



Christian Family Education Model for Couples Facing Marital Crisis

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Abstract:

Marital crisis can affect emotional well-being, identity, parenting, social relationships, economic conditions, and spiritual life. For Christian couples, it may also raise questions of faith, meaning, and belonging within the church. This article formulates a Christian family education model for couples facing marital crisis through a descriptive-analytical literature review integrating crisis intervention, family systems, pastoral care, spirituality, mental health, and divorce studies. Relevant literature was identified from selected academic databases and books based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The findings suggest that family education should go beyond teaching marital ideals by strengthening couples' capacities to understand crisis, regulate emotions, communicate safely, protect children, develop adaptive coping, reconstruct relationships, and integrate faith into recovery. The proposed model includes assessment, safety, stabilization, exploration, meaning reconstruction, coping strengthening, relationship reconstruction, spiritual integration, and recovery. It also emphasizes child well-being, professional referral when necessary, and the church's role as a supportive community. Further empirical testing is needed across diverse Christian family contexts.

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Introduction (مقدمة)

Family is one of the primary environments in which people experience love, acceptance, safety, identity formation, and personality development. The husband-wife relationship is an important foundation of family life. When a marriage becomes distressed, the consequences are not limited to the relationship between two adults; they may also affect children, extended family, social networks, economic conditions, and spiritual life. Research on marital conflict and divorce indicates that family processes surrounding separation, particularly persistent interparental conflict, can be important for children's adjustment (Kelly, 2000; Lansford, 2009).

Marital crisis may be preceded by prolonged conflict, tension, disappointment, infidelity, economic problems, differences in values, domestic violence, or communication difficulties. In some situations, people facing crisis experience pressure that exceeds their usual coping resources. Difficult divorce is particularly challenging because it can involve conflict, accusations, uncertainty about the future, and changes in family structure (Lebow, 2018). Crisis intervention literature likewise emphasizes the importance of restoring safety and basic functioning before expecting individuals or couples to engage in deeper reflection or problem solving (James & Gilliland, 2017; Slaikeu, 1990). These perspectives indicate that marital crisis requires a staged response in which immediate safety and stabilization precede relational reconstruction.

Marital crisis also needs to be understood within a mental-health framework. The World Health Organization defines mental health in terms of well-being and the capacity to cope with the stresses of life, work, and participation in community. Mental health is influenced by individual, family, community, and environmental conditions (World Health Organization, 2025). Accordingly, marital crisis should not be treated only as a private relational disagreement but as a condition that may influence emotional functioning, daily participation, family relationships, and broader psychosocial well-being.

The impact of marital crisis is also experienced by children. The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that children and parents may experience emotional stress before, during, and after divorce, and children's responses vary according to developmental stage and family circumstances (Cohen & Weitzman, 2016). Reviews further show that interparental conflict, parenting processes, and post-divorce family relationships are important pathways through which family transitions influence child adjustment (Kelly, 2000; van Dijk et al., 2020). Children therefore need protection from destructive parental conflict and should not be placed in the roles of messengers, mediators, emotional allies, or decision makers between parents. This means that any model of marital-crisis accompaniment should address not only the couple relationship but also parental responsibility and child well-being.

Within Christian life, marital crisis may also develop into spiritual crisis. Individuals may question whether God still loves them, whether the crisis represents personal or moral failure, whether reconciliation is still possible, or how faith can be maintained when marriage becomes unstable. These questions show that marital crisis is multidimensional, involving emotional, psychological, social, relational, economic, family, and spiritual dimensions. Religious coping can be a resource in stressful circumstances, but its effects are not uniformly positive; positive and negative forms of religious coping can be associated with different psychological outcomes (Pargament, 1997; Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). Therefore, spirituality needs to be integrated carefully into crisis accompaniment rather than being treated simply as a source of moral instruction.

Pastoral counseling provides an important foundation for responding to these conditions. Classical pastoral-care perspectives emphasize listening to suffering, understanding the person's life context, supporting crisis management, and creating space for spiritual recovery (Clinebell, 1984; Gerkin, 1997; Hiltner, 1958). These approaches are valuable because they position pastoral care as accompaniment rather than mere judgment. However, pastoral counseling is commonly centered on the helping relationship between caregiver and counselee, while marital crisis often requires a broader educational and family-oriented framework that also develops practical capacities in emotional regulation, communication, parenting, coping, decision making, and relationship reconstruction.

