



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 11 [MB Confession of Faith]

Marriage, Singleness and Family

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Those who apply this confessional article to the life of the church will have to get used to seeing through a glass darkly. That does not mean God's *design* is unclear. The ideals for singleness, marriage, and family are clearly visible in the Bible—put into place from the very beginning. But sin wreaks havoc on God's design. The fallout from broken relationships, marriages, and families often makes it difficult to see a clear pastoral path. So it is important to be at peace with some ambivalence in this area of ministry.

It is equally important, however, to seize every opportunity to promote the ideals. These include sexual purity, believers marrying believers, lifetime marriages, loving families, and fulfilling singleness. The best times to preach and teach these ideals are in the absence of crisis—when individuals and couples and families are relatively healthy. There are also times, of course, when teaching and counsel need to be offered in situations of difficulty and brokenness. Thus there are two positions from which Article 11 can be applied: a proactive position and a reactive position.

Proactive Applications

Take Care of Yourself :

It is hypocritical to offer help in the interpersonal, marriage, and family relationships of others when the “helper's” own relationships in these areas are unattended. Before presuming to speak to the difficulties of other singles, couples, and families, care-givers must be open to hearing the voice of God in their own relationships. Before offering practical steps to others, there must be a continuing willingness in one's own life to forgive and be forgiven.

Continue Learning:

The temptation in all pastoral work is to rely on momentum. There is so much to do and so little time to pursue new insights and develop new skills. But faithfulness in ministry, especially in these relationship areas, demands it. Read. Attend conferences on singleness, marriage, and family. Take a single person to lunch and invite candid comments on how they experience life. Interview some people within the church family who have survived a divorce and ask them to rate the church's performance during that time. Spend an evening with some “empty nesters” who have done a great job of parenting, pumping them for their secrets. Invite yourself to an older adult meeting in the church and ask them whether they feel part of a family. Such vulnerability will open new windows for learning.

Establish Guidelines:

The worst time to decide how to respond to a failure in a relationship is when there are names attached. Every “decision” at that point will be taken personally and judged subjectively. It is better to anticipate the all-but-certain eventualities in the life of a church and be prepared with a set of response guidelines.

How one approaches such a “documented response” is critical. The temptation is to draft something that fits all people at all times and in all places. Hence the church formulates “Position Papers” and “Policy Statements.” But simple formulas rarely satisfy the complexities surrounding issues such as divorce and remarriage and even more rarely provide a redemptive response. It is better to establish a set of guidelines for creatively working through complicated failures in human relationship.



The genius of “guidelines” is that they can be cited rigidly or flexibly, in consultation with the Holy Spirit. For example, if the Marriage Guidelines state that “the couple must be open to submitting to a discernment group when extraordinary issues arise” and a couple currently living together is unwilling to do that, one can simply say, “those are our guidelines.” On the other hand, if the guidelines also state that “application for marriage must be submitted to the church at least four months in advance of the wedding date” and a repentant couple six months pregnant wants to get married before the baby comes, one can flex with some integrity for it is “merely” a guideline.

Whatever a given community establishes as a non-negotiable needs to be applied uniformly. Given the complexity of most marriage and family issues, inflexible positions and policies should be few and thought through carefully.

Program Marriage, Family, and Singleness Enrichments:

It would seem obvious that marriages and family systems need to be repaired before they fall apart, not after. Still, churches continue to invest considerably more resources trying to rebuild marriages and families rather than working to reinforce them. It is the wrong formula. Investments in marriage and family enrichment will pay huge dividends, while returns on crisis interventions will continue to be meager. Enrichment efforts and expenditures may not always produce quantifiable results, but failure to do so will—in the form of more broken homes.

Leaders and congregations should also consider ways to provide enrichment opportunities for often overlooked singles and single parents. These could focus on particular needs and challenges facing singles such as the call to sexual purity, the need for relational fulfillment, the discernment of ministry gifts, the enhancement of parenting skills, the development of support networks, and so on.

Give Attention to Curriculum:

Another proactive step is the intentional introduction of relational curriculum. It begins at the preschool level with lessons on how to get along with one another. It appropriately introduces elementary age children to their human sexuality. If the church is reluctant to offer the Creator’s version, the Deceiver’s version will rush in to fill the void. By the time our children are at the middle school level, if they don’t have some strong convictions about their self-worth and God-honoring ways of relating to one another, it is too late. Yet very few churches intentionally move their children through a curriculum that can grow healthy Christian singles, marriages, and families.

