Natural Family Planning Instruction as a Marriage Requirement

A Retrospective Analysis of the First Two Years' Experience in the Diocese of Covington*

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Abstract

Beginning January 1, 2009, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Covington mandated that all engaged couples take a full course of NFP instruction as part of preparation for marriage within the Church. Using data from the Couple to Couple League and its Covington-based instructors, overall NFP instruction and characteristics of the

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couples attending classes before and after the mandate were examined. In the first two years, 66 percent and 77 percent of couples who married in the diocese, respectively, attended an NFP class. The mandate shifted the reasons for couples taking NFP instruction; prior to the mandate, 40 percent of engaged couples attended classes solely due to a pastor's requirement while 74 percent of engaged couples did so afterward ($p < 0.001$). Hormonal contraceptive use was common; 54 percent reported current use while another 23 percent reported former use. Current hormonal contraceptive use was significantly more common among those attending solely due to the mandate compared to those attending for multiple reasons (59 percent vs. 41 percent respectively, $p = 0.004$) and was significantly more common among engaged compared to married couples (53 percent vs. 8 percent respectively, $p < 0.001$). Cohabiting engaged couples were significantly more likely to have ever used hormonal contraceptives (91 percent vs. 71 percent, $p < 0.0001$), compared to engaged couples who were not cohabiting at the time of NFP instruction, and were significantly less likely to both be Catholic (55 percent vs. 70 percent, $p = 0.002$). Overall, implementation of mandatory NFP instruction as part of marriage preparation was successful; in post-class surveys, over 90 percent of couples acknowledged they had a better understanding of their fertility, and 83 percent would recommend the classes to a friend. Longer-term prospective follow-up is needed to evaluate the long-term impacts to couples exposed to such a requirement.

Introduction

Despite evidence that contemporary fertility awareness-based methods have effectiveness rates comparable to that of contraceptive methods, use of these methods for family planning is limited.¹ National surveys of contraceptive habits indicate periodic abstinence is used by less than 1 percent of U.S. women in their fertile years.² Among self-described Catholics, use of fertility awareness-based methods is no different than in the general population.³ Natural family planning (NFP) methods are a subset of fertility awareness-based methods that specifically exclude the use of contraceptives during the fertile window by couples seeking to postpone pregnancy.⁴ A 2000 survey found just 1 percent of NFP users came to use the method because of a physician recommendation, while 4 percent did so because of a requirement for marriage, and 20 percent did so due to “side effects from artificial birth control.”⁵

Although nearly all dioceses in the United States have policies that stipulate some sort of exposure to NFP for engaged couples seeking marriage within the Catholic Church, only a few dioceses have mandated a full course of instruction in NFP be included as part of marriage preparation.⁶ The number of U.S. dioceses requiring a full course of NFP is currently less than twelve.

In January 2009, the Diocese of Covington implemented a policy that required all engaged couples to take a full course of NFP instruction as part of preparation for marriage within the Church. Since NFP instruction from the Couple to Couple League (CCL) has been available within the diocese since the 1980s and provides the majority of NFP instruction, the change in policy provided an opportunity to examine the impact of this mandate on NFP instruction. Here we report on NFP instruction and the general demographic characteristics of couples attending classes delivered by CCL in the first two years of the new policy and in the period before the requirement.

Method

Diocese of Covington

The Diocese of Covington lies within the Commonwealth of Kentucky and shares a northern border (the Ohio River) with the city of Cincinnati, Ohio. It is a largely metropolitan/suburban diocese covering thirty-three hundred square miles and includes forty-seven parishes. Approximately ninety thousand Catholics reside within the diocese and comprise almost 20 percent of the entire population.⁷ Although other NFP providers are within or nearby the diocese, the majority of instruction is provided by certified instructors from CCL.

NFP Instruction

CCL instructs couples, so both the man and the woman participate in all classes. Teaching instruction is delivered by trained volunteer couples to reinforce the concept that fertility is a shared gift. A basic class series consists of three 2- to 2.5-hour sessions spaced about a month apart. Students begin charting their own fertility signs the day after the first class, and individual review of couples' charts is part of the second and third classes. With this mode of instruction, learner couples begin to develop the habit of daily observations and interpretation under supervision. In addition to being available for consulting at any time, teaching couples follow up with students one month and three months after the third class to provide six months of supervised use of the method.

