
Must Polygamists Divorce?

by Russell Staples

Polygamy is probably the most complex issue with which Adventism has had to deal in its missionary enterprise. Historically, the actions and judgments of the church have not always been consistent, or evenly tempered with love and justice. To study the requirements the church makes of converts who have already entered polygamous marriages, a General Conference committee met during the 1981 Annual Council. Hopefully, the deliberations will continue. There is obviously no easy solution, but it would seem to be possible to support the case for a limited accommodation of a less than ideal form of marriage within the church under certain circumstances.

The present policy has been followed for over 40 years. A man living in a state of polygamy who wishes to join the church is required to change his status by putting away all but one of his wives. Alternatively, the wives may be baptized, but not the husband. The policy assumes that in some times and places polygamy may be a *legal*

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form of marriage, but is *never* compatible with Christianity. What is not well known is that the Adventist church has not always held to this position.

The Adventist church has always insisted that monogamy is the Christian form of marriage. But for 11 years (1930–1941) the official policy of the denomination, adopted at Autumn Council, allowed that “persons found living in a state of polygamy at the time the gospel light comes to them, and who have entered into plural marriage before knowing it to be a custom condemned by the Word of God, may upon recommendation of responsible field committees be admitted to baptism and the ordinances of the church, and may be recognized as probationary members.”¹ The principal limitation on such probationary members was that they could not hold church office.

Characteristics of Polygamy

The Adventist church is confronted with the fact that polygamy is a worldwide phenomenon and is not passing into oblivion. Indeed, over 70 percent of the societies in the world practice polygamy. Islamic law approves of polygamy, and it therefore continues to be practiced in many of the

numerous Muslim countries of the world. African societies, more than those in any other part of the globe, accept polygamy as the ideal form of marriage.² Polygamy, then, remains a serious problem, not only for church leaders, but for the young women of these cultures, who have no power to prevent their own initially monogamous marriage from ending up in polygamy and who fear and resent that possibility.

The root motivation for polygamy is a passionate longing for children. In contemporary Western societies, the purpose of marriage has come to be primarily the fostering of a relationship of love and mutual support between a man and woman; but, in societies that approve of polygamy, the principal purpose of marriage is the procreation and socialization of children. Influential males are committed to having the largest number of descendants possible. In fact, every lineage, every family, every person feels compelled to procreate and produce heirs.

Traditionally, there have been other reasons for polygamy. One of the most obvious is the desire of parents to have offspring who will support them during their old age. Another reason, in societies where there is an excess of women over men, is to avoid the social anomaly of an unmarried woman. A third reason, in subsistence agricultural societies, is economic. Wives and children provide labor to make agricultural holdings productive.

Polygamy takes on many shapes and sizes. In some patrilineal societies with institutionalized systems of bridewealth, it is extremely stable. The marriage bond may not be regarded as terminated by death, and there may be no institutionalized means of divorce. On the other hand, in some matrilineal societies there is an inbuilt instability. Almost every marriage goes through a cycle of beginning and ending. These fundamental differences mean that missionaries working in different societies have had widely differing experiences dealing with polygamous converts.

In contemporary society polygamy is taking on new, repugnant forms. Although the transition from a subsistence, agricultural economy to a cash economy often deters many from polygamy, the wealthy and powerful have increased means to buy and support a number of wives. In the traditional household an additional wife was usually appreciated by the other wives because she helped not only with household maintenance, but with the heavy tasks of food production and preparation. However, in the city, styles of life and housing often lead to the first wife resenting the intrusion of a second wife and end in the first wife's walking out. Traditionally, some forms of polygamy functioned to stabilize marriage; but, among contemporary urban elites, polygamy is a major cause of marital breakdown.

Response of Missionaries

When Adventists entered the mission field, they were confronted with at least six possible ways for the church to deal with polygamous families desiring membership. The options fell into two main categories. Theologically and historically, the key question was whether the Christian church would separate members of polygamous families or keep them together:

- I. The family is separated.
 - A. The husband is required to retain the first wife.
 - B. The husband is allowed to choose one of the wives.
- II. The family is kept together.
 - A. None of the spouses may be baptized, but church attendance is encouraged.
 - B. All the spouses may be baptized, but not advanced to church office.
 - C. All the wives may be baptized, but not the husband.
 - D. Only the first wife may be baptized.