Christian family education offers another relevant perspective because it addresses the formation of values, relationships, responsibilities, and family life. However, family education is often oriented toward preparation, enrichment, or the transmission of ideals concerning marriage and family life. Such an orientation is important but may be insufficient when couples are already experiencing acute or prolonged crisis. In crisis situations, couples may need more than knowledge about ideal marital relationships; they may need structured support to recognize the nature of the crisis, restore safety, regulate emotions, understand relational patterns, protect children, strengthen coping resources, reconstruct meaning, and determine realistic steps toward recovery.

This distinction reveals the central research gap addressed in this article. Existing crisis-intervention literature provides principles for safety and stabilization (James & Gilliland, 2017; Slaikeu, 1990), pastoral-care literature emphasizes compassionate and spiritually sensitive accompaniment (Clinebell, 1984; Gerkin, 1997; Hiltner, 1958), religious-coping literature explains the complex role of spirituality during distress (Pargament, 1997; Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005), and divorce and family research highlights the importance of interparental conflict, parenting, and child adjustment (Kelly, 2000; Cohen & Weitzman, 2016; van Dijk et al., 2020). However, these perspectives are generally discussed within their respective disciplinary frameworks. A clearer need remains for a Christian family education framework that integrates these dimensions into a single staged model specifically designed for couples facing marital crisis.

The proposed model therefore differs from conventional pastoral counseling and general family education in both scope and structure. It does not position pastoral care merely as individual or couple counseling, nor does it limit family education to the transmission of Christian marital values. Instead, it conceptualizes marital-crisis accompaniment as a structured educational and pastoral process that includes assessment, safety, stabilization, exploration, meaning reconstruction, coping strengthening, relationship reconstruction, spiritual integration, and recovery. In this model, Christian family education functions as a capacity-building process in which couples are supported to understand crisis, regulate emotions, communicate more safely, protect children, identify healthier coping strategies, reconstruct relational patterns, and integrate faith into recovery.

A further distinction lies in the model's attention to professional boundaries and referral. Marital crisis may involve psychological distress, psychiatric symptoms, domestic violence, legal conflict, or other conditions that exceed the competence of pastoral caregivers. For this reason, Christian accompaniment should not be understood as a substitute for clinical, psychiatric, legal, or safety-related intervention. The church is instead positioned as a supportive community that combines compassion, accountability, spiritual accompaniment, and referral to appropriate professional services when needed. This approach is consistent with the view that community-based mental-health support should respect dignity, rights, safety, and access to appropriate care (World Health Organization, 2025).

Accordingly, the contribution of this article lies in synthesizing crisis intervention, mental health, pastoral care, spirituality, family processes, and divorce literature into a Christian family education model specifically oriented toward marital crisis. Its novelty does not lie in proposing a new form of pastoral counseling, but in integrating educational, relational, spiritual, child-protection, safety, and referral dimensions within one staged framework for crisis accompaniment. The model is intended to help churches and family educators move from predominantly normative teaching about marriage toward a more

structured, responsive, and recovery-oriented approach to couples experiencing marital crisis.

This article therefore aims to formulate a Christian family education model for couples facing marital crisis through a synthesis of literature on crisis intervention, mental health, pastoral counseling, spirituality, family systems, and divorce. The proposed model is conceptual and is intended as a framework for education and pastoral accompaniment rather than as a substitute for clinical or legal intervention.



Method (منهج)

This study employed library research with a descriptive-analytical approach. Literature review was used to develop a conceptual understanding of marital crisis, divorce, family psychology, pastoral counseling, spirituality, mental health, and family systems. The approach is consistent with conceptual model building in which relevant theoretical perspectives are compared and synthesized rather than tested statistically.

The sources consisted of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, professional publications, institutional sources, and the Bible. The literature was analyzed by identifying key concepts, comparing the perspectives of major authors, and synthesizing theories relevant to Christian family education for couples experiencing marital crisis. Particular attention was given to crisis intervention, child adjustment, family systems, couple interventions, religious coping, pastoral care, and the boundaries between pastoral and professional services.

This approach was selected because the purpose of the study was to develop a conceptual family-education model rather than to test statistical relationships among variables. The resulting model is therefore a conceptual synthesis grounded in the literature reviewed. The model should be understood as a framework that can guide future empirical research, program development, and contextual adaptation in Christian family settings.