CCL teaches the Sympto-Thermal Method of NFP in a classroom setting that allows instruction of from one to thirty couples at a time. Instruction is highly standardized; teaching couples supplement the training with their personal witness to how NFP works in their daily lives and the impact it has on their relationship. A home study course is also available. Although a well-conducted trial in the United States has not been conducted, several well-designed prospective cohort studies among European populations have established a high degree of effectiveness for postponing pregnancy using the method taught by CCL.⁸

Data Sources and Collection

For this study, three data sources were used. While all information was captured prospectively as part of standard procedures for tracking and counseling couples learning NFP, its collection was prior to and not expressly designed for this study. The data presented here are therefore retrospective in nature.

First, information on teaching activity in the diocese was obtained from CCL's national membership database. Every couple learning from CCL is automatically enrolled as a member. The member record includes the diocese where they were instructed and the teaching couple who instructed them (or if self-taught via the home study course). Teaching-couple records within the database also contain a historical listing of classes taught, where taught, and the number of student couples in each. Information on instruction during 2009 and 2010 within the Diocese of Covington was captured. Home study instruction totals were defined by capturing home study kits shipped to zip codes within the diocesan boundaries.

To provide a pre-mandate comparator, instruction for the six years prior to implementation of the mandate (2003–2008) was captured and pooled. Results are reported as average annual values. This comparator window was chosen for several reasons; for one reason, it represents all the full-year periods when the current bishop was in place in the diocese. Next, this number of years of instruction when pooled was expected to provide a total number of couples taught roughly comparable to the annual number of couples taught after the mandate. Finally, the period was judged to be short enough to avoid adding confounding factors such as changing social trends about contraception and family planning. To estimate compliance with the mandate, the number of weddings in a given year in the diocese was obtained from *The Official Catholic Directory* or from personal communication with the diocese.

Second, student-level information was obtained from the Covington-based CCL teachers via their personal records. Student background information is routinely collected by CCL teachers to help in chart consultation, to track attendance, and for follow-up after class. To preserve student confidentiality, needed information for this study was duplicated onto a template without connection to names or address information.

Student-level information collected for this study included the following:

- *Religion*, scored as either “both Catholic,” “mixed” when only one partner was Catholic, or “missing” if incomplete information was provided or if both partners stated they were non-Catholic (which represent less than 1 percent of the total responses).
- *Reason for attending NFP class*, scored as “mandatory” when the only one of six available options checked on the background form was “marriage requirement.” If more than one box was

checked or if the “marriage requirement” box was left empty, the couple was considered as attending for reasons in addition to the diocesan requirement.

- *Cohabitation status*, scored “yes” by the teacher if both partners provided the same address, “no” if the partners had different addresses, or “married” if the couple was married. This information is available only for students from 2008 onwards. Prior to 2008, only marital status was available.
- *History of hormonal contraceptive use*, women were considered “never users” if they indicated they had never used hormonal contraceptives on the background form, “current users” if any one of twelve possible hormonal contraceptive types listed was marked, and “former users” if they indicated they had discontinued some type of hormonal contraceptive. Use of non-hormonal contraceptives was not available since CCL teachers do not request this. Information collected prior to 2008 on hormonal contraceptive use was less detailed but still allowed categorization for never, former, or current use.

Since student-level information is provided voluntarily by students to teachers and teachers decide how long to hold these data in their personal records, complete collection was not possible. In 2009 and 2010, student-level information was collected on 68 percent and 73 percent of the total students instructed respectively. Student-level information from 2008 and earlier is less complete, representing between 10 percent and 73 percent of the cohort instructed in each year and 30 percent of the total period.

