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Polygamy And The African Church: A Survey

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Introduction

The polygamy issue has been a problem to the African Churches for well over a century. Judging from the fairly steady flow of books and articles that continues to be produced the debate over polygamy is very much alive and shows little sign of letting up. My hope is that this article will make many more aware of this practical problem. Therefore, I have approached it as more of a pastoral problem and not simply an academic exercise. The purpose of this article is simply to survey some of the Biblical, historical and pastoral aspects of the issue.

The History of Polygamy

Polygamy[1] is a general term which means mutiplierity of partners in the family relation by one of either sex. In some societies, the issue is polyandry whereby one woman has many men in family relation to herself. However, polyandry has not been very much practiced. Polygamy is supposed to have been largely the result of tribal wars. A majority of the women and children were taken by the conquerors. They then became concubines, slaves and in some cases mistresses of the conquerors.

What shall be done with this surplus of women? Here again the might of the strongest comes to the front. The chief or the most heroic fighter would

assert his right to choice of captives, and thus concubinage or what is the same thing - polygamy would be set up. Successes in further wars come and add other women to be distributed. Of course to the sheik or king there soon comes the seraglio and the harem. Polygamous practices will come in other ways. The prisoner of war becomes property and passes from hand to hand by gift or sale. So woman - the weaker party - endures what comes to her as slave, concubine.[2]

Polygamy in most of the African Societies is viewed as a social, economic, and in some cases political asset. There are some cultural reasons as to why men get more than one wife. In some instances, it is for security, as a means of getting a son to take care of one in old age.

The polygamous institution of marriage is found in almost every African traditional society where the rate of such marriage may be as high as 25 per cent in some societies. Within that context of life, polygamy is not only acceptable and workable, but is a great social and economic asset.[3]

Historically, polygamy has been an accepted if not recommended pattern of marriage in many African societies. Polygamy is seen as a sign of prestige, and prosperity. The prosperity comes through having many children with is the father's "life insurance" as well as a guarantee for a good home in old age. Due to cultural and economic changes, polygamy does not seem to have the respect it used to have. It seem that it will not be as much of a problem in the future as it has been in the past.

Broadly, polygamy had four major and related functions. First, polygamy traditionally helped to satisfy the need for having a large family at the same time keeping the women's fertility rate low and also preventing prostitution. Thus, spacing of children was not uncommon. Having a second baby when the older one was not four or five years was frowned upon. Second, poly-

gamy also catered for childless marriages. Since divorce was almost unheard of, barren women were always comforted by getting a co-wife who in some instances gave one of her children to the barren wife. Also, women who had no sons hoped the co-wives could provide a son for the husband. Third, polygamy provided a form of security and a guarantee because the children cared for the parents in their old age; and fourth, polygamy brought a tie between families through multiple marriage. It tightened the bonds of society and broadened the circle of relatives.

The social and cultural factors which encourage polygamy in Africa

Polygamy is still accepted in many tribal groups. Hillman says:

From this total of 742 clearly identified socio-cultural units, it was found that in 580 of them polygamy is the accepted preferential form of marriage. In other words, polygamy is traditionally and socially normative in 78 per cent of these anthropological groups although the incidence is not the same in all of them. [4]

Hillman continues his analysis to indicate that in 34 per cent of all these sub-saharan tribes, the incidence of polygamy is more than 20 per cent. He concludes by saying:

In general, therefore, it may be said that according to the widest and most reliable data analysis polygamy is regarded as a socially valid form of preferential marriage among the majority of peoples in Africa, south of the Sahara.[5]

Elaborating on the above generalization - Kitembe, Magesa and Shorter report the following on polygamy rates:

