

CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE: SPECIAL PROBLEMS FOR LEADERSHIP ¹

I. INTRODUCTION

The following material appears in Section IV in the Annual Conference approved statement "Marriage and Divorce."

The clergy today, as in the past, are expected by many people to be an example of perfection. Corporately we look to them as representing the ideal standard or model of life in thought and deed. Therefore, their marriages exert disproportionate influence on other marriages in the community.

Through ordination the minister is indeed placed in a special relationship with others. The minister serves as counselor to many marriages and is in a position to challenge marriage partners to a larger vision of what marriage can and should be. In our society we are desperately in need of this larger vision of marriage.

Major problems are apparent in the marriages of the clergy today. Divorces and internal problems are prevalent, as they are elsewhere in our society. As perhaps in no other profession, marriages in the clergy have been at a tremendous disadvantage. In a real sense, the expectations put upon the traditional clergy have been put upon their marriages as well. They are to be something more than human, with few or no personal problems, capable of leading exemplary lives. Similar or even greater demands have been put upon the minister's spouse. Both have felt the restrictive attitudes of the church toward the creative expression of their individuality, as well as their sexuality. All of the inhibitions and repressions that have been encouraged by the church rest heavily also upon the clergy couple. These problems have been neglected, ignored, glossed over, or denied.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is time for the church to make a new thrust forward in regard to clergy marriages. This committee recommends . . .

- A. That we implement the 1975 report on "Ordination and Family Life," especially the section on counseling and discipline;
- B. That we involve seminary students and spouses in new models of marriage education at the seminary level that are undergirded with theological exploration;

1. Approved by 1977 Annual Conference.

- C. That pastoral marriages be given support both prior to and during crisis (a pastor needs a “pastor” not involved in placement);
- D. That congregational expectations of pastoral leadership be reexamined and pastoral contracts be reviewed with . . .
 1. The inclusion of financial support for growth and marriage enrichment experiences for the pastor and spouse and family enrichment experiences for the pastor and family;
 2. Opportunities (both time and money) provided for pastoral families to deal with enrichment or crisis; and
 3. Clear delineation of expectations of the role of the spouse. (This is particularly important now in view of the fact that increasing numbers of women are in training for full pastoral leadership.)

If the church implements the above recommendations with sincerity, it will create the potential for renewed and deepened relationships within the clergy family. Despite our best efforts in seeking reconciliation and wholeness, we acknowledge that in some situations extreme brokenness and divorce is the end result. The Annual Conference paper “Discipleship and Reconciliation” lists among the examples of brokenness the following: “acts of infidelity, dishonesty, deception, divisiveness, insubordination, lovelessness, rejection, and violence, which break relationships and militate against personal, family, and group relationships.” The paper is clear that all members bear the burden of such brokenness. The paper, however, does suggest that “occasions occur when those who are called to set-apart leadership experience brokenness and must be confronted regarding their accountability.” Among several additional causes of brokenness for set-apart leadership, the paper lists “Adoption of behavior patterns that prevent effective leadership within the congregation, district, and/or denomination (Rom. 14:13-21; 1 Cor. 8:9-13; 10:23, 31).”

E. Times of crisis and brokenness

Times of crisis and brokenness in the pastor’s marriage create certain special circumstances and special responsibilities for both the church and the pastor. Because divorce is a form of brokenness that may prevent “effective leadership within the congregation, district, and/or denomination,” we recommend the following procedure:

1. When divorce is imminent, the pastor shall take the initiative to inform the appropriate congregational supervisory committee. The pastor shall also initiate conversations with the District Executive/Minister, sharing the fact of divorce, so that the district may implement procedures described in the section entitled The Faith Community Shall Facilitate Reconciliation, of the paper “Discipleship and Reconciliation.” The district, working in relationship with the ministerial status of the pastor, and the local church, working on the matter of the employment and service of the pastor, will need to be in close communication with each other.
2. The pastor should seek the counsel of the appropriate congregational committee as to the effect of the divorce on his/her employment relationship with the congregation, including such options as . . .

- a. Renegotiation of the relationship with the local church to continue on a full-time indefinite basis with appropriate procedure for congregational support and action, pending favorable district board action on ministerial status.
 - b. Temporary leave of absence from active pastoral duties while decisions on the future of the relationship are in process.
 - c. Renegotiation of the employment relationships by contract for a specific time, for example, one year, with review possibilities by either the pastor or the congregation. Such a renegotiation would require appropriate procedures for congregational support.
 - d. Resignation by the pastor with an effective date that would be far enough in the future to allow for personal, family, and vocational adjustments.
 - e. Immediate resignation with the congregational option of a vote to call the pastor again to serve the congregation.
3. Caring and skillful members of the appropriate committee shall devise a means of sharing the information with the congregation and the district in ways that respect the privacy of the people involved, indicate next procedures, and provide opportunities for church members to share their concern with members of the committee in either formal or informal settings.
 4. In the event of the remarriage of the pastor, open communication is encouraged between that person and the appropriate congregational and/or district committees.

We have placed upon some clergy marriages a heavy and unrealistic demand that is most difficult to fulfill. We have trapped them in isolation and have demanded exemplary conduct. It is now time for us to see these marriage partners as first of all male and female, with the same drives, needs, and wants as any other human beings. Therefore, all we have said about marriage and divorce and remarriage in relation to church members applies also to them. For them, the faith community has a singular opportunity and responsibility to become the extended family within which they may move toward wholeness and fulfillment. And their wholeness and creativity in marriage will be reflected many times over in the lives and marriages to whom they minister.

Recommendations given in Sections II. D. and III. C. of the paper "Marriage and Divorce" are also applicable here.

1/2000

Office of Ministry
Church of the Brethren General Board
1451 Dundee Avenue
Elgin, Illinois 60120-1694