

**THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH AND MEMBERSHIP PLIGHT OF  
AFRICAN POLYGAMISTS: A BIBLICAL-CONTEXTUAL REFLECTION**

**Joshua J. Zoaka, PhD**

Department of Religious Studies,  
Babcock University,  
Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria  
[zoakaj@babcock.edu.ng](mailto:zoakaj@babcock.edu.ng)

&

**Ucheawaji Godfrey Josiah, PhD**

Department of Religious Studies,  
Adeleke University, Ede, Osun State  
[josiah.ucheawaji@adelekeuniversity.edu.ng](mailto:josiah.ucheawaji@adelekeuniversity.edu.ng)

&

**Innocent Amagbaekhen**

Department of Religious Studies,  
Babcock University,  
Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria  
DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.14770.12482

**Abstract**

*Polygamy is termed “the most complex issue with which the Christian churches in Africa have had to deal with in its missionary enterprise.” The complication in the matter seems to have centered on baptism and admittance into membership of those, especially the males, who were in polygamous relationships at the time they received the gospel. These fellows are confronted with the challenge of whether to keep the family together or to dissolve it. This dilemma has continued to call for the church’s response. As an attempt to resolve this enigma, various church denominations had tackled the polygamous problem differently, yet the issue still persists. It is against this backdrop, that this paper adopts a critical-analytical approach towards analysing the official position of selected Churches (the Roman Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist and Anglican) on the membership status of polygamists, appraising same in light of biblical inferences and the church’s mission of disciple-making especially in Africa. Findings revealed that the church’s positions, suggest that the salvation of the multiple wives is more important than that of the polygamous man who was polygamous at his ‘heathen’ state and now wishes to be part of God’s church through baptism but is denied. The work recommends that a man who at the time of ignorance became a polygamist and then comes in contact with the gospel, be allowed into church membership though with certain conditions not inimical to the peace of his*

*household but mission oriented – a position which has been adopted by the Anglican Communion.*

**Keywords:** Church's mission, African polygamist, Church membership, Anglican, Communion, biblical reflection

## Introduction

Polygamy, regarded popularly, as an African problem has been discovered to have its various types even in the developed parts of the world. It has indeed become a universal issue as scholars have observed.<sup>1</sup> The practice of polygamy in contemporary Africa especially, Nigerian society with the attendant disagreements among Christian scholars and churches, raises some social, ethical and religious questions as to where lies the place of the church's mission to African polygamists? From its cultural milieu, polygamy was morally, ethically and socially accepted in Africa, prior to the advent of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> The words of Nwankpa below are also very informative:

Along the Cross-River basin, the gospel did not penetrate deeply because of its confrontation with polygamy. There is even what one might term a contradiction and that is the situation where a man that has a polygamous home cannot be received into the membership of the church, whereas one of the man's many wives could be ordained a *ruling elder* of the church.<sup>3</sup>

In view of the overwhelming effects of the issue of polygamy in various homes, and the attendant pastoral problems, and disagreement it creates among church members, as well as the evangelical implications, polygamy has been termed "the most complex issue with which the Christian churches in Africa have had to deal with in its missionary enterprise."<sup>4</sup> The complication in the matter seems to have centered on the baptism and admittance into membership of those, especially the males, who are in polygamous relationships at the time they received the gospel. They are confronted with the challenge of whether to keep the family together or to dissolve it. In the Western World from which Christianity got into sub-Saharan Africa, monogamy is basically practised as a culture though

---

<sup>1</sup> Mmagu, M. Uduma, (1980). *Polygamy in Igboland of Eastern Nigeria*, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Michigan, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Onyebuchi Pu, Nwankpa, (2014). *The Ethical, Social and Spiritual Angst of Polygamy: A Pastoral and Spiritual Challenge cum Strategies*, (Aba: Okman Prints Ltd.), xv.

<sup>3</sup> Nwankpa, (2014). *The Ethical, Social and Spiritual Angst of Polygamy: A Pastoral and Spiritual Challenge cum Strategies*.