Polygamy rates appear to be lower in East, Central and Southern Africa than in West Africa. One can compare, for example, Gabon 1:41; Ghana 1.35; Ivory Coast 1.40 with Kenya 1.21; Tanzania 1.25 and Uganda 1.18, these figures all being taken from the 1960s. In Tanzania the crude polygamy rate increased from 1.20 in 1957 to 1.25 in 1967, and the rates of certain regions show how local factors may influence the practice. Iringa Region had a rate of 1.50; Kigoma 1.48; Mara 1.37 and Mbeya 1.37, all well above the national average. The same is true of Uganda where the national rate was 1.18 and the local rates in the Eastern and Northern region both 1.25. Generally speaking, there is no polygamy rate for urban areas, since married men usually outnumber married women in towns. This does not, of course, mean that there are no polygamists in towns. What it means is that married women often remain in the rural areas when their husbands are at work in the urban areas.[6]

As indicated by the above quotation, polygamy is still a significant phenomenon in Africa with which those concerned with presenting the gospel must reckon.

There are broadly three factors which have encouraged polygamy in Africa. Other factors could be mentioned such as sexual desire, but I have restricted myself to what I believe are the more prevalent causes.

Economic

Often polygamy is not only socially acceptable but also economically advantageous. In the past many families worked in the fields, herding cattle and so on. Polygamy is therefore, an economic asset.

The wives will work and the man simply oversees. The wives and the children are there to produce or become income generators. Girls in many societies are

simply income generators. The dowry is an economic asset. The more girls one has, the larger the herds will be in the future.

Security

Most of the African societies believe that the security is in the children, particularly the boys. This is their "life insurance", the guarantee of good place in old age is in their children. Most if not all African societies believe that their security is in their sons. If a man has no children, it is usually assumed that it is the fault of the wife; therefore, the only answer would be to get a second wife. Presumably the second wife might bear a son. Children have been a sign of pride in the past. In the past the more children one had the better one's status in the society. Most if not all African societies stress the importance of large families. The woman, therefore, sees her own personal fulfillment through childbearing, and a mother of several children is respected by both relatives and friends. Furthermore, she will build a name for her family. Her sister will not have any difficulty in getting married. Barrenness is one of the most severe psychological traumas that a woman can suffer. To avoid this trauma as mentioned, many first wives encourage their husbands to get a second wife. The older or first wife can be comforted as well, bestowing her affection upon children of her co-wives. In some societies, such as the Masai and Kalenjin, it is a normal procedure for a barren wife to receive an infant of a co-wife who has had several children. That becomes her own child. This child is the barren wife's security.

There is another type of security which can be seen as a cause or reason for polygamy. A father may want a good home for his daughter and it could happen that all the good men are married. The father (or relative) will encourage a family man to take another wife (the man's daughter) provided the woman is not of the same age group. This is done for security reasons.

As it was in the Old Testament times, so in African societies, polygamy is motivated by more than the need to have children. Sometimes the need to make peace with another group encourages the practice:

There is also the practical need to form an alliance between family and clan groups. Where marriage is conceptualized as an arrangement between such groups and only concomitantly between husband and wife, and the bonds of marriage, and the payments that support the stability of marriage, it may be seen in terms of social alliance. In other words, polygamy is a function of social solidarity on the level of the extended family, the clan and the tribal or ethnic community. Each new marriage sets up new relationships of affinity between two different kin groups - that of the husband and that of the wife, and their children are kin to both groups. A variety of new mutual assistance are thus established.[7]

Status and Social pressure

In the past people of status in the society such as kings, chiefs, spiritual leaders, as well as intermediaries, were polygamists. Polygamy, therefore, became a symbol of status. Besides, a man with many daughters is given respect by many for the hope of getting his daughters. Stories are told of how men with many daughters were invited to beer parties whereas those without daughters were rarely or never invited. The larger the family is (for size is considered a blessing), the higher the status. Polygamy, therefore, helps in extending one's family. Therefore, polygamy was a measure of status in the community.

Polygamy in the past was an accepted if not a desired norm. Some people became polygamous not because they wanted to but because they were encouraged by relatives and friends. This at times is a sign of being a gentleman. A father may desire to give his daughter

to a friend as an expression of his respect.

