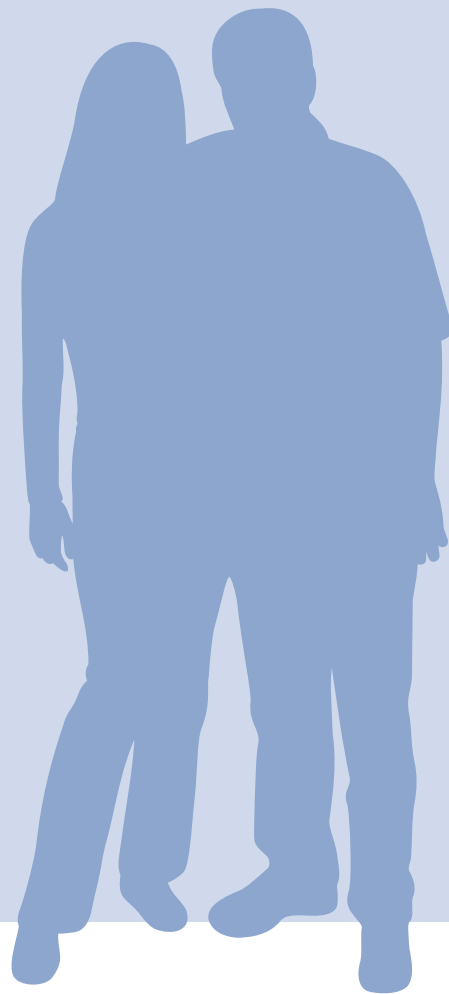


Premarital Counseling and Cohabitation

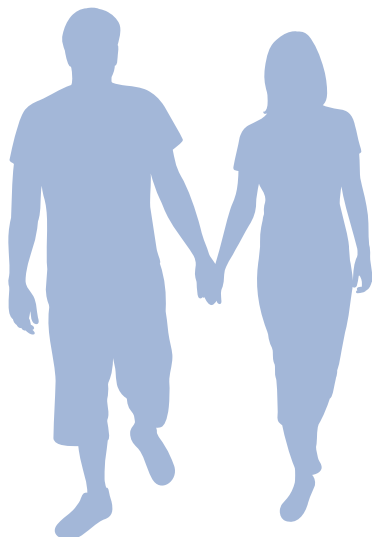


**by the Rev. Dr. Richard W. Marrs
& the Rev. Dr. Kevin Bergmann**

Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support (PALS) is a collaborative effort of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod's Pastoral Education department and LCMS districts to help pastors and their wives in the transition from seminary to congregation. To learn more, visit www.lcms.org/pals.

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Premarital Counseling and Cohabitation

Contents



Session One: Premarital and Marital Counseling.....	4
Session Two: Premarital and Marital Counseling (Continued).....	6
Session Three: Cohabitation Issues.....	8
Session Four: Cohabitation Issues (Continued).....	11
Appendix	13
Quotes	13
Policy Example: Weddings, Cohabitation and Sixth Commandment Issues	14
The Four Gs	16
Bibliography	17
Premarital and Marital Counseling	17
Useful Links	17
Cohabitation and Postmodern Thought	18

Session One: Premarital and Marital Counseling

Marriage in Scripture

- › Created by God from the beginning
- › Genesis 2 (“One flesh”)
- › Mal. 2:16 (God hates divorce)
- › Matt. 5:31–32 (Divorce as adultery)
- › Matt. 19:3–12 (Jesus cites Genesis 2)
- › Mark 10:2–12 (Jesus cites Genesis 2)
- › 1 Corinthians 7 (Directions concerning marriage)
- › Ephesians 5 (“[Submit] to one another Wives, submit to your own husbands Husbands, love your wives.” Cites Genesis 2.)
- › Note: Dr. Joel Biermann and others have noticed that there are no Scripture passages that tell husbands: “Make sure your wife submits to you.” The scriptural teachings are always directed at the person in his or her own vocation. What responsibility does that add for pastors to be sure that a scriptural view of marriage is taught clearly in our congregations?

What do we know?

- › The divorce rates for Christians are much too high, even as high as the general public.
- › *But the anti-Christian groups that happily cite those statistics forget that Christians marry at*

higher rates and have lower rates of cohabitation breakups than in the general public.

