

# MARRIAGE, FAMILY AND DIVORCE

A Social Document of the  
ULCA



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
God's work. Our hands.

## A Series of Statements of the United Lutheran Church in America, 1930, 1936, 1940, 1944, 1956

**1930: Minutes, 7th Biennial Convention, ULCA, pp. 111-12, 116.**

1. The United Lutheran Church, in accordance with the teaching of the Scriptures, holds that marriage is a holy estate, ordained of God, and to be held in honor by all. It deeply deplores the increasing disregard of the sanctity of the marriage tie, and solemnly protests against ill teaching and practice which violates this sanctity and are therefore contrary to the revealed will of God.
2. It urges its pastors to instruct their people regularly and systematically in the meaning and responsibilities of marriage; to seek to maintain among them a Christian conscience on divorce; to be ready, whenever conditions demand it and opportunity offers, to bring the gospel of reconciliation to bear upon those who may be in serious danger of estrangement; and in general to minister through Word and Sacrament to that growth in grace which is the only effectual safeguard against the moral laxity of the times.
3. While it is indispensable that a pastor in performing a marriage comply with every civil requirement, we maintain that he is also accountable to God, and that he therefore not only has the right, but should feel constrained, to refuse to perform any marriage which, so far as he has had the opportunity of discovering after earnest endeavor ascertain the facts, is not in accordance with the divine requirements. (The rite of Christian marriage is a service of the Church and its diminutively religious character when performed by a minister of the church should never be subordinated to other considerations).
4. With respect to divorce we hold that marriage according to the will of God is indissoluble and is normally terminated only by the oath of either party. When it is otherwise dissolved the will of God is frustrated. In general, therefore, all divorce is to be condemned, and, whenever possible, avoided.
5. A great body of the leading thinkers of the Lutheran Church the past have taught that the marriage bond is effectually dissolved by the sins of adultery and malicious desertion, and that, when a divorce has been legally granted for either of these causes, the innocent party is free to marry again. This position

we now reaffirm.

6. With respect to the remarriage of divorced persons, The United Lutheran Church recommends to its constituent synods that they insist that their pastors abide by the rule that only the innocent party to a divorce which has been granted on scriptural grounds can be remarried under the auspices of the Lutheran Church during the lifetime of the other party, and then not until the expiration of a year after the divorce shall have been granted.
7. The matter of retaining within, or admitting to, the membership of the Church persons who have been divorced on other than scriptural grounds and who have remarried during the lifetime of the former husband or wife falls under the rule of discipline provided for by the constitution of the congregation. In all such instances pastors and church councils are exhorted to proceed with care and true spiritual wisdom, having proper regard for the Church's purity and honor, but also mindful of her mission to minister the means of grace so that sinners may be converted, restored and saved.

**1936: Minutes, 10th Biennial Convention, ULCA, pp. 374, 378.**

We request our pastors, wherever possible, to hold conferences with couples planning to marry, with the purpose of emphasizing the sacredness and enduring character of the married state, according to the plan of God.

We reaffirm our position, holding that no Lutheran minister should perform a marriage ceremony for a divorced person, until he is convinced that the individual is the innocent party in a divorce occasioned by grounds recognized by the Church as valid. (See ULCA. Minutes 1930, page 112, item 6).

**1940: Minutes, 12th Biennial Convention, ULCA, pp. 332, 341.**

*The Convention resolved:*

That we urge all pastors, teachers, and parents to aid in preserving the sanctity of marriage and the integrity of the home by fostering worship in private, in the family, and in the public services of the Church; by making provision for Christian instruction regarding the basic facts of life; by the counseling of married couples, and especially those contemplating matrimony; and by binding together the home and the Church.

**1944: Minutes, 14th Biennial Convention, ULCA, pp. 347, 397.**

*The Convention resolved:*

That the Church call the attention of its pastors and people to the serious dangers of hasty marriages and ill-advised marriages between persons of different faiths and races.