Most commonly in the early days, Adventist missionaries separated polygamous families, requiring that the husband choose one of his wives and divorce the others (Option I-B). In societies where polygamous marriages are inherently unstable, this policy seems to have worked reasonably well, except for differences of opinion as to which wife was to be retained (a difference that remains unsettled today). In societies in which polygamous marriages were extremely stable, missionaries encountered stubborn resistance to separation. In fact, in some societies which had no institutionalized form of divorce, the tribe simply refused to countenance the separation arranged by the missionaries. Missionaries, unnerved by implacable resistance and terribly torn by the horrendous social consequences that followed upon the rending apart of families—separation of mothers from their children and the consignment of a wife to a life of prostitution—were forced to the conclusion that, under some circumstances, it was best to keep the families together. Usually this meant baptizing all the wives and weeping with the husband who was barred from fully entering the life of the church and receiving the Lord's Supper (Option II-C). Some of the more enterprising Adventist missionaries simply baptized the entire family (Option II-B).

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Differences in Adventist practice reflected confusion within the nineteenth-century missionary movement, when for the first time in the history of Christianity, large numbers of converts came from already

polygamous families. Not only were the various mission boards confronted with different social contexts and forms of polygamy; they also interpreted polygamy differently. Some considered⁹ polygamous union as essentially marriage and consequently regarded separation as divorce; others regarded polygamous marriage as a form of socially institutionalized adultery. Neither did they all agree on the dictates of Scripture.

Teaching of Scripture

Recourse to Scripture did not easily settle the issues. True, it was generally agreed that the Genesis record (1:27; 2:21–24) of an original monogamy was to be regarded as indicative of the divine will. Also, Old Testament stories often distinguish between a principal and lesser wives, indicating that monogamy was recognized by the Hebrews as the ideal form of marriage. It is also possible to point out that the history of polygamy in the Old Testament is far from beautiful. It is a stark portrayal of envy and jealousy among wives, of love and hatred that is passed on from mothers to their children and perpetuated in rifts and bloodshed in the family, of husbands who are torn in their commitments, of fathers who fail to control the internecine strife in their own families, and of men who lose the will to discipline themselves and ultimately become the slaves of passion. The missionaries conceded that the pageant is occasionally relieved by vignettes of love and beauty, but could persuasively insist that the Old Testament record of polygamy, as a whole, reveals a dark story that is a powerful argument in favor of monogamy.

However, the Old Testament never expressly forbids polygamy. In fact, the striking description in Genesis of marriage states that “a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24, RSV) and is not, in itself, incompatible with polygamy.

Indeed, polygamy appears early in Old Testament history. The Old Testament supports the institution of the levirate,³ and no stigma is attached to leviratic marriage. Ruth, after all, is blessed in memory of Tamar, and both of them are listed in the genealogical table of Jesus (Matt. 1:3, 6). Polygamy is inevitable in any society in which the levirate is a binding obligation.

All denominations had to recognize that there is no direct statement in the New Testament either recognizing or prohibiting polygamy. The most obvious occasion for Jesus to say something about polygamy was in connection with the question regarding the woman who had seven husbands (six of them by the levirate) (Matt. 22: 23–33; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–28). But He did not make use of this occasion to protect marriage from the leviratic custom that was a major cause of polygamy.

However, Christian attitudes toward polygamy do not depend solely on explicit references to the practice in Scripture. Positions on polygamy reflect the churches' general views of marriage and divorce. The Catholic Church has traditionally justified its practice of separating polygamous families on the grounds that such unions are adulterous and not true marriages—in fact, the principle of absolute monogamy requires that they be separated. Protestants have been more inclined to regard polygamy as marriage—inferior and problematic, but nevertheless marriage—and the separation of such marriages as divorce. Each, of course, points to Scripture to justify its position.