Finally, student couples’ immediate reactions to NFP instruction were obtained by completing a brief anonymous questionnaire distributed to all couples at the conclusion of the class series beginning in the spring of 2010. This questionnaire was implemented by the teaching couples to obtain feedback on teaching and to evaluate if couples attending the classes felt the instruction was of value. During the period covered in this report, 138 couples provided questionnaires (87 percent response rate).

Fisher’s exact test was used to compare differences in proportions between various groups. The use of previously collected records and the investigator’s inability to link (directly or indirectly) private information to a specific person exempted the study from institutional review board approval.

Results

Implementation of the mandate on January 1, 2009, had an immediate impact on the number of couples taught, increasing nearly sixfold over the pre-mandate annual historical average (table 1). This increase was accommodated by doubling of the number of classes offered in the diocese and increasing the average class size. The ages of women attending class was collected from 2008 onward, although respondents rarely

Table 1 NFP instruction history in the Diocese of Covington

	Pre-mandate (2003–2008 average)	Post-mandate 2009	Post-mandate 2010
Number of couples instructed by CCL	47	273*	317*
Percent attending to comply with policy	n/a	66% [†]	77% [†]
Average class size	4.6	11	16.2
Number of weddings in diocese	Unknown	411	408

Sources: Couple to Couple League national membership database; Office of Evangelization & Catechesis, Diocese of Covington, Kentucky.

* Includes both class instruction and home study.

[†] Unadjusted for weddings exempted from the policy and/or NFP instruction provided by different provider and/or CCL instruction outside the diocese.

reported it. Among those providing information ($n = 125$), the average age of engaged women was 25.4 years, significantly younger than the average age of married women attending (31.1 years, $p < 0.002$).

Comparing the number of couples instructed with the number of weddings in the diocese indicates 66 percent and 77 percent of couples married in the diocese in 2009 and 2010, respectively, attended a CCL NFP class (table 1). Compliance is likely higher since data on couples instructed by other NFP providers or instruction taken outside the Diocese of Covington is not captured in this study.

Implementation of the mandate shifted the reasons for couples taking the classes. In the years prior to the mandate, significantly fewer engaged couples attending NFP instruction did so solely as a requirement for marriage (40 percent), whereas after the mandate more than 70 percent of engaged couples attending are doing so because of the requirement ($p < 0.001$, table 2). Among married couples, most are attending for reasons beyond a requirement, both before and after the mandate's implementation (a few married couples did indicate they were required to attend presumably as part of the process to convalidate an existing civil marriage). In 2009–2010, the number of couples attending for reasons other than the mandate (127, or just over sixty couples per year) compares reasonably well with the average number of couples taught in the six years prior to implementation of the policy (forty-seven couples per year), indicating that the increase in class attendance was driven nearly exclusively by the new policy.

The mandate also impacted the ratio of engaged versus married couples attending instruction; prior to the mandate, about six in every

Table 2 Stated reasons for attending NFP instruction

	<i>N</i>	Only because required for marriage	Multiple reasons	Unknown
Pre-mandate (2003–2008)				
Total	82	26 (32%)	53 (65%)	3 (3%)
Married	30	5	25	
Engaged	52	21 (40%)*	28 (54%)	3 (6%)
Post-mandate (2009–2010)				
Total	442	313 (71%)	127 (29%)	2
Married	21	5	16	
Engaged	421	308 (74%)	111 (26%)	2 (<1%)

Source: Couple to Couple League.

* Significantly different than post-mandate engaged cohort ($p < 0.001$).

ten couples instructed was engaged, whereas after the mandate, more than nine of every ten couples instructed was engaged (table 2).

The stated religion of the couples attending NFP instruction generally reflects that observed among those being married in the Covington diocese. Weddings between Catholics in 2009 and 2010 represented 68 percent and 75 percent, respectively, of the total weddings in the diocese,⁹ while 65 percent of engaged couples attending NFP classes in these years were “both Catholic.” The proportion of couples attending NFP instruction that were “both Catholic” before (53 percent) and after (64 percent) the mandate was not significantly different ($p = 0.351$). Married couples attending NFP classes both before and after the mandate may be more commonly “both Catholic” than engaged couples, but the small numbers make drawing conclusions tenuous.