Premarital counseling ought to be lodged in the youth curriculum. Such an assertion simply faces up to the fact that most important decisions about dating, marriage, and family begin to firm up in junior high or middle school. If sexual purity, believers marrying believers, and lifetime marriages are ever to become defining values they need to be established long before courtship.

Dedicate Children:

Rightly understood and carried out, child dedications can proactively provide parenting advantages. Child dedications are fundamentally mislabeled—they are more accurately parent dedications. With their Christian sisters and brothers as witnesses, parents make a vow to God to provide their children with a Christian home.

Practical responses from the church family might include mentor couples or prayer partners for the parents dedicating their children. Minimally the dedication service should signal in some way a reciprocal commitment from the church family. It has been said that “It takes a village to raise a child,” but even more certainly it takes a Christian community to raise a child.

Affirm Singleness:

Too often the presence and the particular needs of singles and single parents are ignored in congregations where “traditional” family units predominate. Many larger churches are able to invest resources and staff into effective singles ministries, but smaller churches seldom have this option. In such



cases it is imperative that thought and effort be put into how singles and single parents are being integrated into church life.

Just as there are ways to disregard singleness, there are also ways to validate it. Often this involves simple things such as setting an odd number of chairs around tables or making sure singles are welcomed and included in small groups and fellowship activities. Qualified singles should be encouraged as much as anyone toward involvement in worship leading, administering the Lord's Supper, serving in leadership and team capacities, and pursuing other ministries and positions in the church. Singleness is best affirmed not so much by making special provisions for unmarrieds, but by intentionally including them in the ordinary life of the church family.

In some areas, however, more specific steps should be taken. First, we need to consider our use of language. Sermons and teaching can incorporate not only stories and illustrations about family and married life, but also about other life situations including singleness. References to church members could be termed more often as "households" rather than "families." Names and emphases for Bible classes and small groups can be reviewed—for instance, if a Sunday school session referred to as the "Young Marrieds" is also the only class available for career-age singles or young single parents, such a name will immediately put up a barrier against attendance by those singles.

Second, we need to be consciously inclusive with church activities and functions. Of course it is appropriate to target certain activities toward marrieds and families, but not all activities. In many ministry and social events we need to make it clear that singles are not only welcome but essential to the proper functioning of the body of Christ and the full enjoyment of the fellowship of believers.

Third, we need to refute the unsaid but ubiquitous assumption that those with spouses and children are somehow more blessed of God than those without. It is appropriate to offer regular reminders that ultimate worth is found in our relationship with Christ and his body rather than in earthly ties or marital status.

Fourth, Paul's teaching should be emphasized regarding the unique capacity and calling of single persons to serve God and others without the distractions of family life. This is not just a word for singles—it can also serve as a strong reminder to the whole congregation that every believer, whether married or unmarried, is called first to serve the Lord wholeheartedly and commit loyally to the family of faith.

Reactive Applications

Request for Marriage:

Marriage is not a command. While it is held in highest regard in Scripture, even providing an apt picture of God's love for His people (Hosea 1-3; Eph. 5:21-33), it is not a mandate. Marriage is a decision. It is a decision of such huge proportion that each couple requesting marriage should be required to go through a well thought-out pre-marriage process.

The first step should be an initial interview by the pastoral leader who will likely walk with the couple through the pre-marriage work and officiate at the wedding. The initial interview should be understood as a singular session without any further obligation from either side. It is an opportunity to explore the faith journey of the prospective bride and groom (are they believers/non-believers?), their previous relationships (has there been a divorce/loss of a spouse?), their present relationship (are they living together/sexually active?), and their expectations for marriage (is it a lifelong commitment?). Gathering these conversations together brings, finally, an opportunity to lay out the guidelines for marriage in that particular faith community (see "Establish Guidelines" under Proactive Applications).

