children, and the wife committed to making worships relevant and meaningful to all in the family.

The sharing of each couple fulfilled the goal of inviting authenticity and intimacy fostering emotional support and compassionate connection between the generations.

Expectation 2

I will look for an exchange of useful information with the accompanying reasonable volume of questions and responses between engaged and married couples, resulting in possibly more stability, growth and well-being for the engaged couples. Results might also include a reduction in isolation and a greater sense of relatedness between the generations. Minimal observation of this attribute might lead to more effective methods of guiding, coaching or

strengthening the confidence of married couples or possibly inviting more receptiveness from engaged couples.

Engaged and newly married couples reported on the questionnaire they filled out prior to the gathering for exchange in the big circle. The information they sought was presented by them in the form of questions, with related smaller inquiries. The following is an account of what they wanted to learn from the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual:

- How long does the honeymoon phase last? What follows it?
- How important is it that I elevate my domestic skills?
- How can we avoid financial strain?
- How can we keep our marriage exciting?
- How important is it to maintain your own identity outside of your spouse and family?
- How do you define relationship roles when both people have dominant personalities?
- Does sexual passion fade as you get older?
- What if two of you are at different places spiritually, how do you cope?
- What are some of the ways you reinforce love and affection?
- What's the biggest obstacle when transitioning from single to married life?
- How to resolve issues from past arguments
- How to always give your 100%
- How to get what you need without being manipulative or forceful
- Being constructive without criticizing
- I am not sure if I am doing it right and would like reassurance
- How to receive criticism without pushing back
- How to protect sacred circle
- How to bring out the best of each other to foster growth and development
- How to find time for each other when time is so limited
- How do I effectively assess the person that is pursuing me?
- How do you trust God when waiting on God?
- What if we are on different spiritual levels?
- What is the hardest year in a marriage? Is the first year guaranteed to be hardest?
- How do you balance church life and married life?

- Is sex OK on Sabbath?
- Does sex remain hot after many years of marriage?
- How can we plan financially for our kids in this economy?
- Whose parenting style should we adopt? His or hers?
- What if you don't need affection but your partner is the opposite of you in this area?
- How do you keep love alive after many years of marriage?

The following are verbatim comments by the engaged and newly married couples on what they learned as a result of participating in the Sage Circle Ritual. Duplicating comments were not included.

- The importance of “dying to self”. I have to consider what is best for the relationship, not just me or my partner
- Deciding who is in charge of the finances
- Learning not to threaten his manhood. How that invites hostility. His biggest fear is disappointing me. My criticism heightens that fear.
- Communication is important
- Knowing why you’re marrying him is key
- Discuss why you want to be married – What marriage means to you
- Be authentic
- When you have the same core values, marriage is more likely to succeed
- You have to have a conversation with yourself and identify what’s mostly important to you
- Understand why you behave the way you do, especially in response to the other person
- Transparent communication with genuine motives and intentions
- Listening is a very helpful tool to learn
- Keep God as the greatest first love individually and collectively
- Commitment to the marriage relationship is vital
- Yes, I would approach married couples in my church for support
- Each couple must find their financial culture that works for their individual covenant (there is no specific formula that works for all).
- How better to communicate what you need from the marriage
- The ability to listen and speak your mind with respect for the other person
- Unselfishness-consider your spouse’s feelings in all that you do and say

- How to pass on what you learned at the marriage section
- Constant forgiveness
- Knowing why you're marrying is very important
- I have learned it's better to have counseling and an open and serious discussion about the marriage in order to avoid the pitfalls that may later creep up.