Finally, Mbiti sums up social and cultural factors which encourage polygamy when he says:

Polygamy has evolved as an accepted, honourable and respected form of marriage. Indeed many of those who take additional wives are convinced or believe that polygamy, is a higher status of marriage than monogamy since it meets better their aims and purposes of marriage.[8]

Polygamy in the Old Testament

Polygamy was cited for the first time in the Old Testament. In Genesis 4:19, Lamech had two wives. Abraham seems to be one of the first polygamous marriages of the Old Testament where we are told what happened and why. This came about due to Abraham's impatience and Sarah's encouraged marriage. According to Genesis, Sarah was the match-maker. Later Sarah became jealous and requested that Hagar be driven away. She then referred to her as a concubine.

The marriage of Abraham and Sarah seems to have been an original love match, and even to have preserved something of that character through life. Still we find Sarah under the influence of polygamous ideas, presenting Abraham with a concubine. Yet afterward when she herself had a son, she induced Abraham to drive out into the wilderness this concubine and her son. Now Abraham was humane and kind, and it is said "The thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight" (Genesis 21:11). But he was in the toils of polygamy and it brought him pain and retribution. A divine direction may be hard to hear.[9]

The other well known polygamous personalities in the Old Testament are Jacob, David and Solomon. Jacob's case is one of the complicated ones due to Laban's trick. Furthermore, there is not much distinction bet-

ween the children of Rachel and Leah. According to Genesis 35:22-26, it is hard to say whether any of Jacob's children were of other than polygamous origin. David was a man who wanted to be a righteous man with all his heart. Like many other kings and rulers of his day, he was polygamous. According to Adrian Hastings, polygamy was accepted by the Israelite society.

The Old Testament presents us with a number of examples of polygamous marriage, notably the cases of Jacob, David and Solomon. Israelite society of the time undoubtedly accepted polygamy and there is no condemnation of the practice as such anywhere in the Old Testament.[10]

There was however a change of attitude and practice during the post-exilic time. There is no reference to polygamy in any books of the post-exilic period. Most books seem to indicate that the ideal of marriage was a monogamous one.

Walter Trobisch approaches polygamy in a slightly different way by presenting the consequences which followed polygamous marriage:

To the Old Testament writers polygamy was indeed a legally recognized form of marriage and home life. An Israelite who had two wives was by no means considered one who had fallen in his faith or in the necessary obedience in faith. He was not placed into the category of a second-class Israelite who was under discipline and first had to repent before he would be admitted to full congregational membership.[11]

In response, Trobisch points out that this was done out of one's desires, but in turn God did not bless it. There was always some kind of a problem. He says:

Abraham's polygamy is reported as a criticism. No blessing rested upon it. It constituted a poor human makeshift solution, a sign of lack of faith, leading to

contempt, jealousy, quarreling in the home and estrangement between husband and wife (Gen. 26:35). Jacob had nothing but trouble with the two sisters he married in one week. There was rivalry and hatred in his home (Gen. 29:30-31)... In the story of Abimelech, polygamy actually leads to murder. In a war of succession, he kills his brothers with the help of his maternal uncle. (Jud. 9:5).... David's kingdom was ruined through polygamy because his wives turned his heart after other gods.[12]

Although Mosaic law from all indications permitted polygamy and accepted it without condemnation, any writing on polygamy was very rare during the post-exilic period. Monogamy was becoming more and more the ideal marriage in the Jewish tradition. This gave very little room for polygamy but it did not necessarily condemn it.

