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the episcopal church

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Eleventh, inclusive, in the Year of Our Lord 1973*

1973
with Constitution and Canons

Joint Commission on the Church in Human Affairs

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Mr. Pete Rivera, Jr. (Diocese of West Texas)
Dr. Walter Shervington (Diocese of Washington)
Rev. Hugh C. White (Diocese of Michigan)

Meetings

The Joint Commission held three meetings of the full membership: March 1, 1971, in Chicago; March 6, 1972, in Atlanta; and November 4 and 5, 1972, in New Orleans. In addition, regional groupings and sub-committees met and worked throughout the triennium.

A liaison relationship was attempted between the Joint Commission and the Executive Council's Program Group on Public Issues and Action. Information, requests, and Resolutions have been presented to the Executive Council by the Joint Commission, but limitations of budget and staff precluded any action by them; therefore, two Resolutions with programmatic implications on War and Peace, and on Juvenile Justice, are being presented to the Convention.

References to the Commission

Canons on Holy Matrimony
War and Peace
Euthanasia, Overpopulation, and
World-Hunger Programs
Abortion
Family Planning
Taxation of Church Properties

SCOPE OF COMMISSION'S WORK

The Joint Commission has continued to hold, as its Statement of Purpose, the following standards adopted in 1959:

1. The Commission shall continually remind the Church of its prophetic role in society.
2. It shall be the function of the Commission to report to the General Convention on its study and work in the area of the Church and Human Affairs, and to suggest action to the Executive Council and its duly constituted Departments.

promptly to address its attention and resources to this subject, and recommended that the Executive Council give careful consideration to it. The Commission sent one of its members, Michelle Hawkins, accompanied by two representatives of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, to present this Resolution to the Committee on Public Issues and Action of the Executive Council. In response, the Executive Council passed a Resolution welcoming the initiative of the Commission in drawing their attention to the subject, and recommended that the Presiding Bishop direct the staff to develop a plan for consideration of the Executive Council at their next meeting in May, 1972.

The Commission met in November, 1972, and approved a communication to the Executive Council expressing its appreciation for the adoption of the Resolution, and stating that the Commission looks forward to the development of such a plan, and trusts that an adequate appropriation for its implementation will be included in the Council's program and budget recommendations to the General Convention in Louisville. On its part, the Commission offered to provide additional information, materials and resources.

The Commission, in order to express its continuing concern and to discharge its responsibility on behalf of this General Convention, requests the adoption of the Resolution appended as *Recommendation III*.

VI. Christian Marriage and Family Life

In facing the assignment of the revision of the marriage Canons, the Joint Commission recognized that there are deep and basic questions concerning Christian marriage and family life on which there is presently no consensus in the Church, but concerning which the Church has an obligation to do some thinking. To that end, the Joint Commission requested the Rev. John H. Snow of the Diocese of Massachusetts to write a paper on Christian Marriage and Family Life. This paper is appended (Annex C).

The Joint Commission includes the paper as a document worthy of circulation; it should not be assumed that the Joint Commission, or indeed any of its members, subscribes to every part of the paper. We hope to evoke thinking and discussion within the Church on this important subject.

VII. Into the Next Triennium (or Biennium)

The Commission recommends that a Joint Commission on the Church in Human Affairs be appointed to report to the next General Convention.

The nature of the matters which may be expected to be referred to such Commission by General Convention in Louisville, and those which may be undertaken for report on the initiative of the Commission itself, are such as to require two essential conditions: the involvement of professionally qualified and competent consultants (as mandated, for instance, by the references made by the 62nd General Convention in Seattle), and the convening of meetings of the Commission to assure face-to-face discussion and deliberation (the extent of constructive activity which can be conducted by correspondence in such matters being inescapably very limited). With these and other related considerations in mind, the present Commission urgently recommends the appropriation of funds sufficient for the decent discharge of the next Commission's assignments and responsibilities.

Accordingly, it is recommended that the 64th General Convention also adopt the Resolutions appended as *Recommendations IV* and *V*.

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13. Lecke, C.D. 1960 "Utilization of Old People", pp. 51-58 in *Aging—Some Social & Biological Aspects*, (AAAS Pub. # 65, Washington, D.C., Ed. N.W. Shock)

ANNEX C

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

Christian marriage has been defined in the Declaration of Intention which all Episcopalians and their spouses must sign by canon law in order to be married in the Church.