Catholics cite Mark 10:11 to buttress their insistence on absolute monogamy. If a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, then logically the marriage of a man to an additional wife is likewise to be regarded as adultery. Certainly this passage indicates how much Christ raised the standards of the Christian marriage above the standards acceptable in Old Testament times, and it is imperative that the church maintain the standard of

marriage that may be extrapolated from this saying of Jesus. But this passage deals with the person who is already within the household of faith. It is not directly applicable to the essential missionary problem of how to deal with the man who has contracted a plural marriage prior to becoming a Christian. That this passage implies a very high standard of monogamy is clear, but it would seem to be insufficient of itself, given other Scriptural evidence and the lack of any specific interdict against polygamy, to establish the necessity of an absolutist monogamy.

Protestants in favor of a responsible and considered policy of admitting families who are converted to the church while in the state of polygamy, cite the “Pauline privilege” (I Cor. 7:12–20). Paul, after quoting the command of the Lord (7:10), invokes his apostolic authority to mitigate that rule and orders that marriage may be dissolved, not only on grounds of adultery, but also because the conversion of one of the partners may result in so much tension that the marriage cannot be endured. He advises the believing spouse to try to hold the marriage together; but if this fails, then the spouse “. . . is not under bondage in such cases: . . . God hath called us to peace” (7:15). Those missionaries opposed to an absolutist position also referred to Jesus' handling of the case of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:3–11). They believed that it was very significant that while the Jews held that adultery made divorce obligatory, Jesus' pronouncement “Neither do I condemn thee” (8:11) indicates that He believed adultery could be forgiven.

Debates among Adventists

We have already noted the differences in the way Adventist missionaries dealt with polygamists. Some insisted on the “putting away of all wives but one”; others tried to keep families together and were willing to baptize all the wives, but not the husband;

others, arguing that the Gospel had to deal with people in the state in which it found them, baptized entire polygamous families. These differences reflected the experience of the missionaries in dealing with different forms of polygamy, as well as differing interpretations of Scripture. The General Conference administration organized a "Missionary Round Table Conference" in 1913 in an attempt to achieve unanimity of interpretation and practice. Evidently the effort was not successful. In January 1926, the African Division printed an edition of its "Plans and general policies" that permitted converts to remain in polygamous marriages. Missionaries in parts of that division had encountered patrilineal peoples with stable forms of polygamy who strongly resisted the separation of families. The heart of the African Division policy reflects that practical reality:

. . . it is agreed that natives living in the state of polygamy at the time the gospel light comes to them, . . . may be admitted to baptism and the ordinances of the church, but can never hold office. . . .⁴

Later the same year, and quite likely as a response to the action of the African Division, the General Conference convened another "Missionary Round Table Conference." At the conference the various parties supported their views vigorously without reaching a consensus. But shortly thereafter, the General Conference in session resoundingly countermanded the policy adopted by the African Division. It was voted to recommend: "That in no case should a man living in polygamy be admitted into the fellowship of the church."⁵

A difficult marriage problem encountered in some of the countries of Latin America was brought to the attention of the same General Conference session. In the absence of divorce laws⁶, it was the prevailing practice for persons having contracted an unhappy marriage to simply leave their legal spouse and strike up a de facto, but illegal, "marriage." Many couples in

this circumstance who had lived together for years and raised a family had accepted the Adventist message and wished to become members of the church. The predicament of the church was that they could not be married, because (at least) one of the spouses was already married and could not obtain a divorce. Any kind of marriage service to regularize the union would create an illegal case of bigamy. The session ruled that worthy families in this circumstance could be admitted to church membership without the benefit of either divorce or remarriage.

Thus the session sanctioned liaisons that were not legal marriages, while at the same time denying membership to men who were legally married and living in faithfulness to their wives. Here, in striking juxtaposition within the same minutes, is a resounding triumph of grace over law, in the one case, and the withholding of grace, in the other.

