



TEACHINGS and PRACTICE on MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, and REMARRIAGE

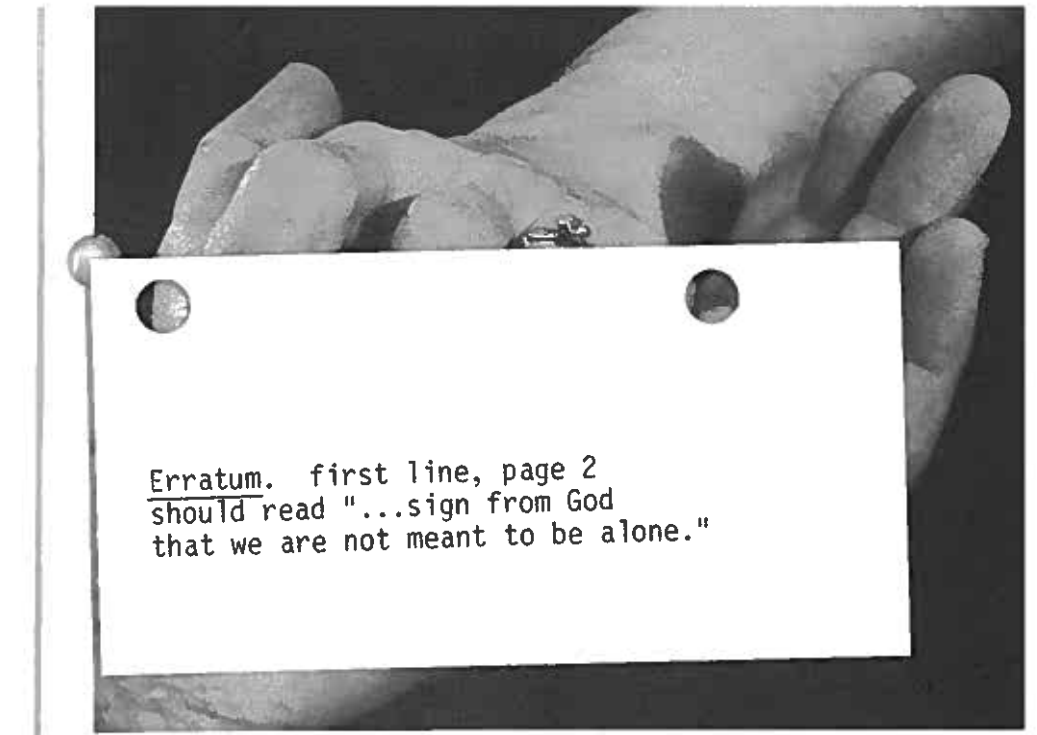
Adopted Sept. 10, 1982, by the Eleventh General Convention of The American Lutheran Church as a statement of policy and practice for this church (GC82.10.104). It replaces the statement "Teachings and Practice on Marriage and Divorce" adopted by the 1964 General Convention (GC64.26.84). Ballot vote tally: Yes 867; No 44.

I. MARRIAGE

A. Basic Understanding of Marriage

1. Marriage is a structure of human life built into the creation by the Creator. It builds upon our creation as male and female (Gen. 1:27). Sexual differences are of God's good design, intended to bring joy and enrichment to human life as well as to provide for procreation. The essence of marriage is that in the act and relationships of marriage two persons become one flesh (Gen. 2:24). In this complementary nature of the two sexes as God created them lies the basis for marriage and each new family.

2. Marriage exists within a world characterized by our alienation from God and from each other; it therefore is affected by human sinfulness. Nevertheless, being part of God's creative and sustaining order, marriage continues to exist under God's goodness and protection. It is a means by which God provides men and women with an intimate relationship with



Erratum. first line, page 2
should read "...sign from God
that we are not meant to be alone."

Mark Gonnerman photo

selfishly on rights or duties. Together husband and wife become one in love, serving one another within marriage. (See Gal. 5:22, 23; Eph. 5:21-25; Col. 3:18, 19; 1 Peter 3:1-7).

7. Every person has been created by God with gifts that make him or her a unique personality. The strength and unity of marriage come from mutual recognition and sharing of each other's needs and gifts. This unity recognizes the freedoms of husband and wife to express their own interests as well as their duty to share in those relationships where sharing is essential to the success of the marriage. The unique gifts of husband and wife should be utilized, within the harmony of marriage, toward the meaningful goals and purposes of human life assigned by God.

