Clergy Skills in Family-Planning Education and Counseling

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Introduction

During the decade 1962-1971, the proportion of married seminary students who planned to contribute actively to family-planning counseling resources in American communities rose from six out of 10 to eight out of 10. During that same period, however, follow-up data indicate that the actual participation level in premarital birth-control counseling by clergymen increased only half as much as expected from 1962 data. The evidence offered below suggests that this gap is in part a result of a lack of counseling preparation: recently graduated American clergymen who plan to offer premarital family-planning counseling are as poorly prepared to do so as were their predecessors 10 years ago, due to a continuing lack of adequate training in this area provided by the seminaries.

Methodology

Ten-year comparative data on family-planning attitudes and experiences of seminarians who will do marital and premarital counseling have been collected for the first time.

In 1962, a study of the attitudes of married seminary students toward birth-control and family-planning counseling was conducted in cooperation with 23 members of the American Association of Theological Schools.¹ The study reported here was conducted in 1971 as a 10-year follow-up to the earlier research.

The 1971 study was conducted among a subsample of 10 of the 23 seminaries participating in the study of 1962. Both the original and follow-up samples are representative of the 120+ seminaries in the American Association of Theological Schools. Denominations were grouped into three orientations along the theological continuum with subsamples of each chosen for inclusion in the study: 1) Conservatives and Baptists, 2) Methodists, and 3) Lutherans and Episcopalians.

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Baptist and Conservative seminaries were selected to obtain a fundamentalist type of theological orientation. The primary sampling effort for both years focused on Methodist seminary students for two reasons: 1) the Methodist Church is Protestantism's largest and most widely extended denomination (its seminaries are located in all the major geographical and cultural subregions of the United States), and 2) it is broadly representative of American middle-class Protestant churches. Lutheran and Episcopal seminaries were chosen as representative of the European ecclesia tradition in America.

Ten seminaries—five Methodist, three Conservative-Baptist, and two Lutheran-Episcopalian—were selected for the follow-up study. A 70-item pretested, precoded, and printed questionnaire, identical to that used in 1962, was mailed to 40 couples in each of the 10 seminaries. The sample was constructed so as to give every married couple in all 10 seminaries an equal chance of being selected for the study. A response rate of 70% was achieved. Because religious affiliation was not always the same as seminary affiliation, students were grouped for comparisons by reported religion rather than by seminary. Of the 270 student responses included in the data below, 107 were Methodists, 73 Conservative-Baptists, and 85 Lutheran-Episcopalians.

The 1962 and 1971 Methodist seminary students are compared on their family-planning attitudes and practices, especially as related to their plans for counseling. Data also are presented for the comparison groups where they differ significantly from the Methodists.

Findings

Although more and more seminary students intend to contribute significantly to the availability of marriage and family-planning counsel in the communities they serve, data indicate that many are not following through by putting their plans into practice.

The 1962 study found that attitudes of seminary students on family-planning counseling differed radically from the practices of the ministers who had married them; only 16% of the Methodist students had received helpful birth-control counsel from their ministers, but 60% planned to offer it to their congregations (see Figure 1). By 1971, 76% planned to offer it.

If in each year since 1962, more than half the Methodists going into the ministry had followed their inclinations and offered birth-control help to every couple that they married within their congregations, the percentage of 1971 seminary students who had received such help perhaps should have increased by as much as 12%. The percentage did increase, but not as much as was predicted; over the 10-year period, the number of Methodists who said they had received helpful birth-control counsel from their ministers increased from 16% to 22%.

Although there is at least some evidence of follow-through for Methodist students, no evidence of increased birth-control counseling was found for the