Subsequent to the 1926 General Conference, the African Division appears to have appealed the case and was successful in getting a committee appointed to give study to "Polygamy among Primitive Tribes." This committee met and submitted a memorandum to the General Conference Committee, in effect, recommending a return to the African Division policies. In a dramatic reversal of the action taken by the General Conference in session four years earlier, the 1930 Fall Council adopted a policy that permitted the baptism of polygamous families under certain circumstances.⁷ There must have been many with earnest convictions and a sense of urgency about the matter for a Fall Council meeting to overrule a policy adopted at a General Conference session. It is of interest that W. H. Branson, who had been president of the African Division since its inception in 1920, had just been appointed a vice-president of the General Conference and was one of the chairmen of the 1930 Fall Council session.

Some of the divisions resisted the new policy; both the Northern and the Central European Divisions retained the more re-

strictive 1926 General Conference policy in their manuals and followed it in practice. Within a year of W. H. Branson's appointment as president of the mission section of the Central European Division in 1938, that division adopted the more liberal 1930 policy. However, the implementation of the policy in Tanganyika (a central European mission bordering on Kenya, a mission field under the jurisdiction of the Northern European Division) provoked a storm of protest from Northern Europe to the General Conference. This incident was probably one of the factors that set a train of events in motion that led to the demise of the 1930 policy.

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A subcommittee of the Home and Foreign Officers was appointed to give further study to the polygamy problem and make suggestions that would lead to a united worldwide standard. In 1941 the General Conference in session adopted a policy which diametrically opposed the 1930 policy. It requires “that a man living in a state of polygamy . . . shall be required to change his status by putting away all his wives save one,”⁸ It did, however, permit the wives of a polygamist to become baptized church members under certain circumstances. In general it is this latter provision which has become the operating policy of the church for the last 41 years. The wives are baptized, but not the husband; and, not uncommonly, the provisions spelled out in the minutes governing the circumstances under which the wives may be baptized are overlooked. In what appears to be self-conscious sensitivity to both the dramatic

reversals in the dealings of the church with polygamy and the ineffectiveness of the church in maintaining a united standard, the minutes end with the strong admonition “. . . that the above policy supercedes all previous policies on polygamy.” This policy, without substantial modification, remains today the official standard of the church.

Principles To Consider

The practice of baptizing all the wives, but not the husband has, in effect, become a way of avoiding the real issue at stake. It bypasses the policy without providing a solution. This is not a satisfactory course of action, because it leaves the husband in a state of exclusion from the community of faith. Perhaps some persons in our individualistic Western societies could endure this painful isolation and retain their faith and commitment to the church, but this is almost an impossibility for persons in communal societies.

This is a good time to return to basic issues and consider the matter from the beginning. The first step requires that the church clearly spell out the four possible judgments that it could make regarding polygamy. These are arranged as follows in descending order of gravity: 1). Polygamy is an institutionalized form of adultery which is always and under all circumstances objectively sinful. 2). Polygamy is a legal but inferior form of marriage which is not compatible with Christianity under any circumstances. 3). Polygamy is a form of marriage which falls short of, and even opposes, the Christian ideal; but under rare and extenuating circumstances it can be temporarily accommodated within the church. 4). Polygamy is an acceptable form of marriage, and the most helpful attitude which can be assumed is that it is more suitable to some social situations than is monogamy.

The second step requires that the prin-

ciples with which the church makes its judgment of polygamy be equally clearly spelled out. It would seem that the following principles for guiding the practice of the Adventist church can be adequately defended. The first is a social/legal distinction which cannot be ignored; the second and third are biblical/theological principles: A). Socially approved polygamous marriages, contracted in good faith, should be recognized as legal marriages. The implication is that to “put away” a wife is a euphemism for divorce. B). Marriage is in principle monogamous, but not in an absolutist sense. C). Marriage is intrinsically a bond for life, but the principle of indissolubility cannot be maintained in an absolutist sense. The third step requires the application of these principles to the four possible judgments spelled out above.

The first judgment, once fairly commonly made by the churches, can no longer be sustained. The legality of traditional forms of polygamy is now generally recognized, and a legally recognized marriage may not be stigmatized as adultery.

The second view is based upon an absolutist view of monogamy which it does not seem possible to maintain on Scriptural evidence, as we have cursorily shown. While absolutist views have influenced mission thought and practice more than is generally recognized, both humanity and the Gospel are best served when a strict and compassionate, but not absolutist, position is taken regarding monogamy. Like the Sabbath, marriage was made for humankind and not humankind for marriage (cf. Mark 2:27).