Statements reported by both engaged/newly married and mature couples, as "I have learned that I am not alone," "Other couples are able to relate to the issues and struggles in experiences," "I learned from others 'experiences in marriage that can benefit my relationship,'" demonstrate that all couples did benefit from the information shared, and were impacted in the area of isolation and relatedness. Such statements of what new couples learned as "avoid making assumptions when communicating, exercise patience, be honest and open, fight triggers, remove expectations, go back to the foundation," also indicate learning tips for stability, growth and well-being. Both men and women equally indicated benefitting. In discussing egalitarian roles during the pre-sessions, the engaged and newly married couples expressed views that seemed to come from their individual perspective alone. In seeking the promotion of satisfying and fulfilling marriage relationships, interaction with the mature couples led engaged and newly married couples to consider the Biblical term "dying to self" as a vital approach in integrating their partner's perspective as well as the welfare of the partnership in addition to their own personal perspective.

Expectation 3

I will seek to detect vulnerability and generosity as demonstrated by any personal experiences shared. This might be evidence of bonding, investment and some disappearance of condemnation and judgment. Such results might lead to general increased happiness, better quality of life, relatedness and greater psychological well-being and emotional support for all

involved.

Especially during the second half of the discussion, most couples were open and generous in their sharing. Such questions as "What is your definition of affection," resulted in new and mature couples describing what they truly needed and sometimes were not getting from their partner. Others gave tips on how they sought to get the affection they wanted. There was dialogue between the partners in a couple for all others to observe. There were spontaneous gestures of offering affection to each other which elicited laughter as well as silent appreciation and support from others.

To the question about keeping love alive, funny stories were told about what length couples went to keep love alive. Men as well as women recounted the 'sacrifices' they made for their spouse to keep love alive, with one man describing his torture at watching Judge Judy with his wife and her counteracting with her watching football with him occasionally. Most couples were very generous in sharing their secrets, even if deemed by them to be laughable. New couples responded positively to the sharing and even offered their own practices that they were developing. A good sense of humor was very evident among the individual couples in their sessions as well as in the Sage Circle exchanges.

One engaged female participant asked from the men, "What do you want from us? You get mad when we talk, yet you want us to talk. What do you want?" A mature married man responded, "It's the way you talk to us. We want to hear from you, but we need for you to give us the benefit of the doubt. You don't have to defy us, question us, and doubt us so much! We need you to trust our judgement more. We feel crushed and put down by you when you question our judgement. When we feel that way, we don't feel love and romance. I don't want to be with my wife when she talks to me a certain way." Meanwhile, the engaged partner was shaking his head with a smile in agreement with the speaker. The conversation was concluded by the mature man saying, "I have been married for 15 years and it's been re-

cently that we have begun to listen to each other and communicate in a way that we can hear each other. So the way we talk to each other is key.”

The general exchange between couples and generations convincingly demonstrated vulnerability, generosity, and some bonding. Relatedness and emotional support between couples and generations were demonstrated and verbalized by attendees. Such statements as, “I wish we had had this in our day!” “I hope we’re going to have this more in our church!” “When are you going to do this again?” “Let us keep in touch.” During refreshments time, I observed a mixture of couples hug each other and promise to watch out for each other as in, “I’ll be watching out for you!”

Expectation 4

I will look for spontaneous and written declarations of the benefits of the ritual from either the engaged or married group, or any offering of gratitude from any attendee. This might serve as a demonstration of the increased psychological well-being and quality of life and happiness for all involved.

The following are some of the comments that both engaged/newly married and mature couples made on the questionnaire.

- A valuable lesson I learned is that my situation is not unique
- Each marriage is unique, but the issues are similar
- This is a helpful means to help build marriage
- All couples share similar experiences with us
- My wife needs my affection. I need to be more spontaneous
- I am not alone. There are other couples who have challenges as we do
- I learned a lot from listening to other couples share their experiences. It was helpful.
- That you are not the only one going through certain things
- I am not alone and our problems are common
- Other couples have the same issues regardless of how long or short we have been married

- Marriage is trial and error and it's not all "peaches and cream".
- Successful marriages require hard work
- Couples today do have the same concerns
- I am not the only one that thinks affection is Key
- Advice from seasoned marriages was very helpful.
- How to solve problems and overcome difficult situations

To the question, would you approach married couples in church for support, 15 out of 16 individuals from the group of engaged and newly married couples indicated that they would approach a couple in the church for support. Participants wrote, "There are a few people in this circle that I can & will go to when I need to talk with someone," "Mentoring in marriage is helpful," "Yes, I would approach married couples at my church for support," "I will approach married couples for support because I see and feel how it is to be able to express your issues and the benefits of it." "These activities (the ritual) have helped me to feel comfortable to open up to others." One mature married individual did not indicate if they would recommend the ritual or not.