Not surprisingly, use of hormonal contraceptives was common among engaged couples throughout the study period; 54 percent of the 2009–2010 cohort reported current use of some type of hormonal contraceptive while another 23 percent reported former use (table 3). Among engaged couples attending solely due to the mandatory policy, hormonal contraceptive use was significantly more common compared to those attending for additional reasons; 59 percent (132/223) versus 41 percent (41/99), respectively ($p = 0.004$). Current hormonal contraceptive use was significantly more common among engaged couples (245/461; 53 percent) compared to married couples (4/48; 8 percent) over the entire period ($p < 0.001$).

Cohabitation prior to marriage among the engaged in this sample was common but not the dominant living arrangement; 34 percent of engaged couples that provided information in 2009 and 2010 were

Table 3 Hormonal contraceptive use among women attending NFP instruction

	<i>N</i>	Contraceptive Use		
		Never	Former	Current
Pre-mandate (2003–2008)				
Total	82	36 (46%)*	20 (26%)	21 (27%)
Married	30	12	13	2
Engaged	52	24 (48%)	7	19
Post-mandate (2009–2010)				
Total	432	95 (22%)	109 (25%)	228 (53%) [†]
Married	21	5	14	2
Engaged	411	90	95	226 (54%)

Source: Couple to Couple League.

* Significantly different than post-mandate never use cohort ($p < 0.001$).

[†] Significantly different than pre-mandate current use cohort ($p < 0.001$).

cohabiting. Since cohabitation was defined passively by teachers examining the reported home addresses of both partners, the frequency of cohabitation could be underreported. However, national data indicate 34 percent of women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine report cohabiting prior to marriage¹⁰; suggesting Covington couples are typical for U.S. engaged couples. Engaged couples who shared a common address ($n = 143$) were significantly more likely to have ever used hormonal contraceptives (91 percent vs. 71 percent, $p < 0.0001$), and significantly less likely to both be Catholic (55 percent vs. 70 percent, $p = 0.002$), than engaged couples who were not cohabiting at the time of NFP instruction.

Initiated during the latter portion of 2010, a questionnaire was administered to couples at the end of the class series to gather feedback on the teachers and class content. Results indicate that the mandated NFP instruction was generally well received. Fully 95 percent (110/115) reported that they had a better understanding of their fertility as a result of instruction, and 83 percent (109/131) indicated that they would recommend the class to a friend. Of those who admitted having a poor attitude about NFP instruction before beginning classes ($n = 61$, 45 percent of the responding sample), 74 percent would recommend the class to a friend. When asked, “How beneficial do you believe the content of the class will be to you?” 6 percent responded “not beneficial,” 51 percent responded “somewhat beneficial,” and 43 percent “very beneficial” ($n = 138$).

Discussion

To our knowledge this is the first report to document the characteristics of couples attending NFP instruction as part of a newly imple-

mented diocesan policy. While other dioceses have reported initial and continuing compliance rates with NFP policies,¹¹ we are unaware of concurrent reporting of basic demographic information and reactions of those attending such instruction.

Overall, the experience of implementing the new policy, which requires a full course of NFP as part of marriage preparation, was a positive one. Compliance is excellent, averaging more than 70 percent in the first two years. Regrettably, no information is available on the reasons why the couples in the remaining weddings in the diocese did not attend NFP instruction. It is likely that the majority did not attend simply due to incomplete awareness of the policy across the diocese, while a few couples may have been declared exempt by the pastor due to age or permanent infertility.

Based on the information collected, engaged couples in Covington seem typical of U.S. adults. The average age of engaged women in this report (25.4 years) is consistent with the U.S. median age at first marriage for 2009 and 2010 (25.9 and 26.1 years respectively).¹² Couples attending NFP classes are cohabiting before marriage at rates comparable to U.S. norms, and their use of hormonal contraceptives is consistent with nationally reported trends. In its 2010 report on contraceptive use, the National Survey of Family Growth reports that among women twenty to twenty-nine years old, nearly 60 percent are using some form of contraception, regardless of marital or cohabiting status; and of these, hormonal contraceptives represent the majority (58 percent) of the use.¹³ Similarly, over half of the Covington cohort reported current oral contraceptive use, comparable to U.S. norms. Not surprisingly, current hormonal contraceptive use is most common among cohabiting engaged couples attending NFP instruction solely because of the mandate and is least common among married couples.