- › Empirical evidence indicates that those who have good premarital “counsel” are more likely to persist in marriage.
- › Three states (Louisiana, Arkansas and Arizona) have moved to accept optional “covenant marriages” that require premarital counseling and include more difficult divorce.
- › Couples in distress that are willing to engage in 10 or more good marital counseling sessions increase their likelihood of remaining married.
- › From Dr. Marrs’ personal observations, some couples that divorce eventually reconcile.

Options for Continuing Education in Premarital Counseling

Personality-assessment options:

- Myers-Briggs Type Indicator
- Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis — Used by the Rev. Dr. Bruce Hartung
- Zoe — Popular in LCMS circles, developed by the Rev. Dr. Bryan Salminen
- Prepare/Enrich — A primary tool used for premarital counseling

Study Questions

1. Dr. Marrs notes a number of key Bible verses that form the foundation for our theology about marriage. What are some other Bible verses that you have found important in teaching Christians about marriage?

2. Take a few moments to discuss with each other what you know of your congregation’s history with marriage and divorce (e.g., How prevalent

have divorces been? How did your predecessors teach about marriage, and how did they handle divorce situations? Have key congregational lay leaders been divorced, or were any of the previous pastors? How has this history with divorce had an impact on the congregation?) How did your predecessors use premarital counseling? What do you still need to know about your congregation's history about marriage, divorce and cohabitation?

3. Some Christians, even some pastors, do not think it wise for a couple that has been divorced to consider remarrying. What are your thoughts on those situations?

4. Which, if any, of the personality-assessment options for premarital counseling have you been trained for, or at least experienced firsthand? What has been your assessment of the strengths of Prepare/Enrich, Zoe or one of the others? Did you use it only, or did you supplement it with premarital counsel of your own?

Session Two: Premarital and Marital Counseling (Continued)

Options for Continuing Education in Premarital Counseling (Continued)

Skill-enhancement options:

- › CPREP is a Christianized version of PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) developed by Drs. Scott Stanley and Howard Markham at the University of Denver. It is currently being widely used among military chaplains, DHS and many evangelicals.
- › Stanley and Markham are protégés of John Gottman; his influence has been substantial. Their research leads them to believe that the personality-assessment strategy is limited — simply knowing your spousal differences does not necessarily mean you have the skills to handle these differences.
- › CPREP emphasizes developing various communication and cognitive-behavioral strategies.
- › CPREP research (which is extensive) leads them to believe that we don't know a lot scientifically about what makes great marriages, but we do know empirically what pulls marriages apart — and they try to provide couples with the basic skills necessary to prevent a pulling apart.

What pulls marriages apart?

- › Static factors (e.g., young age, cultural differences, religious differences, personality differences)
Note: Pastors have almost no influence on these static factors, but they can help couples with the next four factors.
- › Escalation — Snowball effect that neither partner realized would occur

- › Invalidation — More than disagreeing; insensitive belittling, putting down others' thoughts, feelings or worth
- › Withdrawal/Avoidance — Ugly dance called Pursuer-Withdrawer
- › Negative Interpretation — The Eighth Commandment (Internal locus of control viewed negatively — “You did that because of the badness of your personality, not the situation.”)

What helps minimize the negative factors?

- › Communication (e.g., Speaker-Listener Technique)
- › Ground rules (e.g., time-out)
Nota Bene: This is NOT the same time-out you give your children!
- › See Scott Stanley's book, *A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage* (2002)
- › Visit www.prepinc.com/Content/CURRICULA/Christian-PREP.htm for materials

Biblical approaches:

- › Some pastors trained by Peacemakers and/or Ambassadors of Reconciliation use the Four Gs and other reconciliation strategies as the core of their premarital and marital counseling. One of the authors blended these with CPREP approaches in the parish. (See Appendix)
- › See also Michael Eschelbach's *Marriage and the Counsel of God* (2007, Wipf and Stock Publishers) for marriage counseling based on a catechetical approach. This may be a very good option for couples you are taking through an adult-instruction class during the premarital counseling.
- › American Association of Christian Counseling

Marriage-enrichment weekends:

- › For couples already married, there is a good amount of research out there to suggest these can be helpful to marriages. But they are primarily for couples that are not in conflict already.