Willingness to recommend the Sage Circle to others was indicated by all engaged newly married and mature married couples as these statements indicate, "This was a good learning experience learning from other married and engaged couples, and I would recommend it to others too," "I would definitely recommend this ritual to others," "All couples should go through this," "Yes, I would recommend this ritual to everyone".

While explicit words were not made in the formal setting of the group, appreciation was offered during the refreshment activity. Attendees from both the mature couple and the engaged/new couple groups said their thanks for convening such a meeting. They had a good time. They came up to the table with their spouse, demonstrating their newly employed affection gestures. They asked if there would be more of these gatherings wishing there would be more in the future. This might be a good indication that both groups of couples might be on

their way to increased well-being and quality of married life.

Expectation 5

In conducting the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual, I intend to utilize the phenomenon of group dynamics that inevitably is present in some form in any gathering, to strengthen the effectiveness of the ritual for the benefit of the participating couples. My record of observed behavior and conversation in the context of group dynamics could later inform future facilitators who might seek to make the ritual exercise more effective for their congregations.

In pursuing and addressing feedback from this ritual, group dynamics was observed and examined. It seemed that the ground rules and the initial instructions that I offered in the beginning served to establish some confidentiality and some comfort and trust in the group. The discussion of the first question was noticeably more halting with longer time lapses between the asking of the question and the various responses. Participants seemed to quickly move past the initial awkwardness especially when the facilitator related a personal experience in response to the question. With the ice broken, there was not much hesitation from participation throughout the entire ritual.

There were two occasions when I as the facilitator had to remind individuals from the mature couples to not offer advice or prescriptions but to offer their experience and insights in addressing the issue being presented. There was good exchange between all groups of individuals – mature, engaged, and newly married couples, between men and women, between new couples and between mature couples and within the individual couples. There was a natural flow in transitioning from question or issue to the next. Everyone participated although some more than others as would be expected. No one dominated, however. The activities were kept on schedule without sacrificing any desire for more expression. Given the oppor-

tunity at the end of the entire ritual, individuals indicated feeling complete in their need for further expression.

Other findings

The following are observations made during the Sage Circle Ritual that were not anticipated:

1. There was close bonding among each group. The engaged and newly married couples developed camaraderie from the very beginning and had to be gently torn away from their company in their small group at the end of each session. They left the entire ritual with support among themselves more strongly established.
2. The same observation was made among the more mature couples although in a lessor way. They were observed inviting each other to share in future social experiences together. Some were overheard offering to support and monitor certain pledges that were made by some partners in the sessions and sage circle.
3. The host pastor and his wife participating in the experience seemed to have credibility in the eyes of the participants. He was very supportive and very open with his own marital experiences which encouraged others to follow suit.
4. In discussing intimate details of their marriage such as, their conflicts and also their sexual secrets, the openness and vulnerability of the mature couples was overwhelmingly expressed far beyond my expectations.
5. Another unexpected outcome is even though there was discussion about the sexual needs of men and women in the preliminary group sessions, both men and women engaged in lengthy discussions, more emotionally influenced, on why men demanded more frequent sexual encounters and why women were so withholding, marked by a mature husband's question, "Why do women punish us by withholding sex from us?" The wife defended herself by responding, "Why do you want sex so much?" This ex-

change opened the floodgates of expressions of frustration on the part of both genders and generations. I as facilitator reminded them of earlier discussions on the sexual needs of males versus females.

