Title: Dissolution of plural marriage: a case study on divorce as a means of regularizing plural marriage before baptism

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Date completed: 1992

Granting Institution: Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS)

Description: Unpublished Dissertation (DPTh): 229 pages

Abstract:

The SDA pastor in Nigeria is not infrequently confronted by polygamists seeking church membership. The church is to promote unity in the home, and healing of broken personhood but divorce conflicts with this mission. Thus tension is created between the church’s policy on polygamy and the church’s role and mission.

This study attempts to find a biblical and pastoral approach to divorce in relation to polygamous marriage. The research procedures used in the study were description, analysis, interpretation, and pastoral action.

Part I: DESCRIPTION

The study was based on a case involving a converted traditional polygamist who divorced all but one of his wives in order to be baptized. The Christian denominations generally consider polygamy as unacceptable, according to the Bible; however, they held three different positions on the issue of accepting a converted polygamist into church membership. On position held by some mission churches demands the dissolution of polygamous relationships before baptism. A second position frowns at polygamy as un-Christian, but converts from polygamous households
are not required to dissolve their existing marital relationship to be baptized, not are they allowed to enter any new polygamous relationship. The third position, held by several indigenous churches, allows polygamists to be baptized, accepting a polygamous life style as normal.

Part II: ANALYSIS

The analysis established that the Igbos practice polygamy to meet their economic, social, and political exigencies. Divorce is seldom practiced among the traditional Igbos, and divorced women are stigmatized.

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church in 1930 adopted the policy of baptizing converted polygamists; however, in 1941 that policy was reversed. The 1941 policy requires dissolution of a plural marriage before baptism. The leaders of the SDA Church in Nigeria enforce this policy; however, several leaders express the need for the church to re-examine the 1941 policy.

Part III: INTERPRETATION

The Bible and some extra-biblical materials present societies that tolerated polygamy and divorce. Divorce, however, was not used as a means of regularizing plural marriages.

The Bible allows divorce in a case of adultery or fornication as one option for dealing with of unfaithfulness in the marital relationship. The Damacus document, and the Nicene and post-Nicene Church Fathers condemned polygamy. Divorce was recommended for regularizing polygamous relationships. Though monogamous marriage is portrayed as ideal, the biblical support for mandatory divorce to regularize a polygamous marriage is non-existent.
The study recommends that any SDA Church policy on polygamy should be backed up with well articulated bible principles. The local leaders, with sound knowledge of the situation, should be allowed to handle a polygamous person seeking church membership. The current policy on polygamy should be modified to allow for baptism of a converted polygamist without requiring divorce.