- › Their effectiveness will differ according to the strengths of the presenters (usually not professional counselors). Roman Catholics provide many of these, but Lutheran and Protestant versions can be found. Take your spouse with you to one first and see what you think of the presenter and process.
- › Grace Place Lutheran Wellness Ministries — Founded by Dr. John Eckrich for Lutheran pastors, church workers and their spouses, Grace Place offers retreats in a variety of locations each year.

Couples mentoring:

- › Many pastors and congregations have gathered a group of successfully married couples to serve as mentors for newly married couples. These couples are encouraged to meet together regularly (at least several times a year for more than one year) and to discuss real relationship and spiritual issues when they do. Evangelical counselors Les and Leslie Parrott have written one good book on this topic, but there are others as well.

Study Questions

1. What advantages do you see of skill-enhancement options like CPREP over the personality-assessment options? Do those advantages entice you to seek training in this option?

2. How have you seen the dynamics of Escalation, Invalidation, Withdrawal/Avoidance and Negative Interpretation work against marriages with which you are familiar?

3. Who among your PALS group has experienced at least one marriage-enrichment weekend? Would they recommend the experience to others? Are there local options, even Lutheran ones, in your region? What does your PALS group leader know of these weekends?

4. Have any of your congregations established a couples-mentoring program? What are the pros and cons of developing such a program in your congregation(s)?

5. Has your congregation developed a culture of forgiveness and reconciliation? Do members, especially family members, explicitly ask for and receive forgiveness from one another? (See Ted Kober’s book, *Confession and Forgiveness*, from Concordia Publishing House and Ambassadors of Reconciliation’s Bible study, “Blessed Are the Peacemakers.” These materials also can be used for premarital and marital counseling.)

6. Do you believe that your efforts to teach your congregation about the importance of Christian marriage will actually make a noticeable difference? Why or why not?

Session Three: Cohabitation Issues

Cohabitation is increasing exponentially in our country:

- › Societal changes occurred between 1960 and 2010
 - Sexual revolution/free love of the 1960s
 - Reliable birth control and legalized abortion
 - Rise in the status of women in the workplace
- › In 1960 there were **430,000** cohabiting couples.
- › As of July 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that there were **8,044,000** cohabiting couples.
- › In 50 years, the number of cohabiting couples is 18.7 times higher, while the U.S. population has only increased by 1.7 times in the same time period.
- › According to a Gallup Poll, the rate of cohabitation is likely to continue to increase:
 - 70 percent of all U.S. teens feel cohabitation is acceptable
 - 49 percent of religious teens also feel cohabitation is acceptable
 - The rate of increase of cohabitation is accelerating dramatically
 - 60-80 percent of all couples live together before marriage, and this may be moving to 90 percent

Reasons couples give for cohabiting:

- › Economics/finances
- › Test of compatibility
- › Convenience
- › “Everyone else does it”
- › A means of getting to know a partner
- › Escape from a difficult home life

The real reasons couples cohabit:

1. Easy availability of sex (#1 for men)
2. A step toward marriage (#1 for women)

What does the Bible say about cohabitation?

- › Heb. 13:4
- › Eph. 5:3

Cohabiting couples' beliefs about the Bible:

- › The Bible is God's Word — 36%
- › The Bible is God's Word, as long as it doesn't interfere with our lives — 23%
- › The Bible is not true for us today — 14%
- › Confused about the Bible — 14%
- › Some of the Bible is God's Word — 4.5%
- › Don't know — 4.5%
- › The Bible is outdated — 2%

How Lutheran cohabiters reconcile cohabitation with the Bible:

- › Don't try to reconcile — 30%
- › The Bible doesn't apply to them today — 14%
- › Justify their behavior — 9%
- › God accepts them as they are — 9%
- › The couple's love is more important than anything — 9%
- › No problem with cohabitation — 9%
- › Recognize their sin, repent and marry — 9%
- › Feel future marriage plans make everything OK — 5%
- › Feel cohabitation is marriage already — 2%
- › Feel cohabitation is not a sin — 2%
- › Feel cohabitation is not a serious sin — 2%
- › Reject clergy authority — 2%