The level of comfort, vulnerability, and authenticity with which the participants expressed themselves was overwhelming. They had no concerns in opening up and becoming vulnerable to the group. I can conclude that such behavior and attitude stemmed from the fact that church members spend inordinate times together on the Sabbath day at church for spiritual and social activities, allowing them frequent opportunities to fellowship with each other.

In summary, the unexpected outcomes were more of a support than a detractor of the initial premises occurring at the beginning of this project. The unexpected outcomes were welcomed results that exceeded the hopes for the project.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

My early clinical pastoral expectations for this project are based on the mandate and foundation of God's purpose and directive for marriage as taught by the Seventh-day Adventist church. This can be characterized as the redemptive, healing love of God for humanity, as demonstrated between spouses and between each individual in the congregation and the wider world. The Family Life Ministries of the church has espoused and promoted the demonstration of God's healing and redemptive love for humanity through the practice of many marriage and relationship principles. The gift that is given to Seventh-day Adventist couples in the theological community of faith is the tools and language to help ensure our marriages are sacred/spiritual as well as physical and material. As a servant-leader in the Seventh-day Adventist church, my mission is to promote the redemptive and healing love of God in marriages and families through the best practices in relationship fostering found in theology, counseling and psychology.

Concerning the outcomes of this project in light of the clinical pastoral expectations mentioned, there was significant evidence of congruence between the expectations of the demonstration of the clinical pastoral principles and the demonstration of participating congregants in the project. The principles displayed in this project included compassionate, non-judgmental listening, by the mature couples with the free and open disclosure of their private, potentially embarrassing experiences which they offered in their mentoring and nurturing of the engaged and newly married couples. These principles were further displayed in the willingness of newly married and engaged couples to be mentored by the more mature couples. Their questions to the mature couples, their responses and follow-up queries, and their own divulging of potentially embarrassing practices was compelling evidence for the bonding and

appreciation shared between the generations.

Part of the inspiration for pursuing the idea of the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual was the felt separation of generations in the churches I serve, and the consequent lack of relatedness among the age groups. Another felt need in the churches was that of engaged/newly married couples who would welcome mentoring and support in negotiating the early stages of marriage relationships. Engaged/newly married couples were not eager for criticism or authoritarian prescriptions, but shared experiences with the resulting wisdom and insight, while more mature couples seemed ill-equipped or hesitant to offer compassionate listening and judgement-free support. It was these differing perspectives, along with felt social separation that led to the goals of this Marriage Sage Circle Ritual project. Affirming that healing takes place in the presence of relationships, the goals were to bring the different groups together for direct, cordial and constructive exchange and sharing in an effort to reduce the sense of isolation and aloneness of engaged/newly married couples in the church, and also to foster exchange of helpful ideas and tips.

Both the expectations and the outcomes of this Marriage Sage Circle Ritual project, as recorded in chapter IV, were in close alignment with each other. The findings outlined in chapter IV revealed that the different generations did indicate receiving significant benefit from meeting together, resulting in more cordiality and trust among them. There was also convincing declarations by the participants, of the benefits related to the exchange of helpful ideas and tips and mentoring. The conclusion drawn, therefore, from this project, as conducted, does make a strong case for such programs as the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual to be utilized as one method of bringing the different generations in the church together for mutual benefit in greater understanding and compassionate support among them. The project demonstrated that a forum for listening and constructive, edifying feedback, if fostered in the congregation, can be an agent for education, nurturing and the reduction of isolation between

generations.

Because this project suggested that there is value to the church, the generations and the couples, it might be a worthwhile endeavor to pursue variations on the format of this project to more effectively fit the congregations and groups that would sponsor such a venture. This ritual would, therefore, be taylor-made to fit the unique needs of each congregation or group participating in the ritual. It might be reasonable to assume that out of the Sage Circle Ritual, the couples could decide to organize an ongoing support group for each other in the months and years after the initial meeting.

