

**AMERICAN BAPTIST  
POLICY STATEMENT ON FAMILY LIFE**

**BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL BASE**

The Bible approaches family life with great honesty and serious idealism. The rivalry of brothers (e.g. Genesis 4:1-16; 25:21-34; 27; 37), the duplicities and infidelities of spouses (e.g. Genesis 27; 30:1-25; Judges 14; 2 Samuel 11), the tensions of parent and child (e.g. Genesis 26:34-35; 37:5-10; 2 Samuel 14-18; Luke 2:41-51) are vividly portrayed. Equally vivid are stories of great love (e.g. Genesis 25:19-21; 29; 37:3; Hosea 1-3), examples of faithfulness and loyalty (e.g. Genesis 39; 45:4-5; Ruth; 1 Samuel 18-20), and moments of reconciliation (e.g. Genesis 33; 45). In the Old Testament, family relationships are used repeatedly as metaphors for the relationship of God and Israel (e.g. Deuteronomy 32:11-12, 18; Isaiah 46:3-4; 49:14-16; Jeremiah 3:1-5; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 2:19-20). In the parables and sayings of Jesus, images of marriage and family life are used frequently to express the nature and reality of God's rule (e.g. Matthew 21:28-32; 22:1-14; Matthew 25:1-13; Luke 11:11-13; Luke 15:11-32; John 3:3-6).

Baptists read the Old Testament from the perspective of the New Testament and especially in the light of Jesus' teachings. As a result, three Old Testament themes are highly valued:

- (1) A vision of marriage as a monogamous, life-long, one-flesh union is affirmed by Jesus as God's intention for marriage "from the beginning" (e.g. Genesis 1:27; 2:24; Matthew 19:3-6; Mark 10:2-9).
- (2) A vision of the parent-child relationship as one of tender care, mutual responsibility, and mutual benefit (e.g. Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 6:6-7; Proverbs 1:8-9; 6:20-22) is reinforced by Jesus' special attention to children (e.g. Matthew 18:1-6; Mark 10:13-16), his assumptions about the depth of parental care (e.g. Matthew 7:9-11) and his insistence in word and deed that adult children fulfill their responsibilities to dependent parents (e.g. Matthew 15:1-9; John 19:26-27).
- (3) A recognition that God creates new family bonds where none existed before (e.g. Deuteronomy 26:5-11; Ruth) is proclaimed by the Church as the New Covenant in Christ through which the brokenness and partiality of human kinship is transcended and healed (e.g. Matthew 3:9; 1 Peter 2:9-10). The New Testament church became the new family of God for those whose acceptance of Christ cut them off from their biological families (e.g. John 9) and for those in special need, such as widows, for whom the church became a family (e.g. Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 5:1-16).

Jesus assumed marriage and family relationships as givens. Even though the gospels include stories of misunderstanding between Jesus and his family (e.g. Mark 3:20-21, 31-35; Luke 2:41-51; John 7:5), he saw in marital and parent-child relationships images of the divine-human bond. Jesus blessed a wedding at Cana, enjoyed the warmth of family gatherings in the homes of Peter and of Mary and Martha, responded with compassion to the parents of sick and dying children, and thereby affirmed the rich possibilities of family life. His teachings of humility, mutual service, forgiveness, and the primacy of persons over property and tradition form the bedrock of any Christian approach to questions of family life in any culture or historical era.

At the same time Jesus put the highest priority on the Kingdom of God and recognized the potential for conflicts between family loyalties and commitment to God's will and rule (e.g. Matthew 10:21, 35-37; Mark 10:29-30). For Jesus, no institution, neither Temple, nor Law, nor Sabbath, nor Family can claim ultimate allegiance. Only participation in God's will and acknowledgement of God's rule can claim our ultimate concern. Jesus' own singleness and celibacy (e.g. Matthew 19:10-12) accents the priority of the Kingdom in his own life.

Salvation history begins with the call to Abraham and Sarah to leave father's house and kin and land and venture to a new place and through divine covenant to found a new family by which all the families of the earth may find blessing. Salvation history culminates in the Son of Abraham (e.g. Matthew 1:1) and the Son of God who founded a more inclusive, spiritual family in which the blessings of family relationship are made available to all regardless of race, or gender, or life condition.

