



WIC Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage 2019

1. Marriage

Marriage is ordained by God as an exclusive covenant between one man and one woman (Genesis 2:18). God designed marriage as the foundational element of all human society. A lawful public exchange of vows, sexual intimacy and loving care, constitute the essential elements of the marriage covenant.

These four vital elements expressed by love, loyalty, faithfulness and responsibility, constitute marriage, which Scripture declares is, in principle, permanent. The biblical support for these elements are found in the following Scriptures:

a) *A public exchange of vows:* Genesis 2:24 identifies that a public commitment initiates the marriage covenant, in that, *“a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife.”* Here, the security and shelter of one's home is left, and a new relationship is established - a new unit of society begins. Malachi 2:13-15 affirms that the covenant aspect of marriage is witnessed by God.

b) *Sexual intimacy:* Genesis 2:24 identifies that sexual intimacy consummates the marriage covenant, in that, *“the two shall become one flesh.”* While having children is an important factor in marriage, sexual intimacy is designed for more than procreation. Sexual relationship assists in establishing, expressing, and maintaining intimacy in the marriage.

c) *Loving care:* Marriage is more than a publicly declared covenant. It is more than sexual intimacy, and it is more than an outward observance of a marriage relationship. Ephesians 5:25-29 conveys a constant nourishing care in the marriage relationship, while Exodus 21:10-11 speaks of the reciprocal responsibilities and privileges of sexual intimacy, caring support, and domestic interdependence.

d) *Reflection of Christ's love for the church:* The healthy marriage relationship beautifully reflects the profound loving covenant relationship that Jesus has with His Church. Ephesians 5:22-32 expresses the model of Jesus sacrificial, sanctifying love for the husband to aspire towards; and the gracious posture of submission the Church has towards Jesus for the wife to aspire to. Earthly marriage therefore has the power and potential to point to the ultimate marriage between Christ and His Church.

2. Divorce

In light of God's intention for marriage, divorce is never God's desire for marriage (Malachi 2:16). Divorce is damaging to individuals, to families, to society, and to the cause of Christ. We therefore discourage divorce and urge that every effort be made to strengthen and restore marriages. Jesus made it clear that in the beginning, God made Adam and Eve to be *“one flesh”* in a lifelong union (Matthew 19:5-6). However, because of the hardness of people's hearts (Matthew 19:8), in certain instances, divorce is permitted on biblical grounds (Exodus 21:10-11; Deuteronomy 24:1-4; 1 Corinthians 7:1-16). In these rare instances the victim of the broken marriage vows has biblical concessions for divorce.



WIC Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage 2019

These are the following instances where divorce may be permitted on Biblical grounds:

a) Divorce on the basis of sexual immorality

Divorce is permitted on the grounds of sexual immorality. Jesus, in His answer to the Pharisees' question (Matthew 5:32; Matthew 19:9), permitted divorce because of the "sexual immorality"* clause as found in Deuteronomy 24:1.4.

*Sexual immorality- sexual intercourse outside of marriage.

b) Divorce on the basis of abandonment

Divorce is permitted when a marriage partner, who is not a believer, abandons the marriage (1 Corinthians 7:12-16).

c) In the situation of serious physical or mental abuse

Separation in the case of serious physical abuse is strongly encouraged for the purpose of safety, reconciliation and restoration.

There are no clear biblical grounds for divorce on the basis of abuse, however if after every effort is made towards reconciliation and the situation remains unsafe, the leadership of the church will walk with the couple to discern God's purpose together where divorce could be considered as an option.

Conclusion

These grounds for divorce need to be understood in the context of the biblical emphasis on grace that empowers forgiveness, and reconciliation. Divorce is the very last option, not the first resort. Ezekiel identifies the aforementioned grounds for God's divorce from Israel, pleading with Judah not to follow her example (Ezekiel 16). God was faithful to His covenant obligations, in contrast to Israel's repeated and unrepentant unfaithfulness toward Him. He did not immediately divorce Israel, but gave her many opportunities to repent and be reconciled. God's reluctance to divorce Israel despite her repeated violations demonstrates the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation. However, Israel's hardness of heart in refusing to be reconciled resulted in God finally giving her a "certificate of divorce" (Jeremiah 3:8). This is one of the reasons why Malachi 2:16 expresses that God never intends for marriage to lead in divorce.

