

Summary Report from the Classis BCNW

Study Committee on Cohabitation

Introduction and Background

Our churches increasingly encounter people who choose to live together in relationships that look like marriage but do not have religious or civic certification as such. As views toward marriage change in our surrounding culture, our church councils feel challenged by situations in which the church's traditional values appear to be in conflict with the values lived out by some of its members. When dealing with such cases, churches and councils struggle to find ways to be caring yet faithful to scriptural norms. To help equip councils for this struggle, and in response to an overture to Classis B.C. Northwest in 2004, a study committee was appointed.

1. *The Committee's Mandate*

The overture called for a committee to *"study the issue of cohabitation or common law living from a Biblical perspective"*. In addition, the committee was asked:

- to evaluate the reasons why cohabitation/common law living is so popular in our society and review statistics to determine if these relationships are usually lasting ones, and
- to recommend guidelines on how church councils should deal with members and regular attenders who cohabit or live in common law relationships.¹

2. *Defining marriage and cohabitation*

The committee felt a good place to begin is with some definitions. Denominational materials state: *"Marriage is an institution created by God. It is a covenant relationship established by mutual vows between a man and a woman united by God."*² The committee's working understanding of cohabitation, taken from the overture was: *"any unmarried, heterosexual couple who consistently share a common residence and engage in sexual intercourse."*³ That essentially implies couples who live in what for all appearances is a marriage relationship, but without a Christian covenant ceremony sealing it, and/or without formal civil certification by license or banns.

3. *The Purpose of Marriage*

Your committee, finding the denominational forms for marriage ceremonies a great help, agrees that the purpose of marriage as institution is:

- to enable mankind to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and
- to enrich not only the structures of society itself as a whole, but especially

¹ For a copy of the complete overture, please see Appendix A "The Overture"

² From Denominational statements found on CRCNA.org

³ This is the definition used in the overture

- to enrich the lives of those entering into the relationship of marriage by providing mutual comfort, companionship, and a place for the loving expression of their God-given desires.

Christian Marriage has the further purpose of advancing the Kingdom of God by creating a secure environment within which to raise God-serving children. Beyond that, Christian marriage also functions as a symbol of the union of Christ and the church.⁴

4. *Examples of how the problem is experienced, with indications of why cohabiting is popular.*

Cohabiting (as the overture defined it) is practiced across the age spectrum. Teens and young adults cohabit, as do seniors. However, the reasons for doing so appear to change according to the ages of those cohabiting. The young seem to have more of distrust of – or simple lack of need for – the institutional components of marriage. They express more of a desire to “be sure this relationship will work before we commit for life.” Older cohabiters point to financial reasons (one or the other would have to give up some source of income if married), or family reasons (children not adjusting well to the idea of a new spouse). There are various other reasons given, but these seemed to be most frequent in the examples encountered.

5. *The Key question: What exactly constitutes a Marriage?*

The question that the Committee spent most time wrestling with is this: what act or rite (if any), and what level of public commitment (if any) is it that definitively establishes the union of a man and a woman as "one" in the eyes of the Lord? (A list of options is offered for consideration in the full report). Cohabiting couples have some of the key elements of marriage in place but not others. For instance, they, by our given definition, are sexually intimate – one of the elements. But they have also rejected other vestiges of matrimony, such as a congregational ceremony with God and his people as witnesses. Does the lack of a civil ceremony, or a church ceremony or some other component such as any kind of public commitment make it no longer a marriage in God's eyes? The answer to that question is crucial to how churches and their councils approach and deal with members who cohabit.

While the Bible gives good direction as to what makes a marriage pleasing in God's sight, it does not directly address the issue of what constitutes the start of a marriage. A review of history is helpful to gain some understanding as to what constituted marriage throughout the ages.

6. *Historical Summary*

Marriage has existed for most of human history as a social agreement between two families or clans. It was a social contract. This was the case within God's people and many of the people's around them in Old Testament times. Religion did not seem to have a large direct role in these customs, aside from prescribing behaviors related to the marriage relationship itself.

⁴This is fleshed out in more detail, with scripture references, in the full report.

Over the early centuries after Christ, religious leaders gradually began to play a greater role in endorsing marriages involving Christians. Civil government involvement increased as well. By the Middle Ages, the institutional church in Europe had gained enough political power that it was governing marriage ceremonies. Gradually marriage made a shift from the realm of social contract to that of a civil and/or ecclesiastical institution. It is in this time that churchmen began to argue that marriage was in fact a sacrament instituted by God.

The Protestant Reformers rejected the notion of marriage as a sacrament. For Reformed folk, marriage was essentially a civil or social contract with church participation or blessing a desirable but non-essential addition. State performed marriage remained a viable option. For many who did not have the means to cover the expense of the required ceremonies the social covenant model remained the norm.

Such studious tracking of the institution of marriage through Bible times, and through Western European history into North American society shows that we can talk in terms of three models:

1. A social covenant model within local communities and families; such a marriage may stand alone, or include some legal or religious components. (a mixed model)
2. An ecclesiological (or church-regulated) marriage model which rejected as invalid any marriage without church sanction, and which came to stress marriage as a sacrament.
3. A state/legal model, which validates marriage as a legal contract between families or two mutually consenting individuals.