Finally, the New Testament both refers to a wide variety of familial households (e.g. Mark 1:29; Mark 6:1-3; Luke 1:5-25, 39-44, 57-66; Luke 10:38-41; John 11:1-44, 13:1-11; Acts 9:36-42; Acts 10; Acts 16:1-2; Acts 18:1-19) and includes specific attempts to guide Christians in family living. The common touchstone of these teachings is mutuality of responsibility and service to one another in Christ (e.g. Ephesians 5:6-9). We affirm the New Testament vision Christian family living in which Christ is the head of the household and all members are mutually responsible to one another and to Christ. With this vision, a sense of serious idealism and biblical honesty we seek to articulate an American Baptist policy on family life today.

#### **SITUATION ANALYSIS**

Americans are at a turning point in our collective understanding of the significance, needs, and potential of family life for the health for of all society. The aspirations of Americans for satisfying family relationships, as reported in national polls, are very high. New methods for family education are available along with new knowledge of the dynamics of family systems and a new appreciation for the impact of public policies on families. This is an opportune moment to define American Baptist policy toward family. Two significant developments require our response.

#### **A. Diversity of family patterns is normative for America.**

Some of the mourning over "the loss of the traditional family" we hear today is in reality a new awareness that the post-World War II, suburban-dwelling nuclear family which filled churches in the 50's and 60's is not the whole picture of family life in America.

A diversity of family patterns is historically characteristic of the United States:

- o European immigrants brought both multi-generation extended family patterns from the continent and nuclear family traditions from the British Isles.
- o American Indians tend toward a different pattern in which the parental generation of several brothers and sisters with spouses focuses on providing for the physical needs of the group while child care and education fall to the grandparents; both siblings and cousins regard one another as brothers and sisters of a single family.
- o African Americans in the new world experienced unspeakable assaults on

the integrity of their family structure and survived by drawing upon their heritage of extended family life, conserving kinship connections where they could, as well as creating surrogate family relationships to fill in the gaps caused by slavery and its aftermath.

- o Hispanic Americans continue rich, powerful traditions of extended family life even in the face of counterpressures from the dominant Anglo culture.
- o Asian American families typically have both parents as breadwinners and aging family members are often included in multi-generational households.

Adding to our historical diversity of family form, the liberation movements among minorities, youth, the aged, persons with disabilities, and women that emerged in new ways during the 1960's challenged the assumption that there either was or should be a prescribed pattern for family. Underlying factors which powered these movements include:

- o A new sense of self-worth among traditionally disenfranchised groups.
- o A longer life span, especially for women.
- o The massive move of women into the paid labor force.
- o An accelerating shift from an economy largely based on industrial manufacturing to one based on information processing and service industries.
- o Growth in governmental programs directly affecting families in the area of health, education, nutrition, and income.

These significant social changes have increased the historical diversity of American families.

Evidence for a growing diversity of family patterns includes these facts. over recent decades:

- o The divorce rate doubled.
- o The percentage of children in single-parent homes grew sharply.
- o The number of remarried-blended families grew as divorced parents remarried at a high rate.

Over the last decade several other developments have highlighted concern about how family life is changing in our society:

- o The problem of family violence and abuse has become widely acknowledged.
- o The number of couples living together without marriage has tripled.
- o The proportion of single-person households has increased markedly.
- o The average age of first marriage has increased for both men and women and many couples have delayed childbearing.
- o The two-income household has become the predominant pattern of nuclear family life.

This diversity of family patterns characteristic of American culture has had a significant impact on the life of American Baptist congregations.

B. New knowledge about family life is available.

Since 1960, new knowledge about family life has been emerging almost in parallel with the growing diversity of family life patterns.

- o Behavioral scientists have learned to look at families as biological-psychological-social systems, in which each member is affected by every other. Understanding what makes a healthy family system has grown, as has understanding of how family systems transmit persistent patterns of and dysfunctional relating, learning, and coping from generation to generation.
- o Professional educators have rediscovered the educative role and function of families. New understandings have been gained of how families mediate the influence of television, school, church, and other community institutions.
- o Sociologists, political scientists, and ecologists have begun to perceive and measure the impact of governmental policy, corporate practices, and the quality of the environment on families. In spite of our highly individualistic culture, a new appreciation is emerging for the familial connections all persons carry.