<sup>4</sup> Staples Russell, (1982). September "Must Polygamists Divorce?" *Spectrum*. 13: 44.

borrowed from the ancient Roman culture. Although, this loaned culture proscribed polygamy, it allowed for divorce and remarriage.<sup>5</sup> The above does not in any way mirror the African society whose traditional culture may be considered to be polygamous.

More so, in spite of the fact that the Bible's ideal is monogamy, more than 83% of the societies of the world allow for polygamy as a form of marriage.<sup>6</sup> Following this background, the missionaries who came from their monogamous milieu to Africa, found the polygamous culture they met, as extremely difficult to understand and even to deal with, and as a result, they unflinchingly and uncompromisingly, insisted on monogamy the way they understood it and this posed a lot of social as well as pastoral problems. In fact, various church denominations tackled the polygamous problem differently.<sup>7</sup> Polygamy as a social phenomenon is indeed a challenge that has continued to call for the church's response since the church is part of the society. It is against this backdrop, that this paper is geared towards analysing the official position (as documented) of select Churches on the membership status of polygamists appraising same in terms of biblical inferences and the church's mission of disciple-making especially, in Africa. A critical-analytical as well as a historical approach is employed for the purpose of this study.

### **The Practice of Polygamy in Old Testament Times and its Attendant Consequences**

Biblical records prove that Lamech was the first polygamist in the history of human existence in the world (Gen. 4:19-23). On the foregoing, Tenney states: "the story of the creation of the first two human beings reveals monogamous marriage as the expression of the will of God. Polygamy first appeared in the reprobate line of Cain when Lamech took two wives."<sup>8</sup> In her *Story of Redemption* with reference to Lamech's polygamous relationship, White writes: In the beginning... He never designed that man should have a plurality of wives. Lamech... had two wives, which created discord in his family.... this was one of the great sins of the old world which brought the wrath of God upon them.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>A. O. Igenozu, (2005). *Polygamy and the African Churches: A Biblical Appraisal of An African Marriage System*. (Ibadan, NI: Nigerian Publications Bureau), 27-28.

<sup>6</sup> George Murdock, (1967). *Ethnographic Atlas*. (Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press), 47-48, 62-122.

<sup>7</sup> A. O. Igenozu, (2005). *Polygamy and the African Churches: A Biblical Appraisal of An African Marriage System*, 28-29.

<sup>8</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, (1975). *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible*. (Michigan: Zondervan Publications), 93.

<sup>9</sup> White, Ellen Gould (1948). *Testimonies to the Church, Volume 7*, (California: Pacific Press), 75, 76.

The above words of White, indeed express a shift from God's intended ideal (of monogamous) marriage relationship to a polygamous one. Although White infers that such polygamous relationship attracted God's wrath on the people, the fact remains, that the scriptures did not expressly condemn such act but however, made allusions to God's intended ideal for marriages. Notwithstanding, John Calvin in Kunhiyop,<sup>10</sup> holds that it may be possible to presume that the very mention that Lamech had married two wives might suggest divine disfavour towards polygamy.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, he identifies Lamech's offense as a "corruption of lawful marriage" and says such was allowed to put polygamists to shame.

As a response to the above scholars' suppositions, it may be unfair to use Lamech's wicked life as judgment against polygamy and polygamists. However, it could be appropriate to say that his bad life's disposition must have led him into making a bad decision of going contrary to God's ideal. This position is echoed by Whiteset<sup>12</sup> who says that Lamech was a bad example since he was both a murderer like his ancestor Cain who he described as a selfish braggart. Moreover, it is observed that "Lamech was the first to prepare the way for polygamy by which the ethical aspects of marriage, ordained by God, were turned into the lust of the eye and the lust of the flesh."<sup>13</sup> However, Etok<sup>14</sup> argues that "at least in the ideal, the Hebrews favoured monogamy although a plurality of wives was tolerated. This too, had not been so in the beginning according to the divine intention.