Cohabitation among Lutherans — 2010 survey of LCMS pastors (Bergmann, D.Min. Study):

- › Percentage of couples LCMS clergy married who were cohabiting at the start of their ministry — 29.3%
- › Percentage of couples cohabiting in recent years — 57.1%

Consequences of cohabitation for couples:

- › **Break up** prior to marriage
 - Less than half of cohabiting couples ever marry
 - The average cohabiting relationship lasts 1.3 years
- › **Divorce** after marrying
 - Those who do marry get divorced at a rate 50 percent higher than couples that marry without cohabiting first
- › **Abuse within the couple**
 - Aggression is three times as likely, according to a Washington State University study
 - 13 percent hit, shove or throw things at their partner versus 4 percent of married couples, according to a University of Chicago study
 - Women are 10 times more likely to be physically abused, according to the U.S. Justice Department
 - The overall rate for **severe** violence is nearly six times as high, according to the Family Violence Research Program at the University of New Hampshire

Consequences of cohabitation for children:

- › Increased emotional problems
 - Children born to cohabiters have more than five times the risk of experiencing their parents' separation
 - Nearly 40 percent of unmarried fathers had no social involvement with their children when the couple split up, as compared to 18 percent of divorced fathers
 - Psychological stress for children who may see themselves as a source of tension and conflict

- › Huge physical dangers
 - Infant mortality rate is 25-30 percent higher
 - 84 percent of all cases of non-parental child abuse occur in a home where a child lives with a boyfriend who is not the child's father
 - A preschooler living with one biological parent and one stepparent was 40 times more likely to be sexually abused
- › Increased economic hardships
 - Less than 30 percent of unmarried fathers paid any child support when the couple split up, compared to 64 percent of married fathers
- › Poor academic performance
 - Children in families with their mother and her cohabiting partner have lower academic performance, lower initiative and more school problems
- › Other harmful effects
 - Lack of commitment is a poor role model for children
 - Cohabitation undermines parents' moral authority

Lutheran clergy approach to dealing with cohabitation:

- › Very few understand all of the consequences of cohabitation
- › The vast majority — 86 percent — of LCMS pastors still believe that cohabitation is morally wrong and against God's commands in the Bible
- › About an equal amount believe that it is very important to address cohabitation in the church
- › There is very little support from congregational leadership and even from the parents of the cohabiting couples

Study Questions

1. Your generation of pastors will be required to handle issues of cohabitation much more than pastors in the 1950s or even the 1980s. Which of the statistics cited by Dr. Bergmann are, in your opinion, most important to know? In what ways

can you use this non-biblical cultural data to inform your pastoral care in these issues? Do you think that your congregational leaders are aware of how prevalent cohabitation has become? Are they aware of how complicated these issues are for pastors?

2. Men and women often differ in their reasons for cohabiting. Why are these differences important to have in the back of your mind when discussing these sensitive issues with a couple you have found is cohabiting?

3. Cohabiting couples often are not willing to admit that cohabitation is a Sixth Commandment issue since they are “committed to one another and planning to get married.” Dr. Marrs used verses like Heb. 13:4 and Eph. 5:3 to address such issues. What other Bible verses have you found helpful in addressing the importance of marriage prior to living together?

Session Four: Cohabitation Issues (Continued)

How should a new pastor in a parish deal with the issue of cohabitation?

- › Whether you are new to ministry or just new to a particular parish, make sure you put this on your checklist to address right away.
- › Discuss church history on this issue with church leadership, starting with the elders.
- › Determine what the existing policies are, or if there are any.
- › If the policies are good, let them be known publicly.
 - You may need to educate your members.
- › If not or if there aren't any policies in place, work with the elders on the development of a policy.
 - Write in a very pastoral manner.
 - Share the policy with congregational members.
- › It is important not to come across too heavy-handed.
- › Keep Gal. 6:1 in mind.
- › Giving them options to choose from gives them buy-in.
- › John 4 — Jesus didn't condemn the woman but moved her toward repentance.