The Jewish ideal of marriage was becoming more and more clearly a monogamous one, a true covenant relationship... Yet polygamy was by no means outlawed among Orthodox Jews either then for or many centuries afterwards, and it continued to be entered into by a few, chiefly in cases of Levirate and prolonged child issues. In subsequent centuries it only came to be forbidden among Western Jews about the twelfth century.[13]

It is, clear that the Israelites did not condemn polygamy. Polygamy was accepted by the society, although there is no writing indicating that polygamy was encouraged except in Abraham's case where Sarah, his wife encouraged him to marry the maid. The list could be continued to include Solomon but the above examples are enough for the purpose of this paper. It must be pointed out that as time went on polygamy ceased to be practiced by the Jewish people. Monogamy became customary among them. There is no mention of polygamous marriages after the Babylonian exile.

Polygamy in the New Testament

As Christians our purpose in analysing or solving a problem is to look into the teachings of Christ and the Bible as a whole. Furthermore, one must understand the history as well as the cultural evolution.

Although God permitted polygamy in former times, a careful reading of the Old Testament reveals a gradual evolution away from this ancient Jewish custom, toward monogamy. Because of this progressive development in the history of salvation, monogamy emerges as the properly human and divine form of marriage.[14]

History clearly shows that change of attitude in the Jewish society from the time of Abraham to the time of Christ and the apostles. There is nowhere in the New Testament where Jesus Christ himself condemned polygamy. Many a time Christ condemned divorce. It is therefore best to admit that the New Testament has no certain explicit word, either in recognizing the existence of polygamy or in condemning it.

Jesus surely accepted the monogamous ideal of post exilic Israel. In no recorded word does he go out of his way to condemn polygamous marriage as he so strongly condemned the Jewish practice of divorce though that too had the authority of Moses behind it. Yet his teaching does presuppose that marriage is monogamous, it would hardly be true that a man who divorces his wife and marries another would be guilty precisely of adultery (Mark 10:11), if he had the right to marry another even without divorcing the first.[15]

Hillman supports Hastings contention that the New Testament does not directly condemn polygamy, though it does seem to imply disapproval.

To recognize this is not to deny that the values may also be realized, and perhaps even more fully in a monogamous union. The point here is that while the New

Testament explicitly repudiates ... prostitution, and homosexuality (cf. Rom. 1:24-27, I Cor. 6:9, 12-18, Eph. 4:19), which compromise the christian ideal of marriage there is no prohibition against simultaneous polygamy.[16]

Karl Barth, contends that the New Testament is silent on the issue of polygamy.[17] We can hardly point with certainty to a single text (of the New Testament) in which polygamy is expressly forbidden and monogamy universally accepted.

There is not much discussion about polygamy during Jesus' period. Jesus' teachings on marriage come from Gen. 2:24. The man leaves his mother and father and joins himself to his wife and both will become one flesh. Paul in his epistle does not say anything to condemn or accept polygamy, except "faithful to his one wife" (I Tim. 3:2, Tit. 1:6). However I must point out that Paul's teaching as far as I can tell in I Cor. 7:4, presupposes monogamous union.

Monogamy was accepted during the apostolic period and through time, it became the accepted way of life.

Monogamy was characteristic of the marriage of Christians from apostolic times, indissolubility is clearly called for by Jesus' strong condemnation of divorce, the ecclesiastical approbation of marriage is already suggested by Ignatius of Antioch in the early second century. It is not certain, however, that polygamists were not at times received into the early church. Indissolubility has not always and everywhere been understood in the same way - as a 'cannot' rather than a 'should not'. The obligation to solemnize one's marriage before a priest was only laid down after many centuries.[18]

It is therefore clear that polygamy is not treated directly by the New Testament writers. Obviously they were aware of polygamy because of their particular time

and place in history, but there is no clear reference to any polygamist in the New Testament. It must be pointed out that Christ in Mt. 19:5 and Mk. 10:7 teaches that the ideal is monogamous marriage. The man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. They shall become one flesh. The reason for marriage is for cleaving. This too is a command.

The only explicit indication and directive regarding polygamy is the qualification for a bishop and elder that he be faithful to his one wife (I Tim. 3:2, Tit. 1:6). Hasting contends that Paul was trying to exclude polygamists and men from broken homes from holding positions in the church.