Following closely the polygamous practices in the Old Testament, we understand that the circumstance that led Abraham into polygamy was the barrenness of his wife, Sarah. Nonetheless, the outcome of his action was not favourable but also heart-breaking as of those who pre-planned it. Surprisingly too, the norms and ideals of the time he lived did not frown at the practice of polygamy. This is clearly addressed in Nichol's statement that "the legal codes of Mesopotamia recognized the practice whereby a childless wife might give one of her slaves to her husband and obtain children by means of her and determine precisely the rights of such offspring."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, (2004). *African Christian Ethics*, (Kaduna: Baraka), 319.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, (2004). *African Christian Ethics*, (Kaduna: Baraka), 320.

<sup>12</sup> Dwight Whiteset, ( 2006). *Polygamy Vs God's way*, (Arlington: Mission Pointing), 2.

<sup>13</sup> C. F. Keil and F. Delitzch, (1988). *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, (Grand Rapids: W. B. Erdmans), 118.

<sup>14</sup> Sylvanus Etok, (1995). *Hebrew History and Religion*, University of Port-Harcourt, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Francis D. Nichol (1954). *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 1, Genesis to Deuteronomy*, (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association), 317.

However, O'Donovan commenting on such legal codes has the following to say: "From the time he took Hagar as a second wife, Abraham had no happiness in his home. There was jealousy between Hagar and Sarah and between Isaac and Ishmael. The jealousy between Isaac and Ishmael and their descendants has continued for 4000 years right down to the present day."<sup>16</sup>

The above, highlights the dangers in polygamous relationships. Nevertheless, White<sup>17</sup> also commenting on Abraham's action pointed out, that the step he took resulted in evil not only to his own household, but to future generation. Stringer adds that although Abraham's and Jacob's environment and culture accepted polygamy, the Bible did not approve of it. Abraham became a polygamist "because Sarai seems unable to bear children; the spiteful jealousy that results is a common thread that weaves through most accounts of polygamy."<sup>18</sup>

In Genesis 30 we see the murderous jealousy that existed between the wives of Jacob - Leah and Rachael. Such jealousy brought about the unhealthy competition that ensued. Rachael, seeing that Leah was almost taking the entire heart and love of their husband by bearing him four children while she bore none, handed her maid over to their husband; thereby increasing the number of wives. Leah also did the same thing; bringing the number of Jacob's wives to four. In this way also, the hostility and jealousy which were fraught with no mean heart-break, increased.<sup>19</sup>

The animosity that existed in the polygamous family of Elkanah was very easy to imagine since it led Hannah (one of the wives) to refuse to eat (1Sam 1:6-8). The record has it that: And now there was a certain man... and his name was Elkanah... and he had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah.... And this man went up out of his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice.... He loved Hannah... and her adversary (Peninnah) also provoked her (Hannah) sore for to make her fret... so she provoked her; therefore, she wept, and did not eat (1 Samuel 1:1).

The passage above indicates that Elkanah did not get happiness in taking a second wife. According to White, in her book *Patriarchs and Prophets*, "sons and daughters were added to the household; but the joy and the beauty of God's sacred institution has been marred and the peace of the family was

---

<sup>16</sup> Wilbur O'Donovan, (2000). *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective*, (Ilorin: Peternoster), 280.

<sup>17</sup> Ellen Gould White, (1959). *Patriarchs and Prophets*, (Washington DC: Pacific Press), 145.

<sup>18</sup>I. A. Stringer, (1990). *Dictionary of Bible Knowledge*, (London: Grace Baptist Mission), 150.

<sup>19</sup> Nwankpa, (2014). *The Ethical, Social and Spiritual Angst of Polygamy: A Pastoral and Spiritual Challenge cum Strategies*, xv.

broken.”<sup>20</sup> White further posits that “Peninnah, the new wife, was jealous and narrow-minded, and she bore herself with pride and insolence. To Hannah, hope seemed crushed and life was a weary burden.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Chisto says that although Elkanah was faithful, he still deviated from the right path and engaged in plural marriage. He buttresses:

Elkanah was apparently a faithful follower of the Lord. Yet, that faithfulness did not prevent him from deviating from God’s ideal in marriage, one man and one wife. That polygamy was permitted did not make it right or good. God has given us an ideal because He knows what’s best for us. When we depart from it, no good can arise.<sup>22</sup>