Statistics on LCMS pastors' approaches to dealing with cohabitation:

- › 49 percent favor a traditional approach using Law/Gospel, confession/absolution
- › 30 percent favor broadening education concerning cohabitation among young people and parents in the congregation
- › 9 percent favor remedies directed toward the clergy

- › 9 percent favor a more confrontational approach with cohabiting couples

Some possible options:

- › Ask the couple to stop cohabiting and move apart for a certain amount of time before the wedding.
- › Suggest an immediate civil ceremony followed later by a blessing ceremony (especially for couples that may already have children together).
- › If finances are truly a concern, offer to help find a couple in the congregation who could house one of them until the wedding.

Study Questions

1. What has been your congregation's history with cohabitation? Have there been church conflicts about these issues? Did your predecessor(s) develop a congregational policy about weddings and cohabitation? If so, how usable is that policy?

2. Attached in the appendix is the policy that Dr. Marrs used in his parish. What do you like about that policy? What changes do you think would work better for your congregation and ministry? What challenges do you see in getting lay leaders in your church, or perhaps even other church professionals, to establish a church policy? Would any members of your congregation be willing to provide low-cost or no-cost housing options to one member of the couple if finances were a real issue in their cohabitation (i.e., will the congregation be helpful in addressing these issues, or only moralistic)?

3. Remembering Gal. 6:1 and Eph. 4:15, how do you want to exhibit both appropriate pastoral gentleness and resolve when discussing these sensitive issues with couples that you hope will want to become/remain active members of your congregation?

4. Have these cohabitation issues been discussed within your circuit? Do neighboring congregations and pastors have similar or different policies about cohabitation? How does this affect your circuit's ability to "walk together?"

Appendix (Quotes)

Martin Luther's Opinion of Sexual Immorality

Many think they can evade marriage by having their fling [auss bubenn] for a time, and then becoming righteous. ... He who intends to lead a chaste life had better begin early, and attain it not with but without fornication, either by the grace of God or through marriage. We see only too well how they make out every day. It might well be called **plunging into immorality** rather than growing to maturity. ("The Estate of Marriage," 1522, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 45 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962], p. 44.)

LCMS President Matthew C. Harrison's Opinion on Cohabitation

Many individuals (even Christians) do not see anything wrong with living together and having sexual relations without marriage. **But God says that it is a sin. Yes, Christians sin. But all Christians should remember that as they sin willfully and without repentance, they will eventually drive Christ from their hearts.** Indeed, sin becomes dominant rather than Christ. (The Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison, *Second Thoughts About Living Together*, 16.)

What caused the change in attitude?

How did the West decline from its triumphal march to its present sickness? ... The mistake must be at the root, at the very basis of human thinking in the past centuries ... the proclaimed and enforced autonomy of man from any higher force above him. It could also be called anthropocentricity, **with man seen as the center of everything that exists ... we turned our backs upon the Spirit and embraced all that is material** with excessive and unwarranted zeal."
—Alexandr Solzhenitzyn

Appendix (Policy Example)

Weddings, Cohabitation and Sixth Commandment Issues at Immanuel

As Christians we spend our lives living in faith, trusting God's Word and promises in Christ Jesus, doing our best to follow His teachings. We are called to be a holy people, set apart, special. Eph. 5:3 says, **“But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.”** We live in a culture now that shamelessly promotes sexual immorality in the media, and even among many Christians the Sixth Commandment is ignored and treated as “old-fashioned.” But God has given us a great gift of marriage and sexuality within marriage. He wants us to reserve sexual intercourse for the marriage partner alone. Heb. 13:4 says, “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”

USA Today reported in July 2001 that more than 5 million unmarried American couples now live together, and between 50-60 percent of new marriages now involve couples that lived together first. Many of these couples say they want to live together first to get to know their “partner” and, therefore, think they can avoid divorce in the future. However, other research shows that couples that choose to live together first are actually about 50 percent more likely to divorce than those couples that did not live together first. Some 75 percent of all couples that live together first eventually divorce.