One of the major difficulties with the absolutist position is that its implementation requires the church to insist upon divorce; and, as the churches discovered early on, it may not be legally and/or socially possible for a husband to divorce, on the grounds that he has become a Christian, perfectly honorable wives who wish to remain married to him. More than one society has ruled that the husband has incurred social and legal responsibilities from which he is not entitled

to withdraw on account of conversion. In addition, the social consequences of divorce may be so appalling that even Adventist missionaries have decided that, under some circumstances, the temporary accommodation of polygamy is a lesser evil than divorce.

But perhaps the immediate social difficulties and consequences are not as weighty as the consideration that it is the church that has taught many societies the possibility of divorce. Anthropologists ask whether the church, having once regularized the process of divorce, will be able to stop it when it has finished dealing with polygamy. To separate a polygamous family in the name of Christianity—when Jesus sternly condemned divorce and when, as we have noted, there is no explicit command against polygamy in the Scriptures—would seem to constitute an unbalanced emphasis on one aspect of the Christian understanding of marriage.

The third judgment—that polygamy, under rare and extenuating circumstances, can be temporarily accommodated within the church—is in harmony with the principles enumerated above. But the acceptance of this understanding does not immediately solve all problems. What it does do is to open the way for the church to face the legal, ethical, theological, and practical difficulties involved and make responsible decisions best suited to particular circumstances. This is the truest judgment that the church can make of polygamy.

The fourth view is a purely relativist stance which is unacceptable to those who accept that God has laid down certain norms and ideals for human life. Neither is it in harmony with principles B and C above.

The official position of the Adventist church, as defined in the 1941 policy, is theoretically the closest to judgment two above, except that it is not entirely clear, in terms of the policy, whether polygamy is regarded as marriage. The practice of baptizing all the wives, however, establishes the point practically, for if polygamy is not

marriage, then the wives would be living in adultery and would not be eligible for baptism.

The practice of baptizing all the wives moves the policy closer to the third viewpoint in practice than it is in theory. The argument invariably resorted to in justification of this practice is that each of the wives has only one husband. Where wives are victims of arranged marriages and have no choice in the matter, the logic of the case is sound. But the argument loses much of its force in the case of a woman who chooses to marry into an already polygamous union, for what is so different between the case of a man and that of a woman who of their own volition contract a polygamous marriage? The logic of this practice suggests that the church has come to accept, at least, one side of polygamous marriage as something it can live with.

Proposals for the Future

The situation the church now faces appears to be more complex than it has ever been. In many traditional societies the old social structures and institutions remain relatively unchanged, and so also the old problems in dealing with polygamous converts. But new and less attractive forms of polygamy have emerged among urban elites, and such marriages may call for different solutions. Another factor is that the Adventist churches overseas have solidified their traditions of dealing with polygamists over the years and are not likely to change easily—least of all will they be likely to accept decisions made by others for them. Yet a fourth significant factor must be taken into consideration: Many educated young people—especially women—have come to reject polygamy and the status of structured inferiority it assigns to wives. Adventist young people are generally progressive and would feel let down if the church were to endorse an anachronistic, polygamous past.

And yet something needs to be done for

those men and their families who accept the Gospel while living in a polygamous state and yearn for baptism and the blessings of church fellowship. It is appropriate for the church to maintain a staunch, but not absolutist position, regarding monogamy. This stance should not preclude the temporary accommodation of polygamy within the church under carefully defined circumstances.

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But if the church, in some places, embarks upon the practice of cautiously and responsibly admitting some polygamous families to membership, it will need to zealously safeguard its witness to monogamy. It certainly must maintain a rigorous standard of monogamy for those who are already Christians.