These guidelines should include a minimum time frame from the time of the initial interview to the wedding date, probably not less than four months. This provides the amount of time necessary to walk a couple through the pre-marriage process. The guidelines should require premarital counseling, which is helpful in determining strengths and growth areas in a couple's relationship, and in dealing with a variety of issues impacting marriage. Finally, the guidelines should call for the couple's openness to submitting to a discernment group at any time in the process, initiated at the counseling pastor's discretion. When



extraordinary or complex issues arise, it is helpful to share the burden of discerning readiness for marriage with a group of wise members of the faith community.

At the end of the initial interview both the couple and the pastor have the option to continue down the road together toward marriage, or not. Sometimes the answer will be clear immediately. Sometimes it may be good to mutually commit the decision to an agreed-upon time of prayer. Once the decision to continue is made, however, it should be understood as a long-term commitment on the part of the pastor, reaching well beyond the wedding day.

Divorce:

Each pastoral leader and church body needs to hammer out a practical theology of divorce in advance. That may be something other than what we believe about divorce, even though what we believe profoundly impacts our practical responses.

The reactive dimension of such a practical theology (it should also have a proactive dimension) produces a plan of action beginning at the point of knowledge that a marriage is in trouble. It should include guidelines for identifying a point person for possible intervention, referrals designed to address reconciliation, ministry involvement during a divorce in process, support systems for the couple and children, referrals for divorce recovery, and information-sharing with the church family. Even though each marriage failure plays out a bit differently, it is important for the pastoral leader to at least have a game plan for hope and healing.

Request for Remarriage:

Those who deal with the practical application of the biblical material relating to re-marriage tend to make one of two equal and opposite errors: either they apply the texts too “legally” or too “gracefully.” It is easy, for example, to apply Jesus’ words in Mark 10:11-12 as an injunction against remarriage—as a mandate never to solemnize a marriage where there has been a divorce. It is equally easy to apply a “cheap grace” where vows become trivial and multiple marriages acceptable. What is difficult is a pastoral response that maintains integrity with Jesus’ hard sayings and abounding grace.

There is no explicit biblical warrant for remarriage, other than the death of a spouse. In fact the material addressing this issue directly in the New Testament tilts toward remaining single. Therefore requests for remarriage remain one of the most enduring pastoral dilemmas.

The approach that retains the most integrity with Scripture is for the community of faith to make remarriage decisions on a case-by-case basis. This is the best assurance that “law” and “grace” will be applied redemptively.

As a practical matter, the specific “community of faith” that would directly address such a case needs to be a small (6-8 people), spiritually mature cross-section of the church family. That requires a set of guidelines for identifying and putting into place such a group. Such guidelines are best embedded in an overall set of marriage guidelines, communicating a cohesive theology of marriage.

Among the responsibilities of the small group are the following: to listen to the couple’s story, assess the degree of healing following the divorce(s), mediate forgiveness (if necessary), offer insights, and determine readiness for marriage. A great deal of care must be taken to assemble a group with the spiritual maturity and the gifts to do this kind of work. For the process to have integrity, however, the couples must submit to the group for a final decision regarding marriage within that community of God’s people.

Support:

A failed relationship may not only leave the affected parties emotionally paralyzed, it can also paralyze the church. Fearing that they will do or say the wrong thing, or fearing that they will encourage a wrong decision, Christian sisters and brothers often withhold their support at a time when it is needed most. When a marriage or family is in trouble, the most immediate action needed is to reach out. Emotional support at these times should not simply be deliberated, it should also be delivered.



Discipline:

One way to maintain a balance between “law” and “grace” is to embrace discipline. Discipline should never be understood as punishment, but rather as spiritual conditioning for renewed commitment and service. To be effective such an understanding cannot be applied arbitrarily, but must rise out of a pre-existing discipline culture in the church.

In the midst of divorce proceedings, for example, both partners might be asked to set aside their ministry responsibilities in order to give full time and energy to the work of recovering their marriage. They may be asked to pair up with a mentor-caregiver who can gently lead them through the “heart work” associated with marital failure. If there is sin involved in the breaking of relationship, one or both partners might be asked to confess that sin to a small group of caring leaders. Should the divorce become final, discipline might require a regimen for healing and refitting for service.

Discipline should not be reserved only for public sins such as an illicit pregnancy or a divorce. It also needs to be applied to the more private sins that impact marriages and families: substance abuse, spousal or child abuse, premarital sex, adultery.

Discipline will always be painful and imperfect. But if it is applied with integrity and compassion it remains the best hope for recovering from relationship failures.