From the quote above it is increasingly clear that polygamy was tolerated in the Old Testament even though that did not make it right or acceptable. Although Elkanah was polygamous, he was also referred to as a “faithful follower of the Lord.” There seemed not to be any family devastated, scattered, and in schism in Biblical history as the house of Gideon. As is true of most polygamous homes, the house of Gideon managed to hold together for as long as Gideon was alive. As soon as he died, and was buried, the suppressed polygamy problems began to surface; beginning with the conspiracy resulting in the massacre of the seventy sons of Gideon by one of the same blood and to the unrest, insecurity, and confusion that developed, leading the entire Israel back to the worship of Baal.<sup>23</sup>

Solomon was one of the most outstanding and most famous kings of Israel. He was said in 1 Kings 11:3, to have had “seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines.” In fact, he was acknowledged as one who loved many women of the daughters of Pharaoh, of the Moabites, of the Ammonites, of the Edomites, of the Zidonians and of the Hittites. The wives of Solomon were mainly from forbidden nations and thus overwhelmed him and led him to idolatry. The Bible recorded that “his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.” And this was because he had ignored God’s counsel that Kings should not become polygamist (Deut. 17:16, 17).

---

<sup>20</sup> White, (1959). *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 145.

<sup>21</sup> White, (1959). *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> Gordon Rosenita Christo, (2007). *for better for Worse: Lessons from Old Testament Couples*, Silver Spring: General Conference of SDA, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Nwankpa, (2014). *The Ethical, Social and Spiritual Angst of Polygamy: A Pastoral and Spiritual Challenge cum Strategies*.

Furthermore, Kunhiyop describes the results of polygamy in the Davidic home as: The result of having more than one wife created a rivalry for the throne, dividing the nation, (2 Sam 15:6, 10-15). In fact, that Solomon was trained up properly by his father and chosen by God to be Israel's next king (1 Ki 1:29-35) did not negate the problems arising out of the rivalry between the son of David's first wife and that of Bathsheba.<sup>24</sup>

The footsteps of Solomon were directly followed by his son, Rehoboam. He grossly entered into polygamous life by marrying 18 wives and 60 concubines, which produced 28 sons and 60 daughters. As in the case of his father, where poor parenting was evident, so Rehoboam could not control his children, because a man could not possibly control 88 children (2 Chron 11:18-21). It was noticed that Rehoboam's polygamous expedition was not only detrimental to him and his household, but to the entire house of Israel.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, Kunhiyop is of the opinion that Bible passages on polygamy are only "descriptive rather than prescriptive". He argues that there are no clear-cut statements of either commendation or prohibition that could be picked from them.<sup>26</sup> However, from the beginning, it is discovered that God's ideal for marriage was "a helper suitable" (Gen 2:18) which was in the singular and not in the plural. This suggests one marriage partner and not plurality of wives or husbands.

Three basic views have been advanced by scholars of the Bible concerning the stand of the Bible on polygamy. First, some bible students contend that the Bible does not condemn polygamy, rather that it restricts it. The second group insists that the Old Testament allows for it while the New Testament outlaws it. A third position holds that monogamy is promoted throughout the Bible, while polygamy is ruled out.<sup>27</sup> Witherington cited in Whiteset<sup>28</sup> agrees with Pipim when he argues that although polygamy was practiced in the Bible times, it was neither a doctrine nor a command. He suggests that one reads both portions of the Old Testament and the New Testament and not just focus on one, for a good representative sampling on such issues as polygamy.

---

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, (2004). *African Christian Ethics*, (Kaduna: Baraka), 309.

<sup>25</sup> Nwankpa, (2014). *The Ethical, Social and Spiritual Angst of Polygamy: A Pastoral and Spiritual Challenge cum Strategies*.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, (2004). *African Christian Ethics*, (Kaduna: Baraka), 317.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Koranteng Pipim, (2005). *Here we Stand*, (Michigan: Adventist Affirm), 601.

<sup>28</sup> Dwight Whiteset, (2006). *Polygamy Vs God's way*, (Arlington: Mission Pointing), 1.