In taking a non-absolutist position, the church must also take upon itself serious responsibilities at two levels. The first relates to the church and its community. The overall attitude and social environment of the local church must be evaluated before the inclusion of a polygamous family. For instance, it may be more appropriate to baptize polygamous families in rural tribal conversions than among some city elites. And the church will need to decide whether the form of polygamy involved is adequately stable. The legal status of both polygamy and divorce may also have a bearing on the situation. At a different level, the church needs to know whether the relationship between the spouses is true and that they can be comfortably brought into the fellowship of the community of faith. And the church needs to take upon itself the responsibility of

guiding the family in the weighty decisions that it will need to make. The church should act, believing it is doing what is best under the circumstances.

Marriage, Jesus said, is "from the beginning" (Mark 10:6), and the divine ideal for marriage laid down at creation retains its unchanging validity. Jesus clearly taught that marriage, in principle, is a covenant for life. Divorce was easily permissible under the provisions of the Mosaic law; therefore, Jesus went behind Moses to the order of creation to establish the meaning and sanctity of the marriage relationship.

But marriage is also a human institution and, as such, has come to exist in many

forms. Just as the Jewish people departed widely from the quintessential form and beauty of God's original intention, so have many other societies. The form of marriage in the Palestine of Jesus' time was less than perfect. It did not preclude three unhappy possibilities—the levirate, easy divorce, and polygamy. Jesus sternly condemned its abuses, yet he accepted this order of things as marriage and at Cana of Galilee blessed the wedding with a miracle. So, also, the Adventist church in this age may have to temporarily cope with less than ideal forms of marriage, while steadfastly and compassionately pointing to a better way.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The 1930 Resolution on Polygamous Marriages in Heathen Lands, "Actions of the Autumn Council of the General Conference Committee," Vol. XIV, Book 1, Fifty-Ninth Meeting, Nov. 3, 1930. The text is reproduced in appendix C.

2. In 75 percent of African societies more than 20 percent of families are polygamous. And for all sub-Saharan countries the mean number of wives per 100 married males is 150. (Remi Clignet, *Many Wives, Many Powers* [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970], p. 17.)

3. From the Latin word *levir*, meaning brother-in-law. The marriage contract, sealed by the payment of bridewealth, is not regarded as terminated by the death of the husband. It is the duty of the brother of the deceased husband to marry his widow and to raise up children to the deceased.

4. "General Conference of Seventh-day Ad-

ventists (African Division): Plans and general policies adopted with reference to its work" (Kenilworth, Cape: Sentinel Publishing Company, January, 1926). The full text is reproduced in appendix A.

5. *General Conference Committee Minutes*, Vol. XIII, Book 1, 6th Meeting, June 13, 1926, p. 44. The text is reproduced in appendix B.

6. Roman Catholic canon law has never sanctioned divorce in the sense of a dissolution of the marriage bond. The problem, in Catholic thinking, regarding the marriage-divorce-remarriage cycle is with divorce, whereas in Protestant thinking it is in connection with remarriage.

7. The text is reproduced in appendix C.

8. "General Conference Policy, as voted June 4, 1941." The text is reproduced in appendix D.

APPENDIX A

The 1926 African Division Policy "General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (African Division): Plans and general policies adopted with reference to its work," pp. 8, 9.

POLYGAMY.

Whereas, the Message finds certain natives in Central and Southern Africa living in a state of polygamy, and tribal customs in many parts subject a cast-off wife to a lifelong shame and disgrace, even to the point of becoming common property, her children also becoming disgraced thereby, it is agreed that natives living in the state of polygamy at the time the gospel light comes to them, who have entered into plural marriages before

knowing it to be a custom condemned by the Word of God, be accepted as members of the Probationers' Class, after having spent sufficient time in the Hearers' Class to give evidence of conversion. These persons may be admitted to baptism and the ordinances of the church, but can never hold office or become active in church work, or become members in full membership, unless or until circumstances should change as to leave them with only one companion.

This action merely contemplates the recognition of a condition which cannot be changed without resulting in great injustice to innocent persons, and is not to be construed as endorsing polygamy in any way; and anyone entering into a plural marriage relation after receiving a knowledge of the Truth should be regarded as living in

adultery, and dealt with by the church accordingly. A man who has apostatised from the Truth, and who during the state of his apostasy, has taken a plurality of wives, may not be received again unless he puts away the wives taken during his apostasy. Before polygamous converts are baptized by anyone, counsel should be had with the superintendent of the field.