Result (نتائج) and Discussion (مناقشة)

1. Marital Crisis as the Context of Christian Family Education

Crisis occurs when individuals face circumstances that disrupt their usual balance and exceed the coping resources they normally use. Under such conditions, people may experience confusion, anxiety, loss of control, and difficulty making decisions. Crisis intervention therefore prioritizes stabilization, safety, and restoration of functioning before more complex meaning-making work (James & Gilliland, 2017; Slaikeu, 1990).

Marital crisis can change multiple dimensions of personal and family life, including residence, economic conditions, social status, marital roles, relationships with extended family, parenting patterns, and spiritual life. Lebow (2018) describes difficult divorce as a condition requiring attention to both individual and systemic processes; intervention should address individual distress while also supporting family transition toward a new relational structure. Contemporary couple-intervention literature similarly indicates that structured interventions can improve relationship and individual outcomes for distressed couples, although effects vary across contexts and approaches (Bradbury & Bodenmann, 2020; Roddy et al., 2020).

On this basis, Christian family education should help couples understand that crisis is not simply a question of who is right or wrong. Education should increase their ability to

identify problems, understand the effects of crisis, communicate safely, protect family members, and develop healthier relational patterns. The purpose is not to force reconciliation but to support responsible decision making and constructive adaptation.

2. Psychological, Identity, and Relational Dimensions

Marital crisis can produce sadness, anger, disappointment, anxiety, guilt, shame, loneliness, and fear about the future. These responses do not necessarily appear in a fixed sequence. Individuals differ in background, personality, marital history, social support, and coping resources. Relationship distress may also interact with psychological difficulties such as depression, which supports the importance of understanding relational and individual processes together (Wilde & Dozois, 2019).

Christian family education should provide space for couples to recognize and express emotions. Emotional validation is important because sadness, anger, fear, or disappointment in a situation of loss do not automatically indicate weakness. The initial goal of accompaniment is not to force couples to solve every problem immediately but to help them regain sufficient functioning for everyday life. Couple-therapy research suggests that structured relational interventions can produce meaningful improvements for many distressed couples, while also underscoring the importance of context and treatment fit (Bradbury & Bodenmann, 2020; Roddy et al., 2020).

Marriage can also become part of a person's identity. When the marital relationship enters crisis, individuals may question who they are, whether they have failed, how others view them, and whether they still have a future. Family education should help couples distinguish the experience of crisis from their inherent human worth. A marital crisis is a life experience, but it does not automatically define the whole identity of a person.

3. Children as a Central Part of Family Education

Children are central to family education when a marriage is in crisis. The American Academy of Pediatrics emphasizes that divorce is a process rather than a single event, and children's responses vary with development and family circumstances (Cohen & Weitzman, 2016). Research reviews likewise indicate that children's adjustment is shaped not only by divorce itself but also by interparental conflict, parenting quality, economic stress, and the quality of relationships after separation (Amato, 1994; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Lansford, 2009).

Family education should help parents pay attention to at least the following conditions: (1) how the child understands the marital crisis; (2) the child's relationship with both father and mother; (3) whether the child witnesses parental conflict; (4) whether the child feels responsible for the crisis; (5) behavioral changes; (6) sleep or learning difficulties; (7) withdrawal; and (8) the child's social support.

Children should be given opportunities to express their feelings without being pressured to choose sides. Parents should also recognize that children's emotional needs are a major consideration in family decision making after a crisis. Meta-analytic evidence shows that interparental conflict and parenting processes are associated with child adjustment, including through mechanisms such as parental hostility, support, and role diffusion (van Dijk et al., 2020). The parental alliance after divorce is therefore an important target for family education (Whiteside, 1998).

4. Faith Education and Spiritual Crisis

For Christians, marriage has a spiritual dimension. When marriage enters crisis, individuals may experience a crisis of faith. A person may feel that God has abandoned or punished them or that they are no longer worthy of belonging to the church community. Such experiences should be approached with sensitivity rather than immediate moral judgment.

Christian family education should provide space for couples to express anger, disappointment, confusion, and questions about God. Pastoral responses should not automatically close these questions by demanding stronger faith or by asserting that every suffering has a simple divine purpose. Such responses may leave suffering unrecognized. Instead, couples can be supported in slowly exploring their faith experience. Psalm 34:18 can provide a pastoral image of God's nearness to the brokenhearted. Hope in this context does not mean that a couple must return to exactly the same relationship pattern; it means that life can still develop meaning even when family and relational forms change.