**1956: Minutes, 20th Biennial Convention, ULCA, pp. 1145-46, 1188.**

1. Marriage is that order of creation given by God in love which binds one man and one woman in a life-long union of the most intimate fellowship of body and life. This one flesh relation, when properly based on fidelity and love, serves as a witness to God's grace and leads husband and wife into service one of the other. In their marriage, husband and wife are responsible to God for keeping their vows and must depend upon his love and mercy to fulfill them.
2. God has established the sexual relation for the purpose of bringing husband and wife into full unity so that they may enrich and be a blessing to each other. Such oneness, depending upon lifelong fidelity between the marriage partners and loving service one of the other, is the essential characteristic of marriage. marriage should be consummated in love with the intention of maintaining a permanent and responsible relation. Continence outside of marriage and fidelity within marriage are binding on all.
3. Procreation is a gift inherent in the sex relation. In children the one flesh idea finds embodiment. Children bring great joy to marriage and reveal how God permits men to share in his continuing creation. Married couples should seek to fulfill their responsibilities in marriage by conceiving and nurturing their children in the light of Christian faith.
4. Husband and wife are called to exercise the power of procreation responsibly before God. This implies planning their parenthood in accordance with their ability to provide for their children and carefully nurture them in fullness of Christian faith and life. The health and welfare of the mother-wife should be a major concern in such decisions. Irresponsible conception of children up to the limit of biological capacity and selfish limitation of the number of children are equally detrimental. Choice as to means of conception control should be made upon professional medical advice.
5. Marriage, as ordained by God, is a life-long indissoluble union consummated through consent and coitus. Any breaking of the marriage bond involves sin and suffering. Forgiveness and reconciliation are incumbent upon all within marriage, and especially upon Christians. The church should extend its counseling services in an effort to maintain and strengthen families when they face difficulties threatening their unity.
6. Where marriage failure and divorce occur among Christian people, the church should recognize its involvement in the failure and seek to lead all concerned to repentance and forgiveness. If it proves impossible or unwise in the light of Christian love and concern for the welfare of all involved to reconstitute the marriage, then the church should continue, insofar as possible, to minister to each person involved.

If the question of the remarriage of a divorced person arises, pastors and congregations of The United Lutheran Church in America should make their

decisions on the particular circumstances in each case, being guided by the following considerations:

a. While it is the Christian teaching that marriage is a life-long indissoluble union and that divorce and remarriage do violate God's order, nevertheless, God in his love does accept the sinner and deals with him according to his need. The church has recognized that marriage may be a remedy for sin and has seen in such Bible passages as Matthew 5:32, 19:9, and I Corinthians 7:15 the possibility of remarriage, but it also knows that the final basis of decision is loving concern for man in his actual situation.

b. The divorced person seeking remarriage must recognize his responsibility in the breakup of the former marriage. He must give evidence of repentance and have made an effort to overcome his limitations and failures. He must have forgiven his partner in the former marriage, and he and his intended spouse must give assurance that he will fulfill his obligations to those involved in his former marriage.

c. The divorced persons must give evidence of his Christian faith by his witness in the church and must have received adequate counsel and training in preparation for marriage. He must be prepared to undertake the full responsibilities of marriage in dependence upon God.

7. The church should provide opportunities for its pastors and lay leaders to prepare themselves to meet their responsibilities in ministering to families and young people contemplating marriage. This involves seminary training, in-service training opportunities, college courses, and special courses and institutes for lay leaders. Study material based on the view of marriage set forth in these SUMMARY STATEMENTS should be provided.
8. Congregations should provide opportunities for study courses and other activities in preparation for marriage. Help should be given through activities strengthening and enriching the life of existing family groups. Each pastor should require regular counseling periods with couples before marriage. In part this may be done with groups, but private and individual conferences should also be required.
9. Congregations and youth auxiliary and student groups of the church should continue to carry on educational programs regarding the special problems in mixed marriages. The inevitable compromise or denial of the evangelical faith, and the social and cultural problems usually accompanying such marriages, should be thoroughly explained.
10. The wedding service is a service of the church in which the atmosphere of reverence and worship should be maintained. The recognized service of the church should be used, and only such activities as are in conformity with the

Christian view of marriage and in keeping with a service of worship should be permitted.

11. The home as the best channel for Christian nurture, education, and evangelization should receive renewed emphasis by all agencies of the church. Baptism, as God's act of accepting the child into the church in response to which parents have far-reaching responsibilities, should receive its proper stress in Christian teaching and practice. In preparation for baptism, parents should receive special counsel and instruction as to their duties and opportunities in the rearing of their children. The church should prepare and encourage the use of materials to stimulate and help parents in their task of Christian nurture.
12. In order to develop the highest standards of pastoral practice regarding marriage and family life, synods should hold conferences of pastors for discussion and clarification of the pastoral practices envisaged in this study.
13. Christian citizens should seek the enactment of uniform and constructive marriage and divorce laws. Such laws should encourage the procedures of adjustment and reconciliation rather than adversary litigation.