Rather than offering a change of understanding of the religious and clinical principles initially espoused, the project outcomes strengthened and deepened the accepted theological position of the church and the current clinical best practices. God's healing and reconciling principles of love embraced before the commencement of this project were demonstrated in the project through compassionate communication, generous offering of guidance and support from mature couples and the welcoming reception from the newly married and engaged couples. The conclusion gleaned, therefore, from the execution of this project is that the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual could be an effective tool in strengthening the theology and religious principles of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Since the general principles of God's love, forgiveness and abundant living are universal, this project might be adapted for practice in other than Seventh-day Adventist churches.

The counseling philosophy of human growth taking place in the context of relationships is relevant to, and was used as guiding a principle for, the project. Adler's social context theory, where individuals are seen in the context of the family, the society, and the world at large, was a strong influence in this project. The family systems theory, as practiced by such therapists as Edwin Friedman, and Carl Whitaker, provided an umbrella under which this

project operated. Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, describing the tasks of individuals over the lifespan was also considered when working with the different generations present in the Marriage Sage Circle. Lastly, the principles of group therapy were employed in the running of the various sessions.

Adler's theory was clearly evident in the expressions by the generations participating in their display of comfort level in the sessions, their appreciating and requesting additional connection among the generations and their expression of gratitude for the support and bonding that was established between them. The church being a community with the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual groups of generations being a smaller community within the larger church community, offered a compelling answer to the need for social support, contribution and belonging as taught by Adler. The family systems theory that influenced this project was also utilized and integrated in this project. The education of the separate generations with the principles of effective marriages and the resulting responses and questions asked by the engaged and newly married couples displayed the relevancy of issues introduced and discussed by the theorists.

Erikson's developmental stages were demonstrated in the project through the willingness of the mature couples finding fulfillment and pleasure in sharing with the younger couples since this is one of their developmental tasks. Most of the newly married and engaged couples were demonstrating the developmental stage of industry versus inferiority when that generation is characterized as seeking to establish themselves as vital contributors to society as opposed to feeling a sense of inferiority. In addition, the group process principles taught by Yalom, were effective tools in the facilitation of the groups.

The conclusion is that the project again strengthened rather than changed the initial guiding clinical principles. All things considered, the outcomes of this project have demon-

strated and confirmed that the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual as conducted in this project holds promise and encouragement for the possibility of fostering more cordial and supportive connections between the different generations of married and engaged couples in congregations and perhaps beyond.

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APPENDIX A

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual.

Directions: Below is a chart that will support us in assessing your experience as a participant in the Ritual. Kindly fill out the columns by answering the following questions:

K- What are three meaningful facts you already know about marriage?

W- What are three things you would like to learn from the Marriage Sage Circle Ritual?

L- What are 3 major things you learned as a result of participating in the ritual? Would you approach married couples in your church for support? Would you recommend this ritual to others?

K	W	L

APPENDIX B

Ground Rules for Marriage Sage Circle Ritual

1. Members are expected to adhere to confidentiality practices. They will be encouraged and expected to not divulge any part of the proceedings to any individual outside of the groups. They will be led to understand that confidentiality rules ensure a level of trust where individuals can feel safe to share freely, their experiences, thoughts and feelings without fear of the larger congregation or others outside the group hearing bits and pieces of their information out of context.
2. Members are expected to contribute freely while allowing others to contribute. This requires some consciousness on the part of each member as to the level and frequency of their contribution.
3. Members are expected to SHARE their experiences surrounding issues introduced, and not give advice as to what a couple SHOULD try in their individual relationships.
4. All participants are expected to attend all sessions.

APPENDIX C

QUESTIONS WORKSHEET FOR ENGAGED AND NEW MARRIED COUPLES

This worksheet is to assist you in formulating the questions you might want to ask at the culminating session with the mature married couples. You may use the following categories as prompts as you write your questions.

1. Spirituality
2. Communication
3. Conflict resolution
4. Affection and sex
5. Family and friends relationships
6. Finance
7. Egalitarian roles
8. Parenting
9. Personality styles
10. Keeping love alive