It is just possible that its intention was to rule out the appointment of a polygamist as elder and does, then, imply both a moderate condemnation of polygamy and the acceptance within the congregation of the church of some people with more than one wife. It is far more likely, however, that its meaning is either simply to stress the duty of fidelity to one's wife or to exclude from office men who have had a broken marriage in the past, or even a remarried widower.[19]

Based on the above, it can be said again that there is no flat condemnation of polygamy anywhere either in the Old Testament or in the New Testament. In the apostolic period and the subsequent generations there was very little polygamy, if any; monogamy therefore became the rule.

Monogamy became, indeed, so firmly the rule that soon some, such as Athenagoras and Tertullian could deny that a second marriage, contracted after the death of a first wife, was other than adultery.[20]

It is clear however, that Christ condemned divorce. Mark 10:11,12 states that "Whosoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. So, too, if she divorces her husband and marries another,

she commits adultery." Paul refers to a similar case in Rom. 7:3. The scripture is not as directive in the issue of polygamy as it is in the issue of divorce.

Historical Review of Polygamy and the Church

Historically, there has not been one accepted way of handling polygamists. However, there seems to be one major practice by various churches; that is, expulsion. Many of the Mission Churches excommunicate the polygamist for taking the sacraments. Many polygamists have sought refuge in the independent churches or some sects and cults.

In Kenya, there were many causes of agitation between Africans and Christianity. These caused disagreements within churches and eventually separation. Probably the most crucial issues were female circumcision, land acquisition, and polygamy. A story is told of a chief who wanted to become a Christian but he could not be allowed to do so until he had divorced his second wife. Divorce was almost unheard of in African culture. Finally the man came to the missionary, the story continues. The man told the missionary that he was ready to become a Christian. He was no longer a polygamist, the man said. The missionary asked how? The man said that he had killed his second wife. The missionary told the chief that he could not be a Christian because he was now a murderer. The above story, though not verified as true, illustrates the dilemma of a polygamist.

David Barrett says that one of the major causes of the formation of independent churches is a revolt against the practice of the churches in regard to polygamy.

The reasons for the formation of independent churches have been many, but most can be contained in one or other of the following: A revolt against European domination in church or state, a revolt against the practice of the churches in regard to polygamy, or a revolt against limitation of spontaneous expression in worship such as drumming, hand clapping and dancing or of the application of the christian faith to healing and the related world of witch-craft.[21]

Two church fathers touched on the issue of polygamy. These are St. Augustine and St. Thomas. St. Augustine said that polygamy was neither contrary to the law of nature nor to the nature of marriage. St. Augustine argued from the law of nature that just as one man could bear children through many women but one woman could not concieve children from more than one man at a time so a man may be able to have more than one wife but it would not be proper for a wife to have more than one husband.[22]

Similarly, St. Thomas came to the conclusion, from his theory of natural law that simultaneous polygamy was not always and everywhere prohibited.[23]

It seems that some theological scholars during the reformation period were confused on the subject until the time of Calvin who claimed that polygamy was prohibited by natural law and that it was directly opposed to the secondary end of marriage because it hindered domestic peace and created inferiority amongst the wives[24]. Monogamy was then seen as preferable to polygamy. As the economy changed, the culture evolved, many people in the western world became more sympathetic to monogamy rather than to polygamy. Yet among some early missionaries there was a surprising tolerance.

Hastings summarizes:

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, there had been nearly a century of Protestant missionary work in Asia. Many missionaries here had shown themselves quite sympathetic towards the validity of polygamous marriage, and some at least open to the baptism of polygamists as such. Thus early in that century a series of missionary conferences in North India, at which a number of different denominations including Anglican had taken part resolved that 'if a convert, before becoming a Christian, has married more wives than one, then in accordance with the practice of the Jewish and primitive churches, he shall be permitted to keep them all. But such a person is not eligible to any office in the church.[25]

The above conclusion seems to have spread rapidly and was accepted and adopted in other countries. This was adopted by the Anglican Missionaries in 1850 in Nigeria and Sierra Leone.