APPENDIX B

The 1926 Resolutions on Polygamy and Marriage Relationships *General Conference Committee Minutes*, Vol. XIII, Book 1, 6th Meeting, June 13, 1926

WE RECOMMEND, 1. That great care be used in the examination of peoples in heathen lands for entrance into the church, and as this examination relates to this practise, we would advise the following:

(a) That in no case should a man living in polygamy be admitted into the fellowship of the church.

(b) That preceding his entrance into the church a sufficient time of probation be given him to test out his sincerity in separating himself from this practice.

WE RECOMMEND, 2. That where parties are living together as husband and wife, that they be not baptized nor received into church fellowship until they have been legally married; however,—

Inasmuch as we find many parties whose matrimonial alliances became badly tangled before they accepted the truth, and as the laws of some of our countries are such that it is impossible for them to become legally married; and as some of these desire to obey the truth when it comes to them, to be baptized and unite with the church; and in many cases, after careful investigation, we cannot advise them to separate and thus break up their home and present relationship, for this would only make conditions worse, and knowing that the gospel truth does not come to people to make their conditions worse, but better, and that God receives a sinner where he is found and saves him when he repents and turns to Him: therefore,—

WE RECOMMEND, 3. That in countries where the laws are such as to make impossible legal marriage of certain persons whose matrimonial alliances have become badly tangled on account of these laws; and when such persons have given real evidence that they are truly converted and are in harmony with the truth and desire to unite with us, all such cases shall be presented to the conference or mission committee of the field in which they reside; and if, after careful investigation, this committee is clear in the case, then the parties may be recommended to church fellowship; with the understanding, however, that if the time ever comes when such persons can be legally married, they do so, and that until so married, they be not eligible to hold any office in the church which requires ordination.

APPENDIX C

The 1930 Resolution on Polygamous Marriages in Heathen Lands "Actions of the Autumn Council of the General Conference Committee," Vol. XIV, Book 1, 59th Meeting, Nov. 3, 1930

RESOLVED, that in such sections, persons found living in a state of polygamy at the time the gospel light comes to them, and who have entered into plural marriage before knowing it to be a custom condemned by the Word of God, may upon recommendation of responsible field committees be admitted to baptism and the ordinances of the church, and may be recognized as probationary members. They shall not, however be admitted to full membership unless or until circumstances shall change so as to leave them with only one companion.

This action merely contemplates the recognition of a condition which in some places cannot be changed without resulting in great injustice to innocent persons and is not to be construed as endorsing polygamy in any way. Anyone entering into a plural marriage relation after receiving a knowledge of the truth should be regarded as living in adultery, and dealt with by the church accordingly. A man who has apostatized from the truth, and who during the time he is in apostasy, enters into plural marriage may not be received again into any church relationship until he puts away the wives taken during his apostasy and in every way brings forth fruits meet for repentance.

In countries where separation of families can be arranged without injustice being done to innocent parties only one wife should be retained, but we recognize the right of the man to choose the one to be retained.

APPENDIX D

General Conference Policy, as voted June 4, 1941

WE RECOMMEND, 1. That a man found living in a state of polygamy when the gospel reaches him, shall upon conversion be required to change his status by putting away all his wives save one, before he shall be considered eligible for baptism and church membership.

2. That men thus putting away their wives shall be expected to make proper provision for their future support, and that of their children, just as far as it is within their power to do so.

WE RECOMMEND, 3. That in all such cases the church co-operate with the former husband in making such provision for these wives and children as will provide for their care and protect them from disgrace and undue suffering.

4. That we recognize the right of a wife who has been put away by a polygamous husband to marry again.

5. That wives of a polygamist, who have entered into marriage in their heathen state, and who upon accepting Christianity are still not permitted to leave their husbands because of tribal custom, may upon approval of the local and union committees become baptized members of the church. However should a woman who is a member of the church enter into marriage as a secondary wife, she shall be disfellowshipped and shall not be readmitted to the church unless or until she separates from her polygamous husband.

6. That it is understood that the above policy supercedes all previous policies on polygamy.