While a common concern among diocesan officials who are considering a mandatory NFP policy is the lack of sufficient teaching resources, in Covington, by pre-planning in a number of areas, a small number of CCL teaching couples ($n = 5$) were able to absorb the large increase in couples taught.

First, teaching venues were available that allowed for up to thirty couples at a time to be instructed; use of hospital and parish facilities with adequate classroom and parking space made this possible. Second, coordination between the teachers ensured a distribution of available class locations, starting dates and times. Teachers also worked with the diocese to match increased class availability preceding the calendar peaks in wedding dates, and this facilitated meeting the increased demand. Third, sufficient options for class locations and times were available to meet the changing demands of the student couples. Unanticipated prior to implementation was the need for student couples to switch between class series in order to complete the full course; several couples began a class series with one teaching couple and took one or

more of the remaining classes with another. Good communication and flexibility between the teaching couples was critical here.

Some may challenge the wisdom of requiring couples to take a full course on NFP prior to marriage. The experience in Covington suggests a far more positive reaction from engaged couples than anticipated. Among those questioned, nearly all couples (95 percent) felt they had a better understanding of their fertility upon completing NFP classes, and the vast majority, even those who came to class with a poor attitude, would recommend the classes to a friend. This indicates exposing couples to knowledge of their fertility has immediate benefits even when the couples themselves did not anticipate a benefit. Even among those who choose not to use NFP, providing basic knowledge to both men and women about normal fertility cycles, how to observe the signs of fertility, and providing a basic understanding of the mechanism of action of hormonal contraceptives can only improve a couple's ability to make an informed choice about their family planning methods.

Longer-term benefits, most notably the impact on contraceptive use among those instructed in NFP, are more difficult to evaluate and require further investigation. Anecdotally CCL teachers indicate some couples who had no intention of using NFP decided to try it once they fully understood it. Other couples instructed early in 2009 have decided after marriage to try NFP, presumably dissatisfied with their initial choice for family planning. Analysis of membership renewal patterns using the CCL national database may provide an indirect measure of adoption of NFP among married couples. Early exploration suggests that couples who learn NFP in a diocese where NFP is not required (presumably a cohort with a higher proportion of couples voluntarily learning NFP) renew memberships at a rate about 30 percent higher than those who learn in a diocese where it is required (presumably where most are attending simply due to the requirement). However, because of the significantly larger numbers of couples instructed in the required dioceses, overall membership renewal (and by implication, use of NFP in married life) is three to five times higher long term in required dioceses than in non-required dioceses.

Longer-term follow-up is needed to document adoption and use of NFP among couples when exposed to NFP as a marriage requirement. A prospective survey with baseline and periodic follow-up among couples given NFP instruction is needed. Such a survey would create a cohort with consistent baseline exposure to NFP instruction that, over time, would naturally segregate into two groups (NFP users and nonusers). These groups could be periodically examined and compared for any number of outcomes where NFP may have an impact (e.g., persistence with NFP, relationship strength, divorce rates, openness to children, involvement in parish life, etc.).

Absent long-term outcomes, the initial results from Covington should help reassure the clinician that contemporary methods of NFP

can be learned by many without added burden on professional staff and likely results in patients who are better informed about their fertility. Feedback from couples completing instruction and anecdotal information on long-term effects should reassure diocesan policymakers that the addition of full NFP instruction to marriage preparation has meaningful benefit to those entering the vocation of marriage.

This study has some obvious limitations. Use of data collected prospectively for different purposes rather than a prospectively designed and executed survey and the paucity of student-level data in the period prior to the mandate are obvious limitations.

