

G. CLERGY FAMILIES IN MARITAL CRISIS POLICY

(Adopted by 1990 Conference)

Introduction

The Book of Discipline states that “we affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant which is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman... Where marriage partners, even after thoughtful consideration and counsel, are estranged beyond reconciliation, we recognize divorce as regrettable but recognize the right of divorced persons to remarry. We encourage an active, accepting and enabling commitment of the church and our society to minister to the needs of divorced families.”

The continuing tradition of the church affirms marriage as a covenant of lifelong fidelity between a man and a woman. The failure of husbands and wives to sustain the marriage covenant creates a crisis for individuals, for parents and children and for society at large.

The *Discipline* of the United Methodist Church recognizes the sanctity of this covenant and also recognizes the frailty and complexity of human relationships. Divorce is a crisis and is “regrettable,” but it should not stigmatize or delegitimize the rights of a divorced person to remarry, to reconstitute relationships or to serve effectively and with dignity within society and the church.

While the above applies to all marriages in general, the church also bears a special concern for marriages of those who live and work directly under its discipline, i.e. ordained pastors. When a pastor and spouse undergo a crisis of relationship, separation or divorce, it generally creates a crisis for the community of faith to which the pastor has been appointed to serve.

Therefore, the pastor, the spouse and the children that together comprise the pastoral family bear an immense burden. They express stress and tension different from that of other families, since the pastor has made two unconditional promises: the promise of faithfulness to the Lord and His church in ordination, and the promise of faithfulness to his/her spouse in marriage. The lifetime of living within both promises at the same time often leads to serious conflict among the pastor, spouse and family.

It is expected that both pastor and spouse will work to sustain their marriage in spite of difficulties:

- (1) through prayer, mutual resolve and dialogue
- (2) through the support of the Bishop and Cabinet
- (3) through the Conference Counseling services or its equivalent
- (4) through the availability of other supportive services as needed.

When all of these supports have been ineffective in a given situation, the following policy is offered as the way of addressing the problem of separation and divorce in the pastoral family.

Policy

It is the purpose of this policy to respect the right of responsible adults to work through their crisis with a minimum of outside interference, with an inalienable regard for confidentiality, and with a constructive system of counseling and support. The dignity of mature human beings to work through their problems in accord with *Discipline* standards, professional counseling and the love and support of a caring Christian community is a right which every pastor and spouse deserve and which must not be denied.

By the same token, the church has a right to expect of its pastors and their spouses that they will live as mature, responsible adults dedicated to marital fidelity and the highest Christian standards of conduct and commit themselves to a process that will enable them to deal responsibly with their situation. Therefore, the following policy concerning pastoral marriages in crisis **is recommended**:

1. a) When stress becomes problematic in the parsonage family, the pastor and/or spouse are encouraged to seek counseling for self, and/or family members. The District Superintendent may be notified.
- b) When a pastor’s marriage is in danger of dissolution, the pastor has a covenant obligation to consult with the District Superintendent.
2. In circumstances of crisis where interpersonal dynamics have the potential to lead to separation or divorce, the Bishop and Cabinet at the request of the pastor and spouse in consultation with the Board of Ordained Ministry may arrange to place the pastor on Special Leave of Absence for a period of time not to exceed three months.
3. Such Special Leave of Absence shall be negotiated in consultation with the pastor and spouse, and the local church Staff Parish Relations Committee.

Such leave would allow the pastor, spouse and family to devote their energies to intensive efforts to resolve conflict and to restore relationships. In order to facilitate this process **the congregation** would continue to provide the pastor’s salary, housing, insurance and pension. **The Conference** would continue to provide pension and medical benefits. **The Annual Conference** would assume financial responsibility for an interim pastor and preaching supply. This **Special Leave of Absence** should not be seen as burdensome upon the congregation but as an opportunity for the congregation to minister to the pastoral family which has ministered to it. The Bishop

and/or District Superintendent shall determine what portion of the three months maximum shall be applied to the **Special Leave of Absence**. In order to receive this **Special Leave of Absence**, the following conditions must be met by the pastor:

- (1) The pastor will be engaged in verifiable counseling.
- (2) The pastor will act responsibly toward his/her spouse and children in both personal relations and financial matters.
- (3) The pastor will demonstrate an earnest desire to work for a resolution of the marital conflict in a caring manner, paying particular attention to his/her relationship and responsibility as a parent.
- (4) The pastor will consider himself/herself bound to the marriage relationship until the crisis is finally resolved through reconciliation or divorce.

In the event that the pastor does not cooperate with the Bishop and/or District Superintendent, or in the event that the pastor has left the family home, the District Superintendent may consult with the congregation and the spouse concerning the use of the parsonage and/or financial support during the period of crisis.

At a time the Bishop and/or Superintendent deems appropriate within the Special Leave of Absence, and when the facts and circumstances of the situation have been ascertained, the Bishop shall determine what actions shall be taken for the good of the ministry of the pastor, the spouse, the family, the congregation and the whole church. The Bishop may ask:

- (1) that the pastor resume activity within the congregation
- (2) that the pastor be appointed to another congregation
- (3) that the pastor go on Leave of Absence with the assurance that the spouse's insurance and medical benefits are cared for up to a period of one year, and that matters relating to pensions are resolved.
- (4) that the pastor surrender his/her credentials

The pastor shall not be permitted to resume active ministry until the **legal issues** of the separation, divorce, child and spouse support, custody and distribution of property are being legally addressed.

4. A Contingency Fund for spouses be established and administered by the Preacher's Aid Society. The Preacher's Aid Society through the appointment of a task force by the executive committee consisting of representatives of Preacher's Aid Society, Sustentation Fund, the Board of Ordained Ministry, and other representatives deemed necessary would set aside an appropriate portfolio and receive contributions from clergy and laity through a yearly appeal. Monies will be distributed according to need, including such areas as counseling for spouses or children up to one year, housing supplements, insurance assistance, retooling or other emergency needs.

Conclusion

It is not the purpose of this proposal to address every contingency that may arise with regard to pastoral families in crisis. However it does offer a process, which if adopted by the Annual Conference, would provide a unified system and method of addressing with compassion and courage a very painful and often traumatic episode in the life of the parsonage family and the church. This proposal also respects the dignity and privacy of the parsonage family while at the same time calling for mature responsibility and accountability on the part of the pastor to be faithful to the covenants which he/she has vowed to uphold. This proposal recognizes that sometimes, despite all efforts, marriages still dissolve and couples have to rebuild their lives independently with God's help. Hopefully, the process proposed here will enhance the reconciliation, and healing of marital conflict where possible and will help to ensure justice and responsibility where not.