7. Key Question Elaborated

When we face the issue of people cohabiting, we are basically dealing with people who are functioning within a modern version of the social covenant model, maybe somewhat more correctly considered a two individual covenant model, as in many cases society as represented by the family or the community has had little involvement. The real question becomes, is this model an offense to God and thus to the church?

To answer that question, each council must really ask and answer what the essential components that “initiate” or make a marriage are.

Your committee is not able to fully answer this question for you. A case could be made, based on most of Western history, that the social covenant model is especially offensive to churches that perceive marriage as a sacrament or that want to gather and hold political power. We don't see it as a sacrament, and we don't see the church as a place to gather political power and use it to hold people subservient - to make them obey. But there is also truth to the fact that some form of mutual accountability between the faith-professing couple and it's faith community seems to be an important thing that is missed in forms of the social/individual covenant models. How do we achieve that? Could we come to an understanding where we acknowledge that God and His word leave room for variations on what we call marriage, and agree that certain forms of the social covenant may not actually be offensive to him? Could we as a church in a changing time, come up with an understanding

of the types of marriage practiced in our culture as lying on a continuum, which has as its ideal end the perfect, loving, covenant relationship between Christ and his bride - the church, and on the other end the various hard to categorize coupling relationships we encounter as councils? This fresh discussion must be had in the church. Your committee has had portions of it, but not enough discussions to definitively answer the question.

8. Guidelines on how to deal with problem situations

When the church encounters new believers who are not familiar with the church's understood purposes and goals for marriage, or deals with believers married to those who do not adhere to these ideals, or folks who just plain refuse to follow that model, we definitely feel challenged and uncomfortable. We want to be compassionate, we want to bring people toward the ideal, and we don't want to be difficult or harsh if it can be avoided. Each encountered cohabitation situation will have unique features and circumstances to consider. We always begin our task with humility before God. The current situation calls us to reflect anew about what we expect marriage to look like.

Your committee feels the ideals laid out by the church as purposes for marriage are valid and good. We find it helpful to start with the understanding that all "truth" or marriage-like relationships are somewhere on a continuum and need to be helped to move towards God's ideal. There may be situations in which a congregation has to accept that the relationship they are dealing with is far from the ideal and that they may not move much. There may be others where, with conversation, prayer and a study of God's word, couples, without coercion except by the Holy Spirit speaking through the word and the clear love of his people, suddenly realize they need to make a change. Such experiences are common in church plants across the continent.

With that understanding, some questions can be brought to the encountered situations that could shape the elder's pastoral approach to the couple. For instance, the question could be asked: Is the chosen form of relationship primarily the response to past wounds, or a defiance of custom? If rejection of traditional marriage is revealed to be due to past wounds, such as the pain of loss to death or divorce, or past abuse, a different approach would be taken than if it was revealed to be an outright rejection of the church's authority, or of God's authority. Defiance of God's authority is serious. Defying custom is inconvenient, but allows for some leeway. In each individual case, the core issue would need to be identified and worked with. It may be discovered that the real issues are something quite unrelated to not choosing marriage as the church has understood it. Imposing a requirement for compliance in such situations could only increase the damage and would not move things along well. There is a danger of the church setting such clear filters in place that they never have the "burden" of dealing with messy situations. Our Lord seemed drawn particularly to the messy situations, such as with the Samaritan woman at the well, and the church is wise to check if it is merely scaring away the messy people.

9. Concluding Comments

One thing we are sure of when it comes to dealing with cohabitation and marriage. It is a complicated subject, with many other issues woven into it. Your committee, when it began

it's work, quickly saw how much information there was to be processed, how broad a subject we were dealing with, and soon found out how hard it is to be sharp and clear on the matter. The fact is, we had much fruitful exchange between us, and all learned much from the reading and research we did, yet we are left with a feeling of just having scratched the surface. We had to let one Classis meeting go by because we were not able to pull all we had into a report, and even months later we have done this summary report rather arbitrarily, knowing churches are waiting for some help, some guidance for real life situations they are trying to sort through and be of godly assistance in. We have answered a call for help with a Question. That may not at first seem like the desired kind of help. Yet we feel it is where we must start.

Classis Alberta North grappled with this question before we did, and their report is helpful, so we are including it in ours as Appendix 2. It's main helpfulness is in clarifying the 'standard' approach the church has taken to the question of cohabitation.

A report prepared by Bert denBoggende for First Hamilton CRC years ago was an eye opener for most of us, and brought home the call for an approach guided by humility. Reading it we realized that today's expectations of how marriage is sanctioned by the church is really quite recent. His paper moved us in the direction of questioning what ceremony (if any) or what form of commitment must be made to begin a marriage relationship or a marriage-type of relationship that is pleasing to God. His report is attached as Appendix 3.

We met most of the quests of the original overture. Key biblical references are found throughout the full report, (which will be mailed out in a few weeks), reasons people cohabit are explored, guidelines for dealing with them given. One area we chose not to go into was the area of statistical study. We simply were already inundated with information and did not want more on our plate.

It is our sincere hope that what we have pulled together in this summary and in the full report will well serve the Christian Reformed churches in Classis British Columbia North West. We have been educated and enlightened in our service to our Lord's church in preparing it.

Humbly submitted:

The Committee

The committee consists of the following members:

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