3. Remarriage

All considerations of remarriage must be examined in the light of the biblical teaching on what constitutes a biblical or unbiblical divorce and in deep pastoral conversations with the appropriate leadership within the church to discern God's will.

Where a divorce has occurred that falls within the biblical grounds referred to above, the person who has not caused the divorce is free to remarry with a clear conscience before God (Exodus 21:10-11, 1 Corinthians 7:15,16). However, we recognise that in most cases, both parties contribute in some way



WIC Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage 2019

to the breakdown of a marriage. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that any person considering remarriage, commit to appropriate counselling before remarrying.

Any divorce that falls outside of the biblical guidelines, and occurred after conversion, is to be regarded as unbiblical (“without cause”) and a sinful act. As such, remarriage in these circumstances adds to the sin by placing one in an adulterous relationship (Matthew 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18; Matthew 5:32).¹³ Nevertheless, it is recognised that divorce biblical or unbiblical, is not an unforgivable sin. Since divorce ends the marriage for both parties, the Scripture indicates that the person who created the grounds for the divorce, or the person who has been divorced invalidly, is also free to remarry under certain circumstances (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

The remarriage of this person will only be considered if:

- a) There has been appropriate amount of time between the divorce being finalised and remarriage being considered.
- b) There is recognition the marriage covenant was broken by their sin, and was inadequately valued and protected; and
- c) There is evidence of genuine repentance for his or her sinful actions that have caused the marriage covenant to be broken. They commit to go through a process that includes repentance, counselling, and restoration before considering remarriage.

Where the previous spouse has remarried, nothing should be done to undermine that marriage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

4. Impact on Leadership and Ministry

WICC or its appointee, shall consider all applications for pastoral, elder and deacon roles according to the standard requirements and procedures. Such candidates who have a remarriage component to their application will also be assessed, without prejudice, in accordance with the following guidelines. This applies to Pastors, Ministers, Elders and Deacons.

The WIC Council or its appointee:

- a) Will examine the background to the divorce according the biblical grounds. They will take into account such issues as pre or post conversion status at the time of divorce; attempts and attitudes towards reconciliation; fulfilment of responsibilities; and the possible presence of any current improper attitudes towards the divorce or their previous spouse.
- b) May require a candidate for ministry to provide that information required to assist the WICC in determining whether a divorce was unbiblical. A candidate must not refuse any such request. WICC, or its appointee, will maintain confidentiality and privacy at all times.
- c) Christian persons divorced and remarried on unbiblical grounds, or married to a divorced person who has been divorced on unbiblical grounds after his or her conversion, may not enter



WIC Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage 2019

or remain in the ministry. However, the WICC may consider and discern exceptional circumstances in this regard.

- d) May require a list of additional reputable referees who are familiar with the applicant's previous circumstances, and who will be able to attest to the divorce background. The WICC, or its appointee, would then be free to contact and interview these referees.
- e) Must be convinced that the applicant's beliefs and attitudes towards marriage and divorce are in accordance with this policy.
- f) Must be convinced that the current marriage is stable and healthy.
- g) Must be assured there are no legal, financial, or social complications from the previous marriage that have not been adequately addressed by the applicant.
- h) Recognise that ministers/elders/deacons who divorce on biblical grounds, who are not a major contributor to the breakdown of the marriage, and who have not remarried, may remain in the ministry. A review of their credential will be necessary at the point of remarriage.
- i) All the conditions outlined in this policy statement regarding marriage and divorce shall apply to the applicant's spouse.
- j) The circumstances of cases where a marriage has been annulled should be carefully examined by the WICC or its appointee, to determine suitability for ministry.
- k) Generally, a candidate for ministry should not have been divorced and remarried more than once after conversion. However, the WICC may consider exceptional circumstances when issuing a credential.

5. Times of crisis and brokenness

a. Pastoral marriages must be given support both prior to and during crisis (a pastor needs a "pastor" not involved in placement);

b. Congregational expectations of pastoral leadership must be re-examined and pastoral contracts be reviewed with . . .

1. The inclusion of financial support for growth and marriage enrichment experiences for the pastor and spouse and family enrichment experiences for the pastor and family;
2. Opportunities (both time and money) provided for pastoral families to deal with enrichment or crisis; and
3. Clear delineation of expectations of the role of the spouse. (This is particularly important now in view of the fact that increasing numbers of women are in training for full pastoral leadership.)



