



# The Importance of Faith and Religion in Delivering Marriage Education Services to Hispanic Couples





## **The Importance of Faith and Religion in Delivering Marriage Education Services to Hispanic Couples**

Marriages and families within the Hispanic community are strengthened as well as challenged by a myriad of arenas. This memo will address an area that was repeatedly raised by Hispanic researchers in national forums convened by the Administration for Children and Families as impacting how marriage education services are delivered to Hispanic couples— the area of religion and faith.

The findings and recommendations in this memo are drawn from discussions at the Supporting Healthy Marriage and Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative Joint Research Meeting held on September 12-13, 2005 in Washington, DC; a research meeting held in conjunction with the Hispanic Healthy Marriage National Conference, May 11, 2006, in San Antonio, Texas; and a research meeting held in conjunction with a conference sponsored by the Center for Latino Family Research on September 15-16, 2006 in St. Louis, Missouri. The goals of these national research meetings were to discuss research findings and to identify the need for additional research that is important to advancing the field of marriage education services for Hispanic couples.

This memo is not intended to be a complete discussion of this complex issue, but rather a summary of the discussions held among researchers that focus on the Hispanic/Latino<sup>1</sup> family and is for discussion purposes only.

### *Introduction*

Religious institutions play an important role in Latino family life. They provide a context and rationale for marriage, contribute to family rituals, and offer social support in Hispanic communities. This memo explores how religion, primarily Protestantism and Catholicism, affect Hispanic couples' attitudes toward marriage.

### **What Do We Know?**

The Hispanic population in the United States is a broad and diverse group with roots in the Caribbean, Spain, Mexico, and throughout Central and South America. Although diverse, a common cultural thread among these populations and cultures is religion. Religious institutions provide guidance in social dynamics and couple relationships. This is evidenced by high commitment to marriage among Hispanic families, as measured by higher marriage and lower cohabitation rates. In 1995, 61 percent of Hispanic women age 15-44 had been married at some point in their lives, compared with 43 percent of African American women. Furthermore, in that same year, 73 percent of Hispanic women had never cohabitated, compared with 58 percent of Caucasian women (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001). Religious affiliation is an indicator of social support systems, family values, and positive behavior (such as commitment in marriage). Spirituality, faith and religious practices were reported more frequently for Latinos than other ethnic groups and are positively related to well-being (La Hoz et al, 2005). One study

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Hispanic and Latino will be used interchangeably throughout this document.





found that 94 percent of Latino immigrants in the U.S. self-identified as having a religious affiliation compared with 81 percent of the general population (Skogrand et al, 2006). Such a high percentage of religious affiliation reported by Hispanics may indicate that religious institutions serve as a natural setting for marriage education service delivery.

Religious entities provide social support networks for Hispanic couples which are essential to recent immigrants and individuals who are separated from their immediate and extended family. Hispanic couples trust the church to provide counsel and support (La Hoz et al, 2005). These findings further support the opportunity to integrate marriage education services into religious settings. Trusted religious leaders in the community would also be a likely vehicle for reaching Hispanic couples.

Regardless of whether a couple is catholic or protestant, religion and faith promote values that sustain marriage practices and help form rituals that affect marital satisfaction. Furthermore, research indicates that religious beliefs are positively related to marital satisfaction in Latino marriages (La Hoz et al, 2005). This may help explain the high marriage rate among Hispanic couples in the United States. More than one-third (35 percent) of poor, married couples are Hispanic (Fein, 2004). In other words, Hispanic couples' religious involvement may be related to both encouraging and strengthening marriage.

The traditional hierarchy of religious institutions as found, for example, in Catholicism may have implications for family and couple dynamics (Skogrand et al, 2006). In Catholicism, communication with God involves following a series of steps: priest, bishop, etc. before reaching God. This may be reflected culturally by contemporary Mexicans who tend to accept a traditional (paternalistic) hierarchy as it relates to religion and relationships (Díaz-Loving). This finding may indicate a willingness on the part of some Latinos to trust in a church-based authority to deliver marriage education.

Despite positive research related to religious involvement, differences emerge when religious affiliation or beliefs are not shared in the couple relationship and when gender differences exist. These factors have been found to influence couple dynamics. For example,

- Shared religious affiliation between the father and mother increases the likelihood of the couple being married at the time of their child's birth (Hernández).
- Researchers have identified gender differences related to religious participation among Hispanic couples. Latino men, for example, who are involved in a church, were less likely to engage in alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and adultery. For certain couples, however, research indicates that a woman's religious involvement may not contribute to harmonious marriage relationships if her husband is not also religiously involved (Hernández).
- Religious activity and affiliation have almost no influence on whether mothers marry shortly after a non-marital birth. Only paternal religious attendance is significantly associated with a post-birth transition to marriage. Couples in which the father attends church several times per month are more likely to marry after a non-marital birth compared with couples in which fathers attend church infrequently or not at all.
- Married mothers are more likely to report that the father is supportive when both parents are regular churchgoers (Hernández). However, for unmarried mothers, there is no correlation between religious affiliation or attendance and a positive assessment of their partners' supportiveness. Religious





attendance is not linked to an increased likelihood that a married or unmarried father will report his partner as supportive.

