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## **WHAT ARE WE SAYING ABOUT MARRIAGE?**

A DEWCOM report on the theology of marriage to the 2016 Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA)

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## Background

As a consequence of the on-going work on the church and human sexuality and the Changing Patterns of Family-life in Southern Africa, DEWCOM was tasked to make available to Conference 2016 a report on the theology of marriage.<sup>1</sup> This is DEWCOM's report on a theology of marriage.

It must be kept in mind that this document does not say everything that can be said about such a theology. Most, if not all, of the issues briefly referred to will need to be developed more intentionally and in-depth. Such a complete work will take much longer to complete and be very difficult to deal with within the confines of the meeting of the Annual Conference. It is, however, hoped for that this document will stimulate, within the context of the Annual Conference, further conversations on the church's theology of marriage and is, for this purpose, a more comprehensive work.

### 1 The introduction

There is a pervasiveness regarding a theology of marriage, namely, that it is the Church's witness to strengthen marriage as social and religious custom. In seeking to do this the Church has always placed its theology of human sexuality and marriage in the context of moral living. Various ethical, moral, cultural and historical events inform a theology of marriage. Attitudes to marriage, human sexuality and family-life reflect cultural, social, religious and other views. A theology of marriage can only be appreciated when these complexities are taken into account. A (any) theology of marriage is the result of a 'dialect between faith and culture.' This much is clear when the history of the Church's theology of marriage as well as the biblical witness is considered.

### 2 A point of departure

For many in the MCSA, marriage - its meaning, purpose and constitution - is 'under serious threat' of losing its particular identity and power as the defining context of God's moral will for human bonding, human sexuality and family-life. The threat can be explored through the use of a 'distance' between, on the one hand, the marriage liturgy and, on the other hand, couples and families' contemporary experiences and expressions of marriage: The theology and morality that is envisaged by the liturgy is 'seldom the reality couples and families encounter in their daily lives.'

In the Methodist Service Book (1975 - English version) it is stated that 'the minister shall ensure that the Christian understanding of marriage and its obligations is explained to the couple. The text of the Marriage Service is designed to be used for this purpose.'

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<sup>1</sup> See Yearbook 2016 chapter 18 page 251.

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“Marriage is given by God. According to the teaching of Christ, marriage is the life-long union in body, mind and spirit, of one man and one woman. It is his will that in marriage the love of man and woman should be fulfilled in the wholeness of their life together, in mutual companionship, helpfulness and care. By the help of God this love grows and deepens with the years. Such marriage is the foundation of true family life, and, when blessed with the gift of children, is God's chosen way for the continuance of mankind and the bringing up of children in security and trust. The union of husband and wife is in Scripture compared to the union of Christ and his Church, for he loved the Church and gave himself for it.”<sup>2</sup>

Some Christian couples/families must personally engage with this ‘distance’ for their every-day experiences and expressions of marriage and family-life are different than what is envisaged by the liturgy. Marriage and family-life here include the processes leading to the day of the wedding ceremony as well. Their moral integrity may be at stake because some of these every-day experiences and expressions are nevertheless viewed as morally or otherwise legitimized and within the will of God. Some clergy, particularly as marriage officers, must also engage with this personally. This is particularly so in the absence of an alternative liturgy which would capture a theology and morality that would not go against their own moral identity or conscience.

A Christian theology of marriage is formed within a faith community characterised by a plurality of views on what God's will is for human bonding, human sexuality and family-life. It takes seriously the reality that we live and do theology and ethics within a context of plurality in which we must seriously investigate our own prejudices. Perspectives on marriage and its challenges are situated in and shaped by historical contexts. For example, the church's view on marriage has over the centuries, from the immediate post-apostolic Church to the Reformation to the Enlightenment, undergone some fundamental changes. Is marriage the same for people of the eleventh century as it is for today? Is it the same phenomenon regardless of history and culture? Marriage is, in the first instance, a universal social custom or feature of humanity, predating Christianity, although Christianity has something distinctive to say about marriage.

As Methodist, we have an obligation to live as those who ‘... believe that there is far more that binds us together than what divides us, and that not even our different convictions on ... (the theology of marriage) need compromise the essential unity that is ours in Christ.’<sup>3</sup> As Methodist we are to live within the moral will of God informed by the biblical witness whose use in the production of theological and moral documents is informed by tradition, experience and reason.

### 3 The challenges

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<sup>2</sup> From the Methodist Service Book 1975 English version ‘The Marriage Service,’ pages 183 – 195. It must be acknowledged that different liturgies already exist, especially with regards to greater sensitivity to the use of language and gender. However, they, in essence, do not deviate from the basic suppositions captured by the liturgy above.

<sup>3</sup> See The Methodist Book of Order Twelfth Edition page 216.