C. Love in Marriage

8. As God is love, so has God given to male and female, created in God's image, the capacity to express love. Marriage can be a prime opportunity through which we can reflect the divine relationship of love. That love which reflects divine love is mature, kind, considerate, self-giving, dedi-

cated to the well-being and the fulfillment of the other as of oneself, and faithful to the beloved until death. Its characteristics are described in 1 Cor. 13:4-7. It seeks to give rather than to get. Such love is the goal and gift of marriage, the quality in which the marriage partners ought to grow and mature, even though our capacity for such love is warped by human selfishness.

9. Sexual intercourse is expressive of the unique union established between a husband and wife in marriage. It provides a unique knowing of the other person which can be realized in no other way. By its very nature sexual intercourse expresses a commitment to another person which constitutes marriage. It is for this reason that the biblical witness condemns sexual intercourse outside marriage as contrary to God's intention. Sexual intercourse should be an expression of love, but love is both richer and more inclusive than the sex act. Sexual harmony, truly one of the joys of marriage, nevertheless is not so much the goal of marriage as it is a reflection of the total unity and love of the married pair. The sexual relationship has often been exploited as an instrument of power and aggression, or falsely portrayed as a magic panacea, leading many couples to be disappointed with sex as they experience it. Major marital problems may stem from or be reflected in such unwholesome experience with sex.

10. Married Christians seek to fulfill God's intentions for marriage. Even the marriage of Christians, however, daily falls short of the Christian ideal. Hence the Christian husband and wife daily need God's forgiveness for their sins of omission and commission, followed by a readiness to be forgiving toward one another. In gratitude to God they daily rededicate themselves to God and to one another, realizing that their marital unity is never completed but is always in the process of becoming.

D. Preserving the Marriage

11. Problems are inevitable in marriage. Conflicts and problems can be used constructively to further communication and understanding upon which marriage thrives, or they may become destructive of the relationship of love between husband and wife. When people become involved in marital difficulties, it should be a concern of pastors, relatives, and friends to provide help and understanding in overcoming the conflicts, thereby strengthening and preserving the marriage. The total costs of disruption of a marriage are high, not only for the husband and wife but also for any children involved. Broken marriages are destructive of family, congregational, and community strength. Therefore couples having difficulties with their marriage should be helped to find competent counsel before the marriage itself is threatened.

II. DIVORCE

A. The Nature of Divorce

12. Divorce is never God's intention for our marriages. The breakdown of a marriage relationship is the consequence of human sinfulness, leading to a process of alienation from which there seems to be no other way out. Divorce needs to be seen realistically as the breaking of an order of God, the public and legal recognition of an already broken marriage, the culmination of a process of alienation.

13. Divorce, according to the teaching of Jesus, is a concession to the fact and reality of sin in a fallen world. Being the friend of sinners, Jesus did not condemn or drive away a divorced person. Neither did he excuse divorce. Rather, he declared, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Mark 10:9). He spoke no word by which a man or a woman might rationalize divorce into a righteous act. Jesus did, however, explain divorce as resulting from the hardness of human hearts (Matt. 19:8; Mark 10:5). Divorce arises from self-centeredness or other obstacles the couple cannot or will not overcome.

B. Appraising Reasons for Divorce

14. Divorce is a consequence of human sinfulness. Christians contemplating divorce do so with a sense of the seriousness of their decision, and often with a sense of anguish. Christian spouses will do everything in their power to restore their marriage. Certainly before they decide on divorce they will give themselves time and opportunity to evaluate the total costs of the possible termination of their marriage, for themselves as well as for their families and others involved. They will seek the counsel of their pastor or other competent counsel. If after careful consideration the marriage relationship is deemed beyond repair, and the effects of continuing the marriage to be more destructive of the welfare of persons than divorce, the decision for divorce may be recognized as a responsible choice, the lesser of several evils in a fallen world. Recognizing that each party generally bears some responsibility for the failure of the marriage, a decision for divorce may be made in reliance upon God's grace.

C. Ministering to the Divorced

15. The church must seek to deal in an evangelical rather than a legalistic manner with the problems of divorce and divorced persons. Divorced persons will be fully included in the life of the Christian church, which

expresses God's spirit of love and forgiveness. These persons should not become the victims of gossip, ostracism, or undue attention. They need rather to be brought to feel anew the bonds of human fellowship and the sense of God's continuing presence, so that their divorce, unfortunate though it may be, may lead toward a more mature Christian life. They continue to be part of the Christian community of Word and Sacrament.