We believe it is for the purpose of mutual fellowship, encouragement, and understanding, for the procreation (if it may be) of children, and their physical and spiritual nurture, for the safeguarding and benefit of society.

Most Christians have no argument with this Declaration and sign it in good faith. It is not in conflict with the formal expectations which most Americans bring to marriage. Secularized, with all references to God left out, it is the norm for American culture. And yet those who sign it and believe it to be a fair definition of marriage are finding it increasingly difficult to live by. The institution of Christian marriage, or just traditional marriage, is currently on the danger list of institutions afflicted with rapid social change.

It is perhaps time to look again at this Declaration of Intention to see if it is indeed the definition of marriage which the Church should continue to bless. Regarded closely, it has no specifically biblical basis. The institution described seems curiously "modular", curiously isolated. If marriage is indeed primarily for the purpose of mutual fellowship, encouragement, and understanding, for the procreation of children and their physical and spiritual nurture, for the safeguarding and benefit of society, it is a more conservative, a more important, and a radically more private institution, than Jesus, Paul, or the early Church considered it to be. Indeed, the responsibilities which the New Testament allotted to the Church family, the Christian community, are given in this declaration to the modular family.

Both Jesus and Paul were kind of off-hand about families. " 'Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?' And looking around at those who were sitting in the circle about him Jesus said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, my mother.' " Presumably, the will of God is a generally mutual fellowship, encouragement, and understanding, among all people, especially among those aware that the Kingdom of God is among them, the Christian community.

Neither Paul nor Jesus would have had a place to lay his head had it not been for families. Jesus found Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, a congenial family, despite the fact that Mary was not much encouragement to Martha, and Martha wasn't very understanding of Mary or even of Jesus, what with all that housework. Paul, so far as we know, didn't stay in one of his own tents, but often, and sometimes for extended periods, in families, families whom he greets affectionately by name in his letters. For Paul, a family was a household, all the people living under one roof, and included slaves. As for marriage, Paul's statement that it was better to marry than to burn simply cannot be taken as a massive endorsement of the institution of marriage.

The problem here is obvious. Both Jesus and Paul saw the world coming to an end in a very short time. They hoped to save as large a remnant of humanity as they could before it happened, and marriage, with its built-in motivation towards conservatism, and its time-honored purpose of effecting the orderly transfer of property from one generation to the next, seemed more of a handicap than a help, granted the urgency of their mission and the shortness of time. At best, as an earthly institution, marriage was a convenient arrangement, but families, like Christian individuals, were to serve the Kingdom by their openness, their hospitality, their willingness to serve God and

their neighbor. They were not valued as islands of intimacy into which tired evangelists could flee at the end of a hard day or when things got difficult or dangerous. It was to the gathered community to which a Christian went for sustenance or solace as much as to a husband or wife.

It was a while before the early Church even bothered to bless a marriage, and it was not until the ninth century that the Church began to mention marriage as a sacrament. The reluctance of the Church of England to regard marriage as a sacrament (if we can believe the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church) "arises from the same hesitation of theologians to recognize as such a rite which did not appear to be manifestly productive of Grace." One suspects that a more persuasive reason is that the New Testament nowhere suggests that marriage should be given sacramental significance.

For both Jesus and Paul, then, it is clear that marriage was most important as a symbol of faithfulness. For Paul, it represented the marriage between Christ and his Church. Jesus' most pointed reference to marriage had to do with faithfulness, although for him marriage has no heavenly counterpart, no metaphysical significance. No doubt this emphasis on faithfulness was a consequence of his great concern for children and their safety, a concern far from generally shared by Jews, Greeks, or Romans. Romans, unlike Jews, saw matrimony as a contract between equals, requiring the consent of both parties, and a life-long commitment; but this probably was a consequence of their passion for order and stability, rather than coming out of any apprehension of God's faithfulness to humans, and the translation of this faithfulness to human relationships.