In addition only couples instructed by CCL teachers are captured here. Discussion with diocesan staff indicates CCL was the exclusive provider of NFP instruction in the initial year and nearly exclusive in the second. However, since the policy is enforced at the parish level, one cannot exclude the possibility that some couples received NFP instruction from another provider and the parish staff accepted this as meeting the diocesan requirement. These cases would go unreported in this study.

Finally, not all couples being married in a diocesan parish would necessarily take NFP instruction within the diocese. Examination of CCL instruction in areas bordering the Covington diocese revealed that a few Covington-based couples did do this but a comparable number of outside couples traveled into the diocese to receive NFP instruction, suggesting that this is not a major confounder here.

Nevertheless, the trends observed are consistent with what one might expect.

In conclusion, implementation of a new policy mandating a full course of NFP instruction for couples being married in the Diocese of Covington was successful in the initial two years; compliance with the policy exceeded 70 percent, and was achieved with a limited number of NFP instructors and teaching options. The policy had an immediate impact on exposure of NFP to couples within the diocese with a sixfold increase in the number of couples taught annually. Student response to the required instruction was positive; couples readily acknowledged they gained a better understanding of their fertility by taking NFP instruction, and nearly all felt it will be at least somewhat beneficial to them in the future. Furthermore, despite almost half admitting they had a poor attitude before attending the first class, over 80 percent would recommend NFP classes to a friend.

Notes

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² W.D. Mosher and J. Jones, *Use of Contraception in the United States: 1982–2008* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital and Health Statistics*, series 23, n. 29.

³ R.K. Jones and J. Dreweke, *Countering Conventional Wisdom: New Evidence on Religion and Contraceptive Use* (New York: Guttmacher Institute, 2011).

⁴ Pallone and Bergus, “Fertility Awareness-Based Methods.”

⁵ M.A. Wilson, “The Practice of Natural Family Planning Versus the Use of Artificial Birth Control: Family, Sexual, and Moral Uses,” *Catholic Social Science Review* 7 (2002).

⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Natural Family Planning Program, Secretariat for Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth, “Diocesan Natural Family Planning Ministry National 2010 Profile Report” (2011), <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/diocesan-ministry/upload/2010-Diocesan-NFP-Profile-with-Appendix-2000-to-2009-report.pdf>.

⁷ *The Official Catholic Directory 2011* (Berkeley Heights, NJ: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 2011).

⁸ The European Natural Family Planning Study Groups, “Prospective European Multi-Center Study of Natural Family Planning (1989–1995): Efficacy and Drop-out,” *Advances Contraception* 15 (1999): 69–83; P. Frank-Hermann et al. “Natural Family Planning with and without Barrier Method Use in the Fertile Phase: Efficacy in Relation to Sexual Behavior: A German Prospective Long-Term Study,” *Advances Contraception* 13 (1997): 179–189; P. Frank-Hermann et al., “Determination of the Fertile Window: Reproductive Competence of Women-European Cycle Databases,” *Gynecological Endocrinology* 20 (2005): 305–312; P. Frank-Hermann et al., “The Effectiveness of a Fertility Awareness Based Method to Avoid Pregnancy in Relation to a Couple’s Sexual Behavior During the Fertile Time: A Prospective Longitudinal Study,” *Human Reproduction* 22 (2007): 1310–1319.

⁹ *The Official Catholic Directory 2010* (Berkeley Heights, NJ: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 2010); *The Official Catholic Directory 2011*.

¹⁰ P.J. Goodwin, W.D. Mosher, and A. Chandra, *Marriage and Cohabitation in the United States: A Statistical Portrait Based on Cycle 6 (2002) of the National Survey of Family Growth* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital and Health Statistics* series 23, n. 28.

¹¹ R.R. Cannon, “Trends in NFP Services in the Catholic Dioceses of the United States: An Overview of Data 2000–2009 from the National Survey of Diocesan NFP Programs,” in United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Diocesan Natural Family Planning Ministry National 2010 Profile Report.”

¹² U.S. Census Bureau, “Median Age at First Marriage, 1890–2010” (Pearson Education, Infoplease Database, 2009), <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005061.html>.

¹³ Mosher and Jones, *Use of Contraception in the United States: 1982–2008*.