III. REMARRIAGE

16. Remarriage of divorced persons is neither forbidden nor automatically endorsed by The American Lutheran Church. The second marriage of divorced persons may result in a new union which faithfully witnesses to God's purpose for marriage. Such remarriage will more likely result, however, if persons carefully consider the dynamics which led to the dissolution of a previous marriage. There should be a willingness to acknowledge one's own failures in a spirit of forgiveness toward all involved, and to work at correcting whatever personal characteristics may be detrimental to a marital relationship. Legitimate obligations to any children and to the former spouse must be fulfilled. When such is the case, the church can add its blessing to the remarriage of divorced Christians.

17. The remarriage of a person whose previous marriage was terminated by death normally can be commended as a sound decision, renewing the blessings of companionship which a good marriage brings. This is as true for persons in the years of retirement as for those in young adulthood or in middle years.

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IV. RECOMMENDED PRACTICE

18. Because it regards marriage in such high esteem, the Christian congregation is concerned about the character and quality of marriages, both among its members and in the larger society. Because persons encounter difficulties in marriage and family life, the church needs to give special attention to this aspect of its total ministry. While all members of the congregation share this concern, and each has a part in the total ministry of the congregation, pastors are called to carry a unique responsibility.

19. In light of current trends and pressures, positive Christian education and preparation for marriage and family life belong in every congregation's ministry. The pastor should be alert to opportunities in the pulpit, home, church schools, confirmation classes, and auxiliaries for influencing commitment to Christian standards in the choice of a marriage partner and in patterns for marriage and family living. In counseling sessions, persons can be led to see the implications of their Christian commitment for the marriage and family relationships they are experiencing. Programs for marital and family enrichment can be developed. Pastors should encourage members of congregations to assume a constructive attitude toward the preservation and strengthening of marriage.

20. When officiating at any marriage the pastor acts both as an agent of the state and as a servant of Christ. Therefore the pastor should be satisfied that both the man and woman desiring to be married know what is required in marriage and earnestly intend by the help of God to live up to its obligations. Normally the couple should be expected to participate in a program of premarital education. In the case of remarriage of divorced persons, pastors should discuss with the divorced person whether he or she has come to an understanding of the failure of the former marriage. If the pastor, in clear conscience before God, is convinced that any particular couple is not ready to enter upon a responsible marriage, that pastor should be supported by the congregation in refusing to perform the desired marriage.

21. Requests to officiate at the marriage of a man and a woman markedly different in such characteristics as religion, race, age, and cultural backgrounds should receive special attention. Such differences should not be understood as constituting fundamental impediments to marriage. However, such a marriage may present complex problems. The couple should examine carefully the effects of their marriage for themselves, their children, their families, their congregations, and their community. If the pastor is convinced that the two are not sufficiently strong and mature, both spiritually and emotionally, to overcome the hazards to a sound

marriage which their marked differences in background, experience, and outlook may impose, he or she should not officiate at the desired marriage.

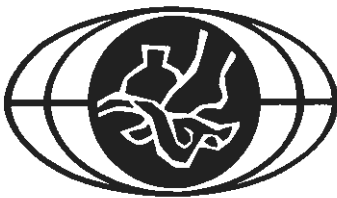
22. In situations where young or immature persons, under pressure of pregnancy, seek to be married, the pastor may counsel strongly against marriage, which is an estate for adults able to accept its obligations. The pastor may point out that to marry may be to compound an already difficult situation. Adults ought not to insist that the youth be married, whether "to give the baby a name" or for other face-saving reasons. When marriage of the couple is not desirable the pastor should work in consultation with an appropriate social agency to see that the needs of the couple are adequately met and the interests of the child are protected.

23. Each pastor should become informed on the marriage and divorce laws of the state in which he or she ministers. Pastors also should take an informed interest in any family life education programs which may be conducted in the public schools, as well as in the work of agencies supporting family life in the community. All pastors, as well as other church members, should support sound legislation both to foster high standards for marriage and the family and to correct the evils and abuses which much divorce legislation now condones.

24. The pastor's ministry to persons contemplating marriage, divorce, or remarriage should proclaim and demonstrate both God's law and his gracious gospel. The pastor will proclaim and demonstrate God's law by holding up God's intention for marriage. The pastor will proclaim and demonstrate God's gracious gospel by pointing to the resources of grace and forgiveness. In this way, the pastor's ministry and practice in relation to marriage, divorce, and remarriage will be consistent with the total ministry of Christ's church.

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