Pargament (1997) argues that religion can be an important coping resource under life stress, while Pargament (2007) emphasizes the integration of the sacred into psychotherapy. Empirical reviews also indicate that positive and negative religious coping are associated with different psychological outcomes (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005), and systematic reviews have found meaningful associations between spirituality/religiousness and mental-health outcomes while emphasizing contextual differences (Rosmarin et al., 2022; Koenig et al., 2019). Therefore, Christian education should explore how couples understand their faith experience rather than simply providing biblical verses as ready-made answers.

5. Principles of Christian Family Education in Crisis

Christian family education for couples in crisis should be developed gradually. The first stage is establishing safety. Couples need to know that personal experiences are treated with confidentiality and respect within appropriate ethical limits. Empathy and a nonjudgmental stance are essential foundations of pastoral care (Clinebell, 1984; Gerkin, 1997).

The next principle is assessment. Assessment should consider emotional and psychological condition, the partner relationship, children, economic circumstances, social support, spiritual condition, risk of violence, risk of self-harm, and the need for referral. Assessment is necessary because marital crises vary greatly in complexity and risk.

Stabilization should follow assessment. When couples are experiencing intense emotional arousal, education and accompaniment should first support stabilization. Relevant practices include active listening, reflection of feelings, validation, breathing exercises, grounding, routine building, identification of social support, and safety planning when necessary. These practices are consistent with the crisis-intervention orientation toward immediate safety and restoration of functioning (James & Gilliland, 2017; Slaikeu, 1990).

An empathic approach means being present to listen, understand, and accompany couples. Empathy does not mean approving every action; it means taking the person's experience seriously. Family education should also be hope-oriented. Lester (1995) places hope at the center of pastoral care because people need a capacity to envision possible futures in the midst of suffering. Hope, however, should be grounded in realistic safety, responsibility, and available support.

6. Family Systems Approach

Marital crisis should be viewed through a family-systems perspective because changes in one family member can affect other members. Bowen developed family systems theory around the understanding of the family as an emotional system (Bowen, 1978). Later reviews

have found empirical support for associations between differentiation of self, psychological functioning, and marital quality, while also identifying areas where Bowen's propositions remain under-researched (Miller et al., 2004; Calatrava et al., 2022).

In marital crisis, couple conflict can influence children, communication patterns, parenting, and relationships with extended family. A family-systems perspective helps couples understand that problems are not only about identifying who is at fault but also about recognizing interactional patterns and considering how those patterns can change. Lebow (2018) likewise emphasizes attention to individual and systemic processes in difficult divorce. Christian family education can therefore help families develop healthier relational patterns while preserving appropriate boundaries among family members.

7. Christian Family Education Model for Couples Facing Marital Crisis

Based on the synthesis of crisis theory, pastoral counseling, family systems, couple interventions, and spirituality research, the Christian family education model can be organized into the following stages:

Stage	Focus	Educational Intervention
1	Assessment	Identify crisis conditions, needs, resources, and risks.
2	Safety	Safety planning and stabilization to maintain a sense of safety.
3	Emotion	Active listening, reflection of feelings, and validation.
4	Meaning	Explore experiences, losses, conflict, and needs.
5	Coping	Develop adaptive strategies for everyday functioning.
6	Family	Communication, parenting, and development of healthier relational patterns.
7	Spiritual	Prayer, reflection, exploration of faith, and hope.
8	Recovery	Reconstruct identity, goals, relationships, and future orientation.

The model places safety and stabilization at the beginning. Once conditions are more stable, education can move toward meaning making, relational work, spirituality, and recovery. The sequence is not necessarily linear; stages may need to be revisited when new risks or transitions emerge. The model treats couples as persons with dignity and capacity for growth, while recognizing that clinical, legal, or safety-related problems may require specialized professional intervention.

8. The Role of the Church in Christian Family Education

The church has a strategic position because it can function as a community that provides social and spiritual support. However, the church should avoid responses that

shame or isolate people experiencing marital crisis. Religious communities can become protective environments when compassion, acceptance, practical support, pastoral care, and appropriate professional referral are combined.

Forms of ministry that can be developed include: (1) pastoral counseling; (2) support groups; (3) family accompaniment; (4) child ministry and child-focused support; (5) mental-health education; (6) pastoral counselor training; (7) referral systems to psychologists or psychiatrists; (8) spiritual accompaniment; and (9) support and education for single parents.