According to research, in a study of 25 Latino couples who self-identified as having strong marriages, the three components of strong marriages in Latino culture are: children, communication and religion (Skogrand et al, 2006). This research highlights the role religion plays in teaching couples how to positively interact as husband and wife. It also illustrates how religion reinforces positive messages about commitment and encourages respect and other virtues that may help strengthen marriage. Skogrand also found that religion was an integral part of Hispanic couples' daily lives. This influences how they parent and how they interact in their marriages (Skogrand et al, 2006).

The findings by Skogrand et al are not unlike other findings. Nationally-representative samples of American adults indicate the normative and social support that religious institutions provide to marriage. This translates into higher rates of marriage, lower rates of non-marital childbearing, and higher-quality marriages for adults who attend religious services at least several times a month. These findings may explain the correlation between religious involvement and entry into marriage among Hispanics. However, it should be noted that marriage rates among Hispanics vary by country of origin and by how recently a couple's or individual's immigration occurred.

Religious beliefs can be both oppressive and protective for Latinos. For example, couples in a relationship consisting of a conservatively religious male and a less religious female tend to have increased domestic violence. However, less domestic violence is experienced when both partners are religious. Furthermore, religious teachings on fidelity, forgiveness, sacrifice, and social support contributed to stronger marriages among those who attended church (Hernández). Religion and spirituality can also sustain couples during difficult times as they learn to depend on God for support.

Hispanic couples in the U.S. may have more access to premarital preparation and marriage supports because of their active participation in religious activities. Many churches require premarital preparation before marriage, and many offer marriage ministries and other services for couples. Although couples may participate in premarital programs offered through their church, participation requirements vary depending on the religion. Furthermore, the content of the curriculum and other program services may be offered in a variety of forms. Even couples that have participated in a marriage education program at their church may need additional services if the program offered did not meet their needs. The benefit for couples who actively participate in a religious setting, which offers marital programs, normalizes such activities which may increase the likelihood that couples would be open to attending marriage education services.

Research has found that a majority of married and unmarried parents indicated they would be willing to attend a relationship program sponsored by a church or other religious institution (Hernández). Twenty-nine percent of married fathers and 26 percent of unmarried fathers, along with 24 percent of married and unmarried women, stated they would be very likely to participate in this type of program (Hernández).





### **What Do We Still Need to Know?**

A research question to be addressed is how to distinguish between the religious values that support marriage and encourage a high marriage rate among recent immigrants and the lack of marriage among U.S.-born Hispanics. Understanding how acculturation and religion work together (or against one another) to support marriage in the United States is important to curriculum development.

Another area for further study regarding religious involvement is related to expectations in the couple relationship. Men married to religious women are less likely to report that their wives are supportive, compared to husbands married to secular Latinas. More research is needed to determine if religious practice reflects a tendency among Christian wives to expect more of their husbands in terms of the marital relationship and general behavior.

There are also many research questions related to the differences between various sub- groups of Hispanics. Research may want to differentiate Latino’s attitudes related to religion by country of origin, where couples reside in the U.S., and different faiths/denominations. For example, the Skogrand et al study was replicated in Kansas and had slightly different outcomes. In the Kansas study, religion was not mentioned as one of the most important components of a strong marriage (Skogrand).

Although a strong association appears to exist between Hispanic couples and religious organizations, there is a gap in knowledge about the quality of the marriage enhancement and marriage preparation services religious entities provide to Hispanic couples. Although many marriage education curricula are available in Spanish, they may also require specific cultural adaptations in order to effectively reach Hispanic couples. Many religious institutions may not have Spanish-speaking staff or volunteers to deliver services making it difficult to express concepts in ways that resonate with couples whose first language is Spanish. If Spanish-speaking marriage educators are available, these individuals may not share a similar cultural background with their audience. This makes conveying curricula content in a meaningful and relevant way even more challenging. An in-depth assessment of the availability of marriage education services in Spanish and qualified leaders to deliver services could indicate the need for additional training within religious settings.

Further, research is needed on how faith-based marriage education services help couples overcome the challenges experienced by lower-income and immigrant couples in the Hispanic community. Issues such as acculturation, language barriers, long periods of separation due to immigration issues, and the stress of the immigration process itself may not be addressed in a religious setting. Nonetheless, these issues may be major influences on the success of the couple relationship. These challenges can strain couple relationships, and research is needed to determine how these social barriers can be addressed in the context of marriage and relationship education in a religious setting.

### **What Should We Do With What We Know?**

Hispanics are a diverse population, yet the widespread faith and confidence in religious institutions provides a unique opportunity for service delivery. Practitioners can build on these cultural strengths by





partnering with religious leaders and spiritual organizations to deliver services. Utilizing a trusted entity in the community as a service provider or referral source is a promising means for overcoming a key service delivery challenge: couple recruitment.

Although religious institutions may be a trusted site in the community for service delivery and/or referral, it may be challenging to ensure that these programs are comprehensive. Religious leaders may need to be connected to and receive training on community-based marriage education programs. Additional training may be needed on how to provide follow-up services or referrals for couples in their congregation. A trusting relationship may need to be established between the faith community and existing service providers. Practitioners can help nurture these relationships by helping religious institutions understand that marriage education programs provided outside the church setting complement, rather than replace, what a church offers.