In 1853, John Colenso, the first Bishop of the Anglican diocese of Natal, challenged the refusal of the church to accept polygamists to baptism.

The conviction has deepened within me more and more that the common practice of requiring a man, who may have more than one wife at the time of his conversion, to put away all but one before he can be received to Christian baptism, is unwarranted by the Scriptures, unsanctioned by Apostolic example or authority, condemned by common reason and sense of right and altogether unjustifiable.[26]

Bishop Colenso's opposition did not go far because he was opposed by Bishops Cotterill and Callaway. Later Colenso was given his freedom. He had no connection with England, so naturally his arguments died. In 1866 at a church congress at Wakefield, polygamy was discussed. Under the chairmanship of Lightfoot, Bishop

Bickersteth of Exeter urged liberty for polygamy in certain circumstances while James Johnson, a Nigerian Anglican priest, strongly opposed Bishop Bickersteth.

At the Lambeth congress convened in 1888, a committee of fifteen bishops met under the chairmanship of Lightfoot of Durham. Although Bickersteth argued for a more tolerant view, the committee passed the following resolution:

It is the opinion of this conference that persons living in polygamy be not admitted to baptism, but that they be accepted as candidates and kept under Christian instruction until such time as they shall be in a position to accept the law of Christ (5 (A), passed by 83 votes to 21)... The wives of polygamists may, in the opinion of this conference be admitted in some cases to baptism, but it must be left to the local authorities of the church to decide under what circumstances they may be baptized (5 (B), passed by 54 to 34).[27]

The above resolutions were confirmed unanimously at the Lambeth conference of 1908 by its committee of foreign missions. Other missions through the years have adopted this resolution.

In reading the historical part of the church practice on polygamy it seems from 1888, on missions condemned polygamy. One mission society reported:

Our correspondents in Africa view with unanimous intolerance conditions of life which are not only unchristian, but are at variance with the instinctive feelings of natural morality. With them there can be no question of polygamy. It is simply one of the gross evils of heathen society which, like habitual murder or slavery, must at all costs must be ended.[28]

The Anglican missionaries were not alone in the polygamy issue. The Presbyterian and the Methodist missionaries followed the decision of the Lambeth conference of 1888.

In other churches, too, the argument has gone backward and forwards. Thus the Presbyterian Church in the French Cameroons formerly held a position of admitting the wives of polygamists in some circumstances, but in the 1930's moved away from this and finally declared in 1940 that there was no other way consistent with Christian teaching than to outlaw polygamy entirely from the Christian church, even at the expense of individuals. Again the Methodist Church in Ghana admitted the wives of polygamists to baptism until 1951 and then ceased to do so.[29]

Finally, in 1920 the Lambeth Conference confirmed its 1888 resolution. Their conclusion was that once you allow polygamy a foothold in the church it will tend to increase in spite of all efforts to the contrary.

Since then there have been numerous meetings discussing the issue of polygamy. In January 1930 a Synod of the Anglican Church of Uganda accepted "native" marriage but to them "polygamy is an evil that cannot be tolerated in the church." [30]

In 1938 the International Missionary Council held its second world Assembly at Tambaram, Madras and decided to do research in the Gold Coast on the attitude of the Christian Church towards polygamy. Their findings were as follows:

It cannot be expected that the present survey will provide either a critique of Christian matrimony or such an estimate of polygamy as will revise the almost unanimous practice of Christian Missions since their inception in Africa. It is a vain hope to think that there may be in the system of polygamy some saving clause, to be discovered from this survey, that will make its practice generally permissible to African Christians.[31]