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Marriage as long-standing custom or institution is facing many challenges. The challenges are not about the importance of marriage. In spite of events like the rise in co-habitation and divorce, marriage as social and religious institution is still popular. We live in a 'high marriage society' where marriage is still the norm. This means that the church must indeed do all it can to strengthen marriages through various marriage enrichment courses and so on. This document does not deal directly with abuse or dysfunction, in whatever form, in marriages or family-life. The focus there would be appropriate pastoral care and counselling intervention programs.

### 3.1 Consider the context

- The relatively high incidence of co-habitation
- The growing trend of equality in all aspects between male and female as an essential characteristic of the contemporary relationship and intimate relationships thus becoming more 'democratic.'
- The 'restructuring of family-life:' example: The preference for, or as an example, the consequence of a divorce; single-parenting and extended families
- Couples/families caught up in love-less/unhealthy/abusive relationships whatever the causes especially where issues like an underlying patriarchal sentiment or social structure may contribute to the abuse or violence
- The separation between human sexuality and marriage and changing views on human sexuality
- Couples getting married for the first time later on in life
- The high rate of divorce
- The importance of emotional satisfaction in intimate relationships or, for example, different understandings of love and commitment based on emotional satisfaction
- High rate of children born outside of marriage
- The legalisation of Same-sex civil unions
- Economic issues, for example, people having to work away from home
- Traditional African concepts of marriage
- Child headed households because of illness and other factors
- The development of new hermeneutics dealing with the use of the Bible in different ways than before
- The development of theological and moral documents in the context of plurality or diversity where at any given time and place you will find a diversity of, often in conflict with one another, moral and other norms and values and perspectives and world-views

To take just one example and explore it a bit more: Traditional African concepts of marriage.

(To add here)

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### 3.2 Consider the history

Historical factors which may have contributed to the formation of the challenges facing the current theology of marriage:

- The developing understanding of the role of gender in the Bible and Christian Tradition and society in general
- The development of a theology based on 'the created order of things' or 'a Natural Law ethics,' for example, the created order of male and femaleness.
- The development of the Covenantal relationship to describe (prescribe) God's union with God's people and the use of this as metaphor for human relationships
- The early church's acceptance of human sexuality and marriage as part of the good creation of God - what a person did with her or his body was important and affecting the soul
- The church's elevation of celibacy and virginity during later years of the Church's history and the view that the fall (sin) is present in human sexuality, primarily because of its link to sexual passion. Therefore every sexual act is or is potentially, tainted by sin. Marriage was thus viewed as the answer to channel these passions in a 'moral way'
- In the Middle Ages at the height of the Monastic movement sexuality was seen as potentially distorted, sinful and addictive and contributed to the separation between the 'elite' and 'ordinary' Christians
- The Reformers' rejection of the ideals of the Monastic movement and the change of human sexuality to be viewed as potentially being part of what it means to be obedient to the calling of one's life within the order of creation. Sexuality was seen as based in creation and marriage as a way in which chastity can be exemplified. In other words, marriage was seen as a way of being Christian in the created world. A movement thus towards a duty one has with respect to the created order of things and through which the present order is preserved. It was the Puritan movement who took this development to its climax: As Monasticism elevated celibacy and virginity so they celebrated the relational aspect of love in the context of a Covenantal relationship wherein the passions of love was restricted to the marriage bed.

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- The development of love as central to intimate relationships following from contexts in which people got married primarily for economic and pragmatic reasons and in which marriage was something arranged between households
- Marriage moving away from being a family affair presided over by the head of the household rooted in local kinship relations and local economics and politics.
- The difference at the time of the early church between Jewish and Roman views: For the Romans marriage required a legal contract, although only for the elite and not the masses. It involved issues around inheritance and ownership. The only requirements were consensus of the two people involved and everyone else viewing the relationship as 'being married.' This made the marriage 'legal.' For the Jewish people there was the importance of betrothal and the consummation of the relationship with the sexual act as initiating 'marriage.' The early church's approach to marriage had to deal with the tension between 'the marriage is a period of betrothal but made at the consummation' and 'a marriage is made when the parties give their consent to it.' It was seen as a process and not one single act. Over time the importance of betrothal or process was diminished and the principle of consent elevated. It was in the sixteenth century that marriage was acknowledged by the church as legitimate if the wedding ceremony was performed in front of a priest.
- In Europe there is no evidence of a particular Christian wedding rite until the medieval period. It is only in the nineteenth century that marriage was 'made' not 'solemnised' by the church's wedding ceremony and marriage, as consensus between two people, became the defined condition for the moral grounds of the intimate relationship. As an example of the 'fluency' around marriage it was common in Europe in the mid eighteenth century for the bride to be pregnant at the public ceremony for the wedding service.
- The onset of modernity with the Enlightenment in which sex became secularized and very much a private matter. It became something about one's personal convictions assisted by the latest technological advances. The Sex act became associated with pleasure and part of a quest for intimacy. There came a separation between sexual expression and marriage.
- A further development took place when relationship began to replace marriage as context for human sexuality and the quality of the relationship became more important
- The onset or development of the nuclear family and its importance for social and economic life in the Western world
- The missionary work by the westernised/European missionaries and subsequent colonisation of other understandings of marriage
- As a result of the Enlightenment the development of different/new ways of reading the Bible in which the role of science/objectivity were to replace earlier methodologies. See also Reader-Response and Social-Scientific approaches
- There is a civil and a spiritual dimension to marriage. As far as marriage affects civil society as a whole the state is considered to be in a position to stipulate the legal conditions of marriage. The view here is that the state and not just the church