While we, the church, can do little to influence this societal tendency of cohabitation among unbelievers, how should we react when couples professing the Christian faith choose to cohabit without the sanctity of marriage? How do we, the community of believers, lovingly but resolutely teach those who are publicly breaking the Sixth Commandment and encourage them to repent of this sin? Gal. 6:1 says, **“Brothers, if anyone**

is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”

Where this dilemma most frequently impacts churches, pastors and elders who are struggling to be faithful is when a publicly cohabiting couple — members or who want to be members — decides they want to have a church wedding. How do we respond in faith? Do we simply look the other way and say, “Oh, we're happy that you're choosing to get married now”? If we do this, we risk inadvertently teaching other couples and young people that we condone cohabiting. We who are church leaders do not want to have to stand before our Lord on Judgment Day knowing that we have publicly taught that living together prior to marriage is acceptable. By the same token, we do not want to push away couples that are in need of the Gospel and God's Word.

To that end, we (pastor and elders) have been working with an unpublished policy about cohabiting couples that we would like to make more widely known among the congregation. We request your prayers, advice and support in fine-tuning this policy. We also request that you communicate it to Christian couples that might be considering cohabiting. It is a problem not just for Immanuel, but also for all Bible-believing congregations in our land. Weddings at Immanuel are public worship services, and we always want our public worship services to be God-pleasing.

This wedding policy is two-fold. First, if an engaged, cohabiting couple approaches pastor about a church wedding, he counsels them about the sanctity of marriage and the awkwardness for the church to appear to condone cohabitation in a public worship service. They are told that there are two options in our current policy. First, they can choose to stop cohabiting and communicate to friends and family members that they now understand that their cohabitation, while perhaps well-intentioned in their minds, was not according to God's plan for husband and wife. Once they have stopped cohabiting, plans can be made and dates set for a wedding. If the couple finds it an extreme hardship to cease cohabiting

(e.g., because of child-care arrangements), they would have the option of first having a civil wedding ceremony to become legally and publicly married, but then have a church ceremony called “A Blessing of a Civil Ceremony” at an agreed upon later date. This blessing ceremony can be just as wonderful and public a gathering as a wedding, but the participants and guests will know that the couple is already legally married, not a cohabiting couple. The couple also is asked to communicate to close friends and family members, especially younger ones, that they understand that their previous cohabitation was not according to God’s plan for husband and wife.

While we all sin in word and deed and are constantly in need of our Lord’s grace and forgiveness, the church has long differentiated between private (secret) sin and public (or manifest) sin. While private sin is serious and harmful to our personal spiritual lives, public sin tempts others to follow by example. Therefore, we who are church leaders have a more public responsibility to the community of believers in faithfully dealing with public sin like cohabitation, divorce, heresy, murder, manifest stealing and so on.

Again, we who are publicly responsible for the church’s public teaching, the pastor and elders, are striving to be faithful to our Lord’s Word with a policy like this. We want to publicly promote the Sixth Commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,” while not setting up restrictions that go beyond God’s Word. Since it is a “policy,” it is open to change and exceptions. We are striving to be faithful to Him in what we do. If you have any questions about this policy, please speak with pastor or one of the elders or come to an elders’ meeting to discuss it with us. Elders meet on the first Thursday of each month at 7:30 p.m.

Policy of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Junction City, Kan., and the Rev. Dr. Rick Marrs (now at Concordia Seminary), 2002-06.

This is an example policy, not one endorsed by Concordia Seminary or the LCMS.

Appendix (The Four Gs)

In his book, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, Ken Sande summarizes what God teaches about resolving conflict in four principles, which Ken refers to as “The Four Gs”:

- Glorify God — How can I please and honor God in this situation, and how can I give witness to what He has done for me through Christ? (1 Cor. 10:31–11:1)
- Get the log out of your eye — How have I contributed to this conflict and what do I need to do to resolve it? (Matt. 7:5)
- Gently restore — How can I help others to understand how they have contributed to this conflict? (Gal. 6:1)
- Go and be reconciled — How can I demonstrate forgiveness and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict? (Matt. 5:21)

For more information, see either Ken Sande’s book referenced above and in the bibliography or the Ambassadors of Reconciliation website at: <http://www.hisaor.org/web-content/ConflictHelp.html>.

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Bibliography: Useful Links

www.prepinc.com/Content/CURRICULA/Christian-PREP.htm for materials

www.prepare-enrich.com

www.myersbriggs.org

www.tjta.com/asp/index.asp

www.zoescore.com/bp/home

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