The Evangelical Lutherans in Liberia originally

accepted that the wives of a polygamist could be baptized but refused the men. Later in 1948 they resolved that it was illogical so they said polygamy was definitely unchristian. This lasted for four years and in 1951 they concluded that 'monogamy is God's plan for marriage, that it is the ideal relationship for the expression of love between man and woman, and is the proper atmosphere within which to develop a Christian family'. The church decided that where evidence of true faith is shown and upon approval of the district church council, parties to an established polygamous marriage may be baptized and confirmed. However, it further affirmed that in accordance with St. Paul's teaching no such person, man or woman, shall be permitted to hold office in the church or congregation or be engaged as a Christian worker.[32]

The more recent seminars indicate more and more divisions. There seems to be no consensus as to the fate of the polygamist as far as the church is concerned. In 1958, the All Africa Church Conference which was held in Ibadan, Nigeria tried to analyze the issue of polygamy by examining the factors which encouraged polygamy. It was followed by a meeting in Mindolo, Zambia in February to April 1963. This meeting was led by Professors Gordon Dubstan and Bolaji Idowu. The recommendation was "that a pagan polygamist upon conversion be received into the church, he and his wives and children, and that the position of monogamous Christians who become polygamists be carefully studied, each case being judged on its merits".[33]

Another attempt to solve the problem of church an polygamy was discussed in early 1969 by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. The president of the Southern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania argued that:

The church is right in discouraging polygamy among its members. But they are wrong in making monogamy into one of the conditions of baptism and church membership

.... My plea with the church and mission, therefore, is that the pre-baptism polygamy should be baptized together with their wives and children without being forced to divorce their wives. They should also be accepted into full church membership. The post-baptism polygamists also should not be excommunicated from church membership because of their wives they married besides the first wife.[34]

The seventies did not produce much in solving the polygamy issue. The Anglican Archbishop meeting in Lusaka, Zambia in 1970 and the Anglican diocese of Victoria - Nyanza in Tanzania simply agreed a polygamist who is legally married by native or Muslim law may be baptized together with his wives and children after they are taught.

There have been a few denominations which have been different in that they are prepared to baptize polygamists without requesting them to send any of their wives away: Mennonites, Salvation Army, Ghana Baptist Church, African Methodist, Episcopal Zion Church, and the Assemblies of God, all in Ghana.

Kenya has not been exceptional. The majority of the Protestant churches, mostly mission churches do not baptize polygamists or admit them to partake the sacraments. Some churches, such as the Africa Inland Church, encourage polygamists to put away all wives but the first wife to have been married.[35] The practice of the other churches is not much different. Several independent churches and some sects do admit and baptize polygamists. This was one of the major causes of a split between the African Brotherhood Church and the Africa Inland Church.

Although many churches in Africa and Kenya in particular seem to agree that a polygamist can accept Christ, there seems to be no agreement as to what he should be and what he can do.

Broad Church Categories or Stand Regarding Polygamy

The following are six broad categories which seem to be the most widely accepted by major denominations in Kenya.[36] However, it is clear from this summary that there is no consensus as to what should be done to polygamists.

1. The polygamist who is converted should put away all other wives except one. The polygamist is given the privilege to choose the one wife he wishes to keep on the condition that she accepts to be baptized and married in the church. (The scripture condemns this - I Cor. 7:39, Rom. 7:3. Mk. 10:11-12).

2. The polygamist is requested to send away all other wives except the first one.

3. The polygamist is kept waiting until he is freed from 'sinfulness' by death of all wives except one.

4. While recognizing monogamy as the ideal, some churches feel they should extend pastoral care and accord full privileges of the church except pastoral leadership to the polygamist and his family.

5. In other churches, wives of polygamist and their children are accorded full privileges but the husband is denied the same.

6. The polygamist who accepts Christ is accepted fully for lay leadership without discrimination, but will not be admitted for ordination.

The above six categories are held by the major denominations in Kenya, although even within those denominations there is no consensus or agreement amongst all the members of each particular denomination. The polygamy issue is still alive in the churches.

