Reflections On Christian Marriage Counseling

Now that my wife has passed away and I have some time to reflect on the past and on my marriage I thought it would be helpful to others to summarize my experience with Christian Marriage counseling. I always felt that the ideal form of Christian marriage counseling would consist of these major elements:
1. It would involve both a husband and a wife counselors (i.e. a spiritually mature and perhaps also a physically mature (older) married Christian couple)

2. It would be offered free of charge – no incentive for the "clients" to keep coming back, more like a ministry of the local church, but not necessarily a ministry of the church leaders.

3. It would be biblically based – with a focus on scripture as the place to go for the right answers to marriage problems, with the counselors pointing the couple being counseled to bible passages that would shed light on various problem areas in the marriage relationship.
Instead, my experience (and that of my wife's) was quite a bit "suboptimal". My wife and I counselled with just one counseling center over the course of several years, off and on. There was always a fee associated with the counseling and it was always just a man or a woman counselor, never a married couple. The counseling center was a "para-church" organization, not simply a ministry of a married couple (or couples) in the local church. The first counselor we worked with was a married man who was at least 20 years younger than us. He did not seem to have the maturity or experience necessary to help us resolve our marriage problems. At times my wife felt like he was taking my side which then destroyed the trust needed for her to continue to take advice from that man. The next counselor we then started seeing at that center was a woman. She was single, never married, and also at least 20 years younger than us. She did however seem to have a great deal of spiritual maturity for her age which I thought was helpful. But again, she lacked marriage experience, and soon my wife did not want to take advice any longer from that woman counselor. Then my wife and I separated for 14 months and started divorce proceedings. Fortunately God intervened and we got back together but the trust we both had for each other had been severely eroded by that time. So we went back to the counseling center and started counseling with another woman, one who was much closer in age to my wife and myself. My wife trusted this older woman counselor, however, I started to feel like the counselor was taking my wife's side. In retrospect, what I really needed was for that counselor to talk to me privately, by phone, instead of putting me on the spot in front of my wife. Most of our sessions with that counselor involved her just watching my wife and I argue. I asked that counselor to help us focus more on the bible for solving our marriage problems but she felt that even though that was what I wanted, she thought my wife was not ready for that. So both my wife and I got frustrated with the lack of results from the counseling at that point, and so we no longer went.

So now we were “on our own”. Time passed and our marriage relationship did not get a whole lot better so my wife finally agreed to counsel with a Christian couple that we both knew. I had recommended we talk to that couple for a while but my wife was apparently not ready, even though she knew that I had wanted us to be counseled by a “couple” for a long time. This couple lives in Michigan, but I knew them from when they used to live near me. Also, my wife and I had visited them and they had visited us over the years. So we (both couples) decided to use Google Video Chat with our computers and webcams to have virtual counseling sessions over the Internet from our home in the Poconos to their home in Michigan. And the result was far better than we had experienced with the paid counselors we had seen in the past. Just as I had hoped, we were able to get the perspective of BOTH couples, BOTH sides of various issues that my wife and I struggled with in our marriage. The couple from Michigan was able to offer us suggestions to try things that worked for them in certain situations. They were able to relate to us how both the husband and the wife handled certain situations, sharing their different approaches to problem resolution. They enabled us to see that our struggles and our differences were not unique and were not the end of the world. I could get to hear the other woman’s point of view about how she interacts with her husband and my wife could hear the other man’s point of view about how he interacts with his wife, right in front of us, in “real time”. Unfortunately, soon after we started counseling with this couple, my wife was diagnosed with cancer, so then we got real busy with doctors and moving closer to my wife’s family, and then my wife went home to be with the Lord, just four months after finding out that she had cancer.

So, in conclusion, I would say to married couples who need help with their marriage (and who doesn’t), seek out a mature Christian couple in your local church or wherever you have to go to find them… even if its in another state via Skype or Google Video Chat (a.k.a. “Google Hangouts”). Forget the paid professionals. Why settle for suboptimal when God has gifted the body of Christ with people whom He has trained through life experiences to be your older brothers and sisters in the Lord, who will minister to you out of love for you and for the Lord and not as a job, for monetary compensation. The so-called professional marriage counselors know that their methodology is suboptimal and problematic (having just one counselor versus a married couple) but as one of them told me: who is going to “pay” for two counselors? Should we blame these paid marriage counselors, who seem to be filling a need in the Church? Yes we should. They should know better… This Bible verse applies to marriage counseling as much as it does to any other type of counseling, but especially to marriage counseling: “in the multitude of counsellors there is safety” [Proverbs 11:14]. — *RM Kane*