WIC Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage 2019

If the church implements the above recommendations with sincerity, it will create the potential for renewed and deepened relationships within the clergy family. Despite our best efforts in seeking reconciliation and wholeness, we acknowledge that in some situations extreme brokenness and divorce is the end result.

The Annual Conference paper “Discipleship and Reconciliation” lists among the examples of brokenness the following: “acts of infidelity, dishonesty, deception, divisiveness, insubordination, lovelessness, rejection, and violence, which break relationships and militate against personal, family, and group relationships.” The paper is clear that all members bear the burden of such brokenness. The paper, however, does suggest that “occasions occur when those who are called to set-apart leadership experience brokenness and must be confronted regarding their accountability.” Among several additional causes of brokenness for set-apart leadership, the paper lists “Adoption of behavior patterns that prevent effective leadership within the congregation, district, and/or denomination (Rom. 14:13-21; 1 Cor. 8:9-13; 10:23, 31).”

How to proceed in times of Crisis and Brokenness

Times of crisis and brokenness in the pastor’s marriage create certain special circumstances and special responsibilities for both the church and the pastor. Because divorce is a form of brokenness that may prevent “effective leadership within the congregation, district, and/or denomination,” we recommend the following procedure:

1. When separation is imminent, the pastor shall take the initiative to inform the WICC. The pastor shall also initiate conversations with the Senior Minister, sharing the fact of divorce, so that the WICC and WMC where necessary may implement procedures. The WMC, working in relationship with the ministerial status of the pastor, and WIC, working on the matter of the employment and service of the pastor, will need to be in close communication with each other.

The WICC together with the minister will discern an appropriate length of time for the minister to focus on personal, family and marriage restoration without pastoral responsibilities and duties. The WICC will enter into a process of reflection and discernment with the minister discussing their Spiritual, Psychological/Emotional health; Self and relational awareness; Primary support networks; Sense of call; Possibility of marriage restoration; and explore future options. The purpose of this discernment will be to assess health, possibility of restoration and fitness for ministry. There will also be a process whereby the WICC will ensure that there will be appropriate pastoral leadership for the health and future direction of the ministries that have been affected as a priority.

2. During this time, the pastor should seek the counsel of WICC as to the effect of the separation on his/her employment relationship with the congregation, including such options as . . .
 - a. Renegotiation of the relationship with the WIC to continue on a full-time indefinite basis with appropriate procedure for congregational support and action, pending favourable WM action on ministerial status.



WIC Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage 2019

- b. Temporary leave of absence from active pastoral duties while decisions on the future of the relationship are in process.
 - c. Renegotiation of the employment relationships by contract for a specific time, for example, one year, to provide for the ministers healing and restoration with review possibilities at a later date by either the pastor or the congregation to re-enter full-time ministry. Such a renegotiation would require appropriate procedures for congregational support.
 - d. Resignation by the pastor with an effective date that would be far enough in the future to allow for personal, family, and vocational adjustments.
 - e. Immediate resignation with the congregational option of a vote to call the pastor again to serve the congregation.
3. Caring and skilful members of the appropriate committee shall devise a means of sharing the information with the congregation and the district in ways that respect the privacy of the people involved, indicate next procedures, and provide opportunities for church members to share their concern with members of the committee in either formal or informal settings.
4. In the event of the remarriage of the pastor, open communication is encouraged between that person and the appropriate congregational and/or committees. We have placed upon some clergy marriages a heavy and unrealistic demand that is most difficult to fulfil. We have trapped them in isolation and have demanded exemplary conduct. It is now time for us to see these marriage partners as first of all male and female, with the same drives, needs, and wants as any other human beings. Therefore, all we have said about marriage and divorce and remarriage in relation to church members applies also to them. For them, the faith community has a singular opportunity and responsibility to become the extended family within which they may move toward wholeness and fulfilment. And their wholeness and creativity in marriage will be reflected many times over in the lives and marriages to whom they minister.

References:

- a. ACC 2014 policy on Divorce and Remarriage
- b. Church of the Brethren document on Ministry, Divorce and Remarriage.
<https://accvic.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/MarriageDivorceAndRemarriagePolicy.pdf>
<http://www.brethren.org/ministryoffice/documents/marriage-and-divorce.pdf>

WIC: Wesley International Congregation

WICC: Wesley International Congregation Council

WMC: Wesley Mission Council

Senior Minister: Senior Minister of Wesley Congregational Life