Conclusion

We can only conclude that the polygamy issue remains one of the biggest pastoral problems Kenyan pastors must grapple with. The problem becomes acute when it comes to baptism. Some churches do not baptize the children of second wives because to them they are illegitimate, some do baptize them. It is hoped that this brief survey has reminded us that the polygamy issue is still with us. What of the future? As the culture changes people by choice will probably become monogamists. The economic crunch as well as the norms and mores of society will change. Unfortunately, we may be moving from a polygamy issue to the divorce issue which is on the increase in the African continent. But peering into the future does not remove our responsibility to face the issue of polygamy today. We should not ignore vital questions which need further discussion among our churches on this issue:

1. What should be done to a polygamist who has lived happily for perhaps 30 years with his wives and then he accepts Christ? Should he send some away? If he sends them away who should provide for her?
2. Does the scripture deny the fruits of grace to a polygamist?
3. What should be done to the children of polygamous marriages? Could they be baptized? Could they train for the ministry?
4. What is the most Biblical and appropriate approach in dealing with polygamists who accept the Lord Jesus as their personal Saviour?
5. Many churches do not allow a polygamist to participate in the Lord's sacraments, should this continue. Is polygamy the unforgivable sin?

6. What hints or helps can we give to our pastors to assist in dealing with this pastoral problem so that the pastors cannot be accused of favoritism? People are known to have moved from one church to another due to this problem.

More study, reflection and prayer are needed as we seek to minister the gospel of Christ in an Africa still characterized by the fact of polygamy.

notes

- [1] Polygamy: The word polygamy and polygyny tend to be used inter-changeably for the sake of this paper the word polygamy alone will be used.
- [2] James Orr, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Mich. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1929)
- [3] John S. Mbiti, *Love Marriage in Africa* (London, Longman, 1973) pp. 81-82
- [4] Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered* (MaryKnoll, New York: Orbit Books, 1975) p. 94
- [5] Hillman, p. 94.
- [6] Kitembo, Magesa, and Shorter, *African Christian Marriage* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1977) pp. 65-66.
- [7] Eugene Hillman pp. 117-118.
- [8] John Mbiti p. 192.
- [9] James Orr, ISBE p. 1460.
- [10] Adrian Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa* (London, SPCK, 1973) pp. 19-20.
- [11] Walter Trobisch, *My wife made me a Polygamist* (Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter-Varsity, 1971) p. 18.
- [12] Trobisch pp. 19-21.
- [13] Hastings pp. 6-7.
- [14] Hillman p. 140.
- [15] Hastings p. 7.

- [16] Hillman p. 140.
- [17] Karl Barth, **Church Dogmatics Vol 4** Ed. by G. W. Bromley, Trans by G. T. Thompson & H. Knight, (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1961) p. 199.
- [18] Hastings pp. 5-6.
- [19] Hastings p. 8.
- [20] Hastings p. 8.
- [21] David Barrett, Ed., **Kenya Churches Hand Book** (Kisumu, Kenya, Evangel Publishing House, 1973) p. 188.
- [22] Hillman pp. 180-181.
- [23] Hillman p. 181.
- [24] Hillman p. 182.
- [25] Hastings p. 11.
- [26] Hastings p. 13.
- [27] Hastings p. 14.
- [28] Hastings p. 15.
- [29] Richard A. Hall, **Marriage law in the Ghanaian Churches: The Christian Approach to Polygamy** p. 52.
- [30] Hastings pp. 19-20.
- [31] Hastings p. 21.
- [32] Hastings p. 22.
- [33] Hastings p. 23.
- [34] Judah Kivowele: "Polygamy as Problem to the

Church" in Africa Theological Journal (Feb. 1969) pp. 24-25.

[35] Africa Inland Church Constitution (1972 Edition) p. 49.

[36] Some of these ideas first appeared in a WEF Theological discussion at All Saints Cathedral in 1983.