In sum, a Christian family, seen from a New Testament perspective, was a convenient social and legal arrangement between men and women, taken over in form from Roman rather than Jewish culture, which put sexuality to the uses of faithfulness, rather than letting it become an agent of social disintegration. The Christian family was a safe and trustworthy place for children, not just the blood children of the family, but all children of the community. As an agent of the kingdom of God, it was a generous and hospitable part of a generous and hospitable community, which welcomed, fed, and put up, friend and stranger. Its goal was not to make a house a home for family, but the world a home for humankind. It became one of the most powerful evangelical tools of the early Church. It was not self-serving, self-aggrandizing, or imperialistic. It was not in competition with other families, but lived with them closely in a relationship of mutual fellowship, encouragement, and understanding.

It was not simply a way for two people of different sexes to meet each other's needs and the needs of their children. It was part of a community committed to meeting the deprivation of the world, spiritual and physical. As such, marriage had the rich spiritual and emotional support of the community in which it existed. It was not left in isolation to fend for itself with all the internal stress and tension which isolation causes in a situation where two people must meet all of each other's needs for intimacy.

It was assumed that the family would care for its own elderly or infirm where it could, but where this was impossible, the community supplied the care, apparently with money for elderly widows who were active and capable. For those who were infirm, there were families to take them in, but only, Paul announces to Timothy, if there was "record that they themselves had been hospitable and helpful to those in need".

One has only to read First Timothy to see the quality of family in its relationship to the early Christian community. St. Paul was transparently honest, and his description shows no idealized realization of Gospel principles in Christian family and community

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life. But it does show what the principles were: faithfulness in the marriage itself, openness and hospitality in the family to those in need, and loyalty to the Christian community.

The question arises, what does this New Testament view of the family hold which is valid for Christians in the United States in the 70's?

One out of three marriages of whatever kind end in divorce. The New Testament forbids divorce in one place, allows it in the case of adultery in another, and consistently regards all re-marriage as adultery. It is not a question of forbidding divorce, or, if permitting divorce, or forbidding re-marriage. The simple attrition on Christian marriage in divorce in our country is so great that were the Church to excommunicate all divorced people, its size would be reduced by a third and the central dynamic of its life, forgiveness, would become a mockery.

A difference in historical situation makes a hard line on re-marriage a particularly punitive position for the Church to take. In the times of Jesus and Paul, life expectancy was hardly more than half what it is today. The economy was close to subsistence level for most people. Life was, in Hobbes' phrase, "nasty, brutish and short". The concept of personal happiness in any worldly sense was unknown to all but a small group of rich people. There was no emphasis on marriage as a mutually fulfilling relationship. Paul's phrase was obviously a saying of the time, "It's better to marry than to burn." Sex was so totally indivisible from procreation that marriage was the only possible answer to it aside from total sexual abstinence for responsible people.

Once married, people had children, and in the Christian community, where infanticide was not considered, many of the children survived. In a subsistence economy, divorce and re-marriage made for impossible property arrangements. There simply wasn't enough money available for a man to support two wives and numerous children. The issues of marriage and divorce and re-marriage were existential, external, related to physical survival.

Today, the issues of marriage, divorce, and re-marriage are more psychological and internal for a large proportion of the population. The issues of property, money, and survival, though still present, are not impossible to deal with responsibly. Thus, the existential aspects of marriage, which were really important during the first century, are not so important now for many people.

It is the theological dimension of marriage which must concern the Church today. Clearly for both Jesus and Paul, marital faithfulness was a metaphor for the relationship between God and his people. It was the most powerful human symbol for a covenant, and there is nothing pragmatic or empirical in the concept of a faithful covenant as understood by modern man. For most people today, a covenant is a mutually convenient arrangement which automatically dissolves when it fails to meet the needs of one party.

For a Christian, this definition simply will not do. For a Christian, faithfulness must go beyond convenience and comfort and carry with it as much assurance of commitment as human finitude, with God's help, permits. The issue here is whether the faithfulness is to the institution of marriage or to a person, and whether, now that sexual intercourse and procreation can be separated by the technology of birth control, sexual constancy is the sole measure of faithfulness. The issue is whether, in a society that tends to isolate marriages and subject them to unusual psychological and social stress, a relationship which has become mutually destructive in an atmosphere of marital intimacy cannot be altered from its marital status, to a different, post-marital, status which can be regarded by the Church as faithful, provided that it takes seriously the mutual raising of children and a mutual concern for the general welfare of the other.