#### POLICY

American Baptists, with our heritage of respect for the Word of God and for the individual conscience, have a contribution to make to the public discussion of family life today.

1. A basic theological conviction underlying American Baptist policy toward families is that God calls each Christian to discipleship in every area of life. Believers make life-shaping decisions in response to God's call. We affirm that for Christian disciples choices about singleness, marriage, parenthood, and living in covenantal, intentional family arrangements are to be made soberly, with prayer, and as integral parts of the Christian's response to God's call in Jesus Christ. We affirm the competence of the individual soul to determine God's will in such matters through the reading and interpreting of Scripture, through dialogue with God, by considering the teaching and counsel of the Christian community, and by seeking and testing the wisdom of sisters and brothers in Christ.
2. We affirm that God intends marriage to be a monogamous, life-long, one flesh union of a woman and a man, who in response to God's call leave father and mother and cleave to one another. We affirm God's blessing and active presence in marriage relationships so entered in response to God's call.

We affirm the full implications of this understanding of marriage, especially that God calls partners to work at personal growth, to deepen skills in communication and decision making, and to invest both their time and energy in the development of their marriage.

We affirm that the grace and forgiveness of God are sufficient to sustain, heal, and renew our lives when our marriages are ended by death or separation or divorce.

We affirm that in God's grace remarriage for divorced Christians is appropriate where there is no possibility of reconciliation of the earlier marriage and the issues which ended an earlier marriage have been addressed and the new marriage shows promise of fulfilling God's intention for the marriage relationship.

3. We affirm that children are a gift from God, entrusted to parents for love, care, and nurture. We affirm parents as the first teachers and spiritual guides of their children; we believe parents are responsible for involving their children in the life of the Christian community. We affirm the reciprocal responsibility of grown children for the well-being of aging parents.
4. We affirm Christian families as agents through which the Good News is proclaimed, received, and lived out so that persons might fulfill God's redemptive purpose in history.
5. We affirm the Church as the inclusive family of God in which
  - o persons living alone find intimacy and support with sisters and brothers in Christ;
  - o youth are challenged to become autonomous disciples of Jesus Christ and are helped in their journey by committed peer and adult friends;
  - o aging persons are enabled to share the wisdom of years through intergenerational fellowship;
  - o divorced persons and single-parent families are strengthened by the presence and involvement of caring Christian friends in their lives;
  - o family groups experiencing conflict within marriages or between generations are supported, reminded of God's grace, and helped to find resources for healing;
  - o individuals and family units will experience God's love and come to know and accept Jesus Christ;
  - o individuals and family units are equipped and inspired to build a social order of respect and care for every person, all family groups, and ethnic communities.
6. We are committed to providing programs of education and support
  - o to guide and nurture persons making choices about singleness, marriage, divorce, remarriage, and parenthood;
  - o to enrich couples seeking to fulfill God's intention in their marriage;
  - o to empower parents striving to raise children according to Christian principles; to enable parents in their roles as teachers, managers, and advocates; and to sustain parents when young adult children struggle with sexual orientation, divorce, job loss, or death;
  - o to strengthen family units of all kinds, including single-parent and blended families, foster and adoption families, those living in group homes and other covenantal family-like groups;
  - o to equip family members and family units with skills and vision for witness to God's grace and participation in God's work of making peace

and justice in the lives of individuals and society.

7. We are committed to working with others for public policies and practices which enhance the status of families and empower them to do their unique work of nurturing succeeding generations of citizens.
8. We are committed to advocating for the rights of all families, and especially those with dependent children and aging members, to the necessities of life: shelter, safety, nutrition, medical care, and education.
9. We are committed to advocacy on behalf of families with special needs including
  - o those where parents are separated by illness, military service, or work;
  - o those caring for a family member with disabilities or the infirmities of age;
  - o those whose breadwinners are unemployed.
10. We are committed to modeling in our congregations and denominational life a vision of an inclusive, intergenerational community, a family of God, in which the variety of family forms, the richness of ethnic traditions, and the gifts of all persons from newborns to the very old, are respected, enjoyed, and celebrated.

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