## **Analysis of the Positions of Selected Churches on Membership Status of Polygamists**

This segment captures and analyses the Roman Catholic official position as captured by Gitari<sup>29</sup>; the Anglican Communion's position<sup>30</sup>; and the official positions of the Seventh-day Adventist church<sup>31</sup> on membership status of polygamists in the church vis-à-vis the mission of the church.

### **Official Position of the Roman Catholic Church**

The Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent of 1563 agreed that:

If anyone says that it is lawful for Christians to have several wives at the same time, and that it is not forbidden by divine law (Matthew 19:4f) let him be anathema. *But in a case where a polygamist wishes to join church membership, divorce was permitted. It was agreed that a polygamist should divorce all his extra wives and retain the one he prefers most as long as the retained wife is willing to be baptized with her husband.*

There is no doubt however that the ideal marriage from the biblical point of view is monogamy as shown in the position above. However, this position unassumingly creates an imbalance with its idea of divorce except if the church is legalising divorce which is unbiblical anyway. More so, retaining the wife he prefers also suggests that the extra wives were legally married and are bound under the marriage covenant as does the first wife. Nevertheless, what if all the wives are willing to be baptized what happens? What consideration does the church have for the salvation of the man, his wives and children? This needs an urgent attention in the Church's struggle over the membership of a polygamist in Africa.

### **Official Position of the Anglican Communion**

At the 1888 Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion, it was resolved that:

---

<sup>29</sup> Gitari, David. (1984). *The Church and Polygamy in Transformation*, 1.1:4-5.

<sup>30</sup> Adrian Hastings, (1973), *Christian Marriage in Africa - being a report commissioned by the Archbishops of Cape Town, Central Africa, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda* (London, SPCK), 12.

<sup>31</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, (1990-1991). *Working Policy*, 73-74, Review and Herald Publishing Association, 73-74.

Persons living in polygamy be not admitted to baptism, but that they be accepted as candidates and kept under Christian instruction until such a time as they shall be in position to accept the law of Christ. The wives of the polygamists however, may be admitted in some cases to baptism but it must be left to the local authorities of the church under what circumstances they must be baptized.

The above position did not state whether the polygamist was in that condition in his heathen state before being confronted with the gospel. If he were polygamous in his heathen state before the gospel got to him, what is the church's stand in that regard? No doubt, keeping the polygamist under Christian instruction is not an issue but is this implying Jesus' injunction of letting people come to Him the way they are? However, it appears that the church's position changed from what it was in 1888 in the Lambeth Conference of 1988 as revealed in the subsequent section.

### **1988 Lambeth Conference Resolution 26: Church and Polygamy<sup>32</sup>**

At this Conference, it was recommended that a polygamist who responds to the Gospel and wishes to join the Anglican Church may be baptized and confirmed with his believing wives and children subject to the following conditions:

- (1) that the polygamist shall promise not to marry again as long as any of his wives at the time of his conversion are alive;
- (2) that the receiving of such a polygamist has the consent of the local Anglican community;
- (3) that such a polygamist shall not be compelled to put away any of his wives, on account of the social deprivation they would suffer;
- (4) and recommends that provinces where the Churches face problems of polygamy are encouraged to share information of their pastoral approach to Christians who become polygamists so that the most appropriate way of disciplining and pastoring them can be found, and that the ACC be requested to facilitate the sharing of that information.

The above recommendations were made in amendment to the 1888 position of the church which appeared to have retard the missionary endeavours toward the polygamists within Africa cultural ambience known for polygamous

---

<sup>32</sup>The Lambeth Conference Resolutions Archive, (1988), *Index of Resolutions*, Published by the Anglican Communion Office, Anglican Consultative Council.

relationships. The first to the third recommendations were made for men who before receiving the gospel, had been polygamists while the fourth recommendation appears to have been made to checkmate those whose names are already in church membership but chose to be polygamous. However, in 2008, the amended position seemed to have generated some concerns which is discussed in the next section.