Such a faithful post-marital relationship would not preclude re-marriage for either party, provided that the new partner in either case understood that the previous commitment was not over, and that his or her new spouse was still bound in faith to maintain with a previous spouse the responsibility of a parent, and the concern inherent in any continuing Christian relationship. If the Church held its members accountable in divorce and re-marriage for this kind of personal faithfulness, rather than for faithfulness to what is a basically secular institution, it would be shoring up the family environment of children, it would be working toward reconciliation in relationships which have tended to be permanently shattered by old attitudes towards divorce, and most importantly, it would maintain the centrality of faithfulness and forgiveness as Christian values which reflect directly God's relationship with his children.

It would seem to be evident that a faithful divorce and re-marriage as described above is a luxury of the middle class. For the poor, the alternative to faithful, life-long, monogamous marriage is either adultery or desertion.

Granted the general distress of the institution of marriage at all class levels in the United States, it might be wise for the Church to address herself to some of the social dynamics contributing to this distress.

First and foremost is the problem of *uprootedness*. The rural poor are driven to the city by the automation of agriculture, and their marriages must have great strength to survive the culture shock of the urban slum and welfare, welfare being, as it is, almost organized to drive the husband from the house.

Middle-class people find that their jobs in business and industrial management, of whatever level, force them to move every two or three years, often to communities where economic and social competitiveness make any welcoming community spirit rare indeed.

After uprootedness, the most significantly destructive tendency in American life to the life-long union of husband and wife is the *American dream*. It is the suspicion that anyone who is not a winner is a loser, and the belief that the winner achieves some kind of continuing, unrelieved, happiness, based on a mixture of status and exotic possessions. This world of successful, rich, beautiful, happy, eternally young, people does not exist; and the quest for it is enormously destructive to Christian marriage, indeed to human corporate life.

Recent research in human sexuality has discovered that male impotence is usually related to the fear of failure, a direct carry-over from the predominant motivation of American culture.

Over-spending puts tremendous pressures on a marriage, as does the frightening vulnerability of the socially mobile couple. Each partner is valued by the other to the degree that he or she is an asset in the race towards "winning big". Each is expendable to the other. There is not one of these hazards to Christian marriage to which a congregation serious about creating a welcoming and supportive community cannot address itself, provided that concern for community is not separated from concern for mission.

What the State and secular society have been powerless to deal with is clearly and historically the Church's concern. In the black community it has been the Church's concern from the beginning, and with inadequate funds, inadequate space, and just about everything working against it, the black Church has heroically battled to take in the uprooted rural family and supply a trustworthy and supportive community from which to defend itself against the limitless destructiveness of urban street life. Christianity has a great deal to learn from the black Church about the building of a community which is basically counter-cultural, maintaining values of mutuality, hospitality, and co-operativeness in a cut-throat milieu.

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For this is what the Church is called to do in a time when Social Darwinism is rapidly becoming the predominant philosophy of a whole society. Increasingly, the single strongest theme in American life is that survival is for the winner. The weak, the poor, the old, the person in any way deviant, all are to be ignored as socially useless, or genetically faulty, or a needless social burden for those clearly up to succeeding.

Faithful life-long unions of husband and wife cannot hold together in this milieu without the support of a community which believes otherwise. The marriage vows are not Darwinian. "I take thee (to my wedded spouse), to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part." This is no formula for the survival of the fittest. Who can compete, saddled with a sick wife or a poor husband, or whatever better has become worse?

Deeply felt values are not enough to free a person or a family from the destructive and self-destructive inter-personal behavior of life in an atmosphere of Social Darwinism. There must be a community to reinforce these values. The form and shape of Christian marriage and family life are not prescribed by the New Testament, but the values of faithfulness, forgiveness, hospitality, and love as a benevolent helpfulness and concern, most certainly are. To these values must be added, with the special emphasis which Jesus gave to it, the value of child-care.

The family, as a safe and trustworthy community for the raising of children, is at the heart of Christian concern for the family.

It is, then, not simply marriage and the family which are under such pressure and currently in such a fragile state; it is the parish as a supportive community for the Christian life. Christian marriage and the Christian family are properly understood as part of that life and will find their proper shape in the 70's in relationship to that life. The key to the renewal of marriage and a family life which is faithful, forgiving, hospitable, and loving, will be in the offering of the family to the larger community of faith in the building of a community life which offers care and safety for children and older people, and a true mutual concern among adults beyond the isolated concern of spouse for spouse.