Community-based mental-health support should respect dignity and rights and should facilitate access to appropriate care (World Health Organization, 2025). Evidence from spirituality research also suggests that religious and spiritual resources can be relevant to mental-health care when used appropriately and sensitively (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Rosmarin et al., 2022). The church can therefore become a recovery community when it integrates love, acceptance, social support, pastoral ministry, and access to professional assistance.

9. Boundaries of Education and Pastoral Accompaniment

Pastoral counselors need to understand the limits of their competence. Not every problem can be resolved through family education or pastoral counseling. Situations involving domestic violence, immediate safety threats, suicide risk, severe mental disorder, severe addiction, legal disputes, or complex custody conflicts require collaboration with or referral to appropriate professionals. Family education should strengthen a referral network rather than replace specialized care.

Pastoral counselors should also be cautious about pressuring couples toward reconciliation. Reconciliation is not synonymous with forgiveness. Forgiveness can be a spiritual and psychological process, whereas reconciliation requires safety, accountability, behavioral change, and willingness from both parties. In situations involving violence or threats to safety, the safety of the partner and other family members must remain the priority. This position is also consistent with the broader evidence that interventions for distressed couples must be appropriately matched to the nature and severity of the problem (Bradbury & Bodenmann, 2020; Roddy et al., 2020).

10. Theological Implications

Christian family education for couples facing marital crisis should be grounded in an understanding of human dignity as part of God's creation. Genesis 1:27 describes human beings as created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, a person does not lose dignity because of marital crisis or divorce. This theological foundation supports a pastoral stance that resists shame and exclusion.

Galatians 6:2 provides a principle of bearing one another's burdens. This is relevant for churches so that people in crisis are not abandoned. Romans 12:15 teaches the importance of weeping with those who weep; in family education and pastoral accompaniment, this illustrates the importance of empathic presence.

Jesus' invitation in Matthew 11:28 to those who are weary and burdened provides a theological basis for creating space in which people experiencing heavy life burdens can seek rest and renewal. Such theological principles should not be used to deny psychological complexity. Responsible Christian family education brings faith into dialogue with psychological understanding while respecting professional boundaries and referral needs (Pargament, 2007; Markelj Pečecnik & Gostecnik, 2022).

Results and Analysis

The literature synthesis yields several principles as the basis of the proposed Christian family education model. First, marital crisis should be understood as multidimensional. Crisis may affect the couple relationship as well as identity, mental health, social relationships, economic conditions, parenting, and spirituality. Second, children should remain a central concern. Children need protection from destructive parental conflict and explanations appropriate to their developmental level (Cohen & Weitzman, 2016; Lansford, 2009).

Third, stabilization should precede deeper meaning making. Couples under acute emotional pressure need safety and functional stability before they can engage in more demanding reflection. Fourth, a family-systems approach is necessary because marital crisis can alter family structure and interaction patterns. Fifth, spirituality can function as a recovery resource, but it should be explored sensitively so that it does not become a source of guilt, condemnation, or spiritual struggle (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Rosmarin et al., 2022).

Sixth, Christian family education should be integrative. Pastoral counselors do not need to take over the functions of psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians, social workers, or lawyers. Instead, pastoral caregivers can build professional networks so that couples and families receive the type of assistance appropriate to their needs. Overall, the proposed model connects assessment, safety, stabilization, exploration, meaning reconstruction, coping strengthening, relationship reconstruction, spiritual integration, and recovery as interrelated processes.



Conclusion (خاتمة)

Marital crisis is a multidimensional condition that can affect emotional well-being, family relationships, parenting, economic life, and spirituality. In response, this study proposes a Christian family education model that integrates assessment, safety, stabilization, exploration, meaning reconstruction, coping strengthening, relationship reconstruction, spiritual integration, and recovery. The model emphasizes empathic and nonjudgmental accompaniment while maintaining attention to accountability, dignity, child well-being, safety, and professional referral when needs exceed pastoral competence.

The main contribution of the model is its integration of educational, relational, spiritual, child-protection, and referral dimensions within a single staged framework for supporting couples in marital crisis. It positions the church not only as a provider of marital teaching but also as a supportive community that accompanies recovery while respecting professional boundaries. Because the model is conceptual, further empirical testing is needed across diverse Christian family, cultural, theological, psychological, and legal contexts..

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