### **2008 Lambeth Conference Resolution** <sup>33</sup>

**Item 114** of the 2008 Lambeth Conference resolution presents the concern below:

For some, the way the Communion has been perceived to handle polygamy has complicated the issue. Polygamy has been part of the history and of the present of some Provinces of the Communion. It is unacceptable in other parts of the Communion. The Communion made a space for such Provinces to deal with this issue at their local level.... In the case of polygamy, there is a universal standard – it is understood to be a sin; therefore, polygamists are not admitted to positions of leadership including Holy Orders, nor after acceptance of the Gospel can a convert take another wife, nor, in some areas, are they admitted to Holy Communion.

The adoption of the 1988 amended resolution of the Lambeth Conference elicited some objection in relation to the perceived complicatedness of the way the church had handled the issue of polygamy in Africa following the amendment. This warranted the 2008 Lambeth Conference. Arising from that conference is Item 114 of the 2008 Lambeth Conference resolution which addressed the objection. This concern was however addressed by stating that in addition to the 1988 Lambeth Conference recommendation, the Communion in 2008 added that the accepted polygamist could be excluded from leadership position, and sometimes from partaking in Holy Communion. This position does not necessarily recommend the exclusion of the polygamist who accepted the gospel, from partaking in Holy Communion but states that in some areas, the exclusion could be enforced.

This position appears to at least have a human face given the fact that the Communion allows local congregation (s) the opportunity to make their

---

<sup>33</sup> The Lambeth Indaba *Capturing Conversations and Reflections from the Lambeth Conference* (Aug., 3, 2008). Equipping Bishops for Mission and Strengthening Anglican Identity.

informed decision as it regards the admission or non-admission of polygamists into leadership position or as it regards their partaking in holy communion. An interaction with some Anglican priest serving within Ijebu-ode province confirmed that in some areas of the Communion in Nigeria, polygamists were allowed into leadership position as well as into Holy Communion. The next segment analysed the official position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

## Official Positions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

### Position One

A man found living in a state of polygamy when the gospel reaches him shall upon conversion be required to change his status by putting away all his wives save one before he shall be considered eligible for baptism and church membership.

This position of the church, though, unassuming, creates an imbalance somehow. Considering the fact that the polygamist in question married these wives both culturally and customarily, asking him to divorce all the wives except the first before becoming an eligible member of the church, seem to downplay the biblical position on marriage covenant (Mal. 2:16). As a covenant, marriage (though heterosexual and monogamous) should be entered with unconditional commitment between the couple. The breaking of a covenant marriage results in the breaking of hearts.<sup>34</sup> Moreso, the family is the bedrock that forms the indispensable foundation for discipleship. In light of its fundamental place, namely 'the primary place where the capacity for love and intimacy with God and other human beings is developed and where spiritual values are extended across generations,' the family thus forms the indispensable foundation for disciple making process of the church in the larger human society.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, getting the man implies getting his wives and children; rejecting the man means creating a problem between him, his wives and children, which obviously, is not God's intention for the church.

Secondly, reading through the instruction on making disciples for Christ in Matthew 28:19-20, the idea of teaching before baptism and continuous

---

<sup>34</sup> F. Lower, (2002). *Covenant Marriage* (West Monroe: Howard Publishing Company), 86.

<sup>35</sup> K. Flowers & R. Flowers, (2004) *Human Sexuality* Silver Spring, MD: Department of Family Ministries, General Conference of the Seventh Day Adventist, 85.

teaching even after baptism comes to the fore. Thus, this paper proposes that polygamists, who come to know Christ and are willing to be part of Him, be allowed the right into the body of Christ through baptism as the teaching continues. This does not in anyway, suggest that the church condones moral decadence. Instead, it implies that the church is out to saving lost souls and pointing them to the salvation in Christ Jesus. Moreover, the commission in Mark 16:15-16 to preach the gospel to everyone and baptize those who accept does not exclude polygamists who are receptive to the gospel call. Their salvation is also important.

### **Position Two**

Men thus putting away their wives shall be expected to make proper provision for their future support, and for that of their children, as far as it is within their power to do so.