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expresses something of God's rule. The marriage ceremony is thus viewed as an act of both 'state and church,' for both have an interest in the understanding and obligations associated with marriage.

- The elevation of marriage as a 'powerful mechanism for public virtue and orderliness.'
- The development in the West of marriage based on a contractual model and with this as an unbreakable contractual and 'forgivable outlet for mutual sexual desire and no adultery.'

### 3.3 Consider the theology

What are we currently saying about marriage?

- As far as the biblical witness is concerned it draws mainly on: Genesis 2: 18 (especially verse 24) – 25, Matthew 19: 3 – 9, (Mark 10: 2 – 12), Ephesians 5: 21 – 33 and Hebrews 13:4. This does not exclude the use of other passages, like for instance, Matthew 24: 36 – 44, John 2, Titus 2: 4 – 5 and 1 Corinthians chapter 7.
- Human beings are sexual beings and as such exist either as male or female which in turn together reflect the image of God. In God traits of both can be found. God uses human sexuality related to either being male or female as a way to attain the divine goal, namely, a community to enjoy God and each other.
- Marriage is viewed as given by God (a gift from God) as a life-long committed relationship between one man as husband and one woman as wife. The Creation account has to do with the 'natural created order of things related to gender, sexuality and marriage.' This natural created order of things places human sexuality within the context of gender, that is, one's male or femaleness. It also places the expression of human sexuality within the context of marriage. Marriage is the only context for the expression of one's sexuality which can only be had in terms of being either male or female. Together they form a community. This is the nature of human sexuality, namely, that it is linked to the created order of things. We relate as male or female and this forms the basis for societal and religious understandings of sex roles and proper and improper sexual behaviour.
- Originally human sexuality was seen as part of the good creation of God. A view that was overtaken by historical events but nevertheless re-emerged as the dominant view of Christianity. The issue has to do with marriage as the appropriate context for sexual expression and thus what would count as appropriate/inappropriate sexual behaviour.
- Marriage is seen as the appropriate context for family-life. The basic purpose of marriage is the bonding of sexual beings. The bonding of a couple as a basis for appropriate family-life as primary experience of community. In this sense male and female to complete one another. This can be replaced by the Jesus community as primary community but in which the family-unit continues to play a significant part as the continuing of the making of disciples for the primary community.

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- Gender roles rooted in male and femaleness. This is seen as intrinsic to human identity especially as far as their sexuality is concerned. There is thus no basic humanity outside or beyond this basic differentiation.
- Marriage is a vehicle through which social cohesion is attained
- One of the purposes of marriage is companionship
- The marriage relationship serves as a spiritual metaphor for the relationship between God and God's people
- The constitution of marriage requires a private inward commitment witnessed to in a public ceremony and consumed through sexual intercourse
- There is a civil or legal aspect to marriage in which the State as 'having been appointed by God' has a say for the sake of the welfare of society as a whole.
- Marriage has a likeness to Christ's relationship with the church. This serves as a model of what the roles of husband and wife ought to be in the relationship
- Marriage seen primarily as a contractual relationship

#### 4 Is there a different theology?

Some Christians are of the opinion that it is necessary to explore an alternative option. Such an alternative may include the following:

- The definition of marriage something else than a 'life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman' and God-given or as belonging to the created order of things. It is thus suggested that marriage need not be based on a Natural Law approach but rather one that takes into account a more modern scientific world-view
- A different reading of the relevant texts. It is especially the Genesis account (Gen.2:24) that needs to be re-read. According to the traditional reading of this text marriage is the one-flesh and life-long covenantal and exclusive relationship between a man and a woman and which may serve as the foundation of community. Jesus also refers to this text in Matthew 19. However, in the Jesus saying he deals with divorce and the focus is on a bonding that cannot be undone merely by referring to a contract of some kind. A wife cannot be 'disowned' as one would disown one's possessions. Becoming one flesh may mean becoming a distinct social unit in a combination of human sexuality and identity. Scripture also suggests that it was the woman who left her family and became incorporated into that of the husband's. The man leaving his family and join the woman's was not the custom. It can also be said that sexual consummation or procreation does not lie at the centre of this relationship but human bonding or companionship. From the beginning thus there is a focus on the relational aspect rather than gender and human sexuality. The creation account thus speaks about human to human relationship as equals, rather than gender or marriage. The reference to man and woman is rather about male and femaleness – a biological fact and not about husband and wife. The creation account is also to be seen as God creating humanity as a whole and not a, or, one particular human being. The word used for 'helper' is given in the 'male – singular form' and it



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is therefore problematic to say that the 'helper' referred to automatically speaks about woman as wife as in a marriage.

- In the Old Testament it is also not easy to find evidence that marriage consisted of this kind of monogamous relationship. As a helper that God created one needs to, again, speak about humanity as a whole and not a particular individual. It must also be noted that nowhere in the creation accounts is there any reference to a contract, agreement or wedding rite. In fact in the Hebrew Scriptures there is no reference to 'marriage.' A man would simply 'take' a woman. (See for instance Ruth 1: 4)
- The ideal of a monogamous marriage between one man and one woman reflect something of a Middle Eastern culture at the time for this ideal is found within a polygamous patriarchal society. Therefore such a ideal of marriage is subject to how the dialectic between faith and culture is resolved and in principle open to change
- The reference to Adam's wife is an interpretation and not what the relationship in essence speaks about.
- On the basis of a different reading of Scripture one could ask how it is that marriage is viewed as a 'gift from God,' and then only so when it is between one man as husband and one woman as wife.
- In the Pauline literature the gift referred to can be viewed as that of intimacy rather than marriage
- The first Christians did not invent immediately their own rites and customs. They did what was the norm within their local contexts.
- A theology based on marriage as relationship rather than as institution Marriage as relational and with the focus on the quality of the relationship
- A move away from marriage as in the first instance an unbreakable contract providing an outlet for sexual desires
- A return to marriage as process in which sexual intercourse may happen at a different time according to local custom
- A recognition of different cultural and traditional formalities
- Marriage based on companionship rather than contractual with equality or the democratisation of the intimate relationship as an important aspect of such a relationship rather than manipulation and domination
- Marriage as relational may more accurately reflect people's every-day experiences and expressions of marriage.
- Such a theology does not exclude but strengthen the focus on companionship, helpfulness, care, security, fidelity and trust as moral guidelines for healthy intimate relationships

## 5 The common good

The above guidelines for a theology of marriage capture an overall perspective that marriage as it is currently captured by the church's liturgy for the wedding ceremony can no longer, in the face of all the challenges it is facing, and as a result of the historical nature

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of a theology of marriage, be the absolute definition or context of a morally right/good intimate or sexual relationship and basis for family-life. It acknowledges that marriage is replaced by relationship. It separates human sexuality from, not marriage itself, but a singular event, namely the wedding ceremony which may include the legal contract. Marriage becomes a significant aspect of that relationship in that it publicly displays through the wedding ceremony, whatever form or process it takes, and liturgy used and the recognition thereof by all or others that the couple is committed to the relationship. The ceremony or public witness can take many forms according to various local customs in which the sexual act is an expression of a deepening of the bonding or companionship. Nor is it limited to one man as husband and one woman as wife. There is enough evidence to point towards this understanding of marriage as historically and culturally situated. The Bible does not view marriage in this sense only. It is rather a particular interpretation and use of the Bible that has brought about the current view. It is clear that the current liturgy in use cannot be any longer protected as though its approach to marriage is valid for all times and under all circumstances and duty and obedience is the primary motif for its morality and theology.

It is the will of God that, amongst others, trust, love, commitment, risk, vulnerability, equality, respect, and fidelity that made for spiritually and otherwise healthy companionship and bonding characterise human intimate relationships. Sexual expression is a deepening of the bonding in which these qualities are present. Human intimacy expressed and experienced in this way is a gift from God. It is clear that the Bible, nor Reason, nor Tradition nor Experience have anything against one or all of these as falling within the moral will of God.

The conclusion

The recommendation to Conference 2016 is to consider the appointment of a Standing Committee as a Sub-committee of DEWCOM to prepare the way for a liturgy for the Marriage Service that will capture a theological and moral foundation for marriage with its basis in, amongst others, the guidelines as given above. This different liturgy can be used, without fear of penalty, by those whose moral identity and conscious are otherwise at stake. Those whose moral identity will not allow them to do so will continue to use what is currently available. It is however, envisaged that much more work need to be done in all aspects related to a theology of marriage.

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