**The Issue of Cohabitation:**

**The World's View of Co-habitation before Marriage**

Cohabitation before marriage and the growing indifference to ever being married are widely accepted and ever-growing realities in American culture. Characteristics of those approaching the church for marriage include low levels of religious participation, those whose own parent’s marriages ended in divorce, and lower levels of earning power where money becomes a burden on the relationship. The growing secularization and individualization of our culture, an aversion to long term commitments, economic feasibility and the conviction that a “trial marriage” is the social norm and improves the chances of a good marriage are reasons frequently given for making this choice.

**Predisposing Attitudes and Characteristics Taken into a Marriage**

***The Church's View on Co-habitation before Marriage***

* Cohabitors as a group are *less committed* to the institution of marriage and more accepting of divorce. Those who cohabit before marriage are 50% more likely to divorce than those who do not cohabit.
* “*Sexual exclusivity"* --After marriage, *a woman who cohabited before marriage is 3.3 times more likely to be sexually unfaithful.*
* Cohabitors identify themselves or the relationship as *poor risk for long-term happiness,* and so feel the need to test the relationship through cohabitation.
* Cohabitors may decide to marry because of various *pressures.* While family and friends are often right to encourage marriage for a cohabiting couple, a marriage made under such pressure is problematic unless the couple chooses it for more substantial reasons.
* Cohabitors report lower satisfaction with marriage after they marry than do noncohabitors. There is danger that they think they have "worked out everything" and that any further challenges are the fault of the institution of marriage.

***Experiences from Cohabitation Itself*** (*versus those who marry without cohabiting*)

* + The experience of cohabitation *changes the attitudes about commitment and permanence* and makes couples more open to divorce.
  + Cohabitors have *more conflict over money;* have set patterns of autonomy or competition about it.
  + Domestic violence is a more common problem, less of a need to protect the relationship, and can lead to dysfunctional patterns of problem-solving. Children and stress over the permanency of the relationship are common causes of conflict and sometimes violence.
  + Cohabitors who marry are *less effective at conflict resolution* due to a fear of upsetting an uncommitted relationship or the lack of need to protect it.
* Using sex as a controlling factor can be a negative pattern which cohabiting couples can bring to their marriage. *Reinforcement of negative family of origin patterns* can also have occurred in the cohabiting relationship and be carried over to marriage. Both of these patterns are common issues that dating couples carry into marriage, but they can be exaggerated by the cohabitation experience.

**Reaching the Cohabiting, Engaged Couple**:

It is important to help the couple to identify the attitudes, issues and patterns that led them to make the decision to cohabit. These often become the predisposing factors to put them at high risk for divorce when they do choose to move from cohabitation to marriage. The cohabitation experience itself creates risk factors, badhabits that can sabotage the subsequent marriage.These attitudes and patterns can be identified and brought to the couple preparing for marriage for examination, decision-making, skill-building, change. Without creating "self-fulfilling prophecies," those preparing cohabiting couples for marriage can help them identify and work with issues around commitment, fidelity, individualism, pressure, appropriate expectations.

**The Goals in Addressing the Issue of Cohabitation**

* The primary goal in counseling a cohabiting couple is to enthusiastically encourage each person that the total and unrestricted gift of oneself to the other in the image of Christ, the bridegroom of his bride, the Church, is not only achievable but the way to each person’s true fulfillment and joy in this life and in the life to come.
* Encourage and, if necessary, support a free decision on the part of the cohabiting couple to live separately in their preparation for marriage.
* Discuss the positive benefits of renewing their relationship by this separation, to live chastely, and to draw closer to the Lord and the effects of his grace, for Catholics, with a warm invitation from clergy, by availing themselves of the sacrament of Reconciliation and regular participation at Mass and for both, a renewal of prayers for each other and for their future together.
* Facilitators of the FOCCUS inventory should be advised to pay particular attention to the couple’s communication and problem solving practices and recommend special counseling/training to be educated in recognizing and overcoming negative behaviors prior to the wedding. Address the issue of pressures that have surfaced in their relationship since they began to live together, especially when they have children together. Encourage them to participate in programs that help them with financial decisions, with parenting and ways to confidently work together to move forward.