Comprehensive marital enrichment programs offered in faith communities will most likely occur when faith leaders work closely with other community-based programs. These programs may be in a position to provide religious institutions with resources and trainings related to research based marriage enrichment programs and a participant's right to maintain his/her own religious beliefs. Informed faith communities can play an important role in making appropriate referrals for couples, providing additional support, recognizing domestic violence, and helping couples access additional social services when needed. It is equally important for community-based organizations to reach out to the faith community to help inform their recruitment practices. Faith leaders have an extensive history of providing effective outreach to the Hispanic community in relation to marriage programs. Lessons learned from faith leaders on outreach practices may help inform community-based organizations and leaders in the healthy marriage movement.

Many Hispanic couples are married in a church and therefore have increased access to premarital preparation. However, these services may not meet the needs of less educated, low-income families. Demographic information on Hispanic couples highlights some issues that can be challenging for religious-based services. Married Hispanic couples are often young, have young children, limited financial resources, and limited educational attainment.

Among adults over age 25, only 52 percent of Hispanics have a high school education, compared to 84 percent of Whites (U.S. Census Bureau). Many marriage education curricula utilize workbooks, written materials, and resources which may not reach this target population. Considerations should be made to ensure that couples' participation in a marriage education program is not limited due to low literacy and education levels. These considerations should be made regardless of whether the marriage education is offered to Hispanic couples in Spanish or English.

Equally challenging is how to effectively incorporate native/indigenous practices and/or faith and beliefs into marriage education curricula. These are cultural strengths that may be incorporated as foundational material for couples. Many secular marriage programs include these concepts in an abstract way. However, developing strategies that discuss values, spirituality and religion in a concrete way without proselytizing may be difficult.

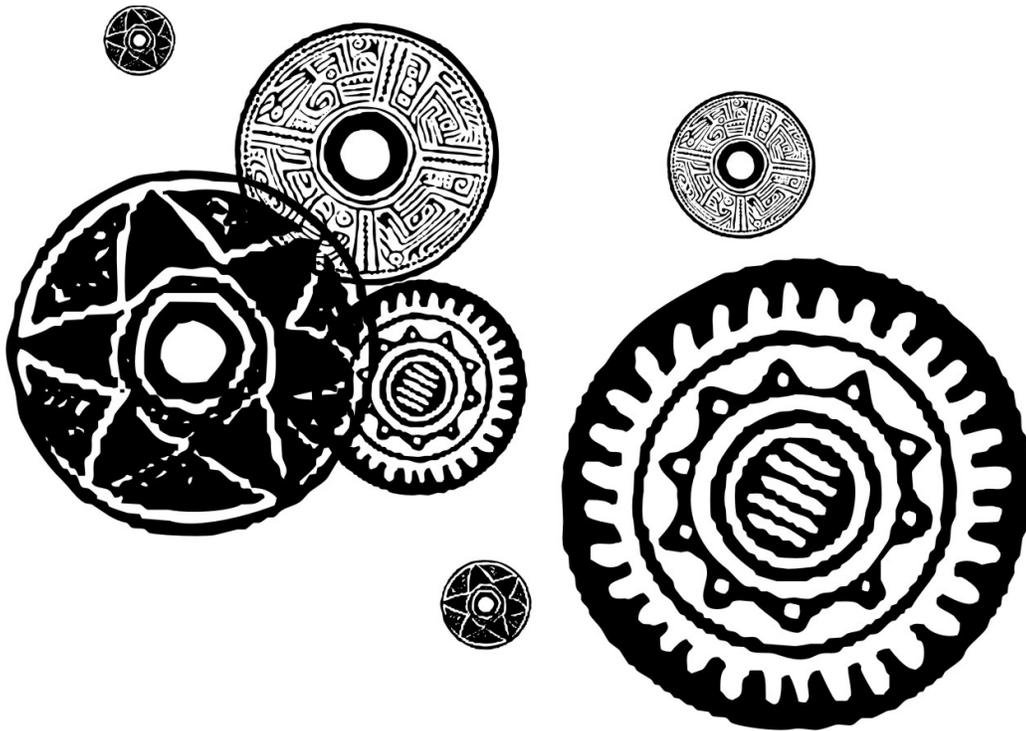




### Conclusion

Faith, spirituality and religion are unifying cultural values in the Hispanic community. Research indicates that Hispanic couples value marriage and are likely to be affiliated with a religious organization in the U.S. These social norms indicate an opportunity to deliver marriage education through faith-based service providers.

Religious organizations offer a natural setting for marriage education service delivery and community-based leadership which may encourage participation in marriage education services. However, these organizations may not be the best equipped to help Hispanic couples. Religious organizations may be limited in their access to qualified bilingual or Spanish-speaking providers. They may also have limited knowledge of community resources available to help couples manage relationship stressors such as unemployment, housing, and lack of education. There is still a need for further education and training specifically for the religious community to provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to assist couples in obtaining quality marriage education services.





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