This position seems to emanate from the law of conjugal rights of marriage in Exodus 21:7-11.<sup>36</sup> The text reads: ‘...her food, her raiment, and her duty of marriage, shall he not diminish’ (KJV); ‘...not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights’ (NAS); ‘...not neglect the rights of the first wife to food, clothing, and sexual intimacy’ (NLT).

From the text of Exodus 21 above, the issue of conjugal right is defined within the context of an abandonment of a first wife (possibly a slave girl) in order to marry a second. Although, polygamy is not the ideal marriage God intended for humanity, it has come to stay with man. It has become an endemic issue that the church needs to critically look at especially given the church’s mission to save.

This paper suggests that the church should fulfil her mission role of getting to the polygamists who wish to join the faith, by accepting them, while the decision whether or not they will be candidates of heaven be left for God and themselves to decide. This idea which aligns with the resolution of the Anglican Communion in her 1988 Lambeth Conference will in away reduce conflict within the family of the polygamist at the point of accepting the gospel and as well enhance the church’s mission to polygamists in Africa.

More so, Deuteronomy 21:15-17 regulates how a man must designate his inheritance to the sons of his multiple wives. He must assign the double portion to the first-born, even if the first-born is the son of his “unloved” wife. He must not give the double portion to “the son of the loved” wife.<sup>37</sup> Even the

---

<sup>36</sup> Walter C. Kaiser (1983). *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publications), 288–90.

<sup>37</sup> Gordon J. Wenham (1979), *The Book of Leviticus, NICOT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publications), 257–58.

case of Elkanah in 1 Samuel 1:1-5, suggests that polygamists were tolerated in Israelites worship setting at Shiloh (1 Sam. 1:3). Therefore, the SDA church needs a rethink on this position regarding a polygamist who accepts the message. Since he must take care of the family he has already, and not deny the children any form of right due to them. The wives should also partake in his care (Exo. 21).

### **Position Three**

We recognize that the message found people in certain countries living in a state of polygamy, where tribal customs subject a wife who has been put away to lifelong shame and disgrace, even to the point of becoming common property, her children also becoming disgraced thereby. In all such cases the church is to co-operate with the former husband in making such provision for these wives and children as will provide for their care and protect them from disgrace and undue suffering

From the above position, it is understood that the polygamist who comes in contact with the message of the gospel could put away his wives save the first and as such, the church is willing to cooperate with him to take care of the wives so far put away with their children. To what extent would the church be willing to cooperate with him? In fact, it is arguably right to assume that inhumanity is involved. This is because, the church is aware of the fact that the wives so put away would suffer shame and disgrace alongside suffering and hardship and yet advises the man to put them away before accepting Christ. Such even does not exemplify the message of salvation. The wives and children of the converted polygamist in the instance would see the church as cruel to their feelings and not being compassionate.

Thus, the paper proposes that the church in Africa looks into this position and re-consider how to rather help unite a family through conversion and thus form a family in harmony than bringing further dissension that may jeopardize the salvation of these family members.

### **Position Four**

Wives of a polygamist, who have entered into the marriage in their heathen state, and who upon accepting Christianity are still not permitted to leave their husbands because of tribal custom, may upon approval of the local and union committees become baptized members of the church. However, should a woman who is a member of the church enter into a marriage as a secondary wife, she shall be

disfellowshipped and shall not be re-admitted to the church unless she separates from her polygamous husband.

This position opens the church to myriad of criticism. One, the concern here is on the multiple wives in their heathen state and not on the polygamous man in his heathen state. Two, if tribal custom would not allow for the putting away of the multiple wives, and upon receiving Christianity, they could be baptized, what happens to the man who in his heathen state became polygamous and now receives Christianity? In fact, this position especially the first phase, suggests that the multiple wives' salvation is more important to the church than that of the polygamous man who was thus polygamous at his heathen state and now wishes to be part of God's church through baptism but is refused.

### **Conclusion/ Recommendation**

Although men and women were created for relationship, that relationship is not without regulations. In other words, God (author of relationship) gave guidelines for such purpose. However, the fact that, God wanted man to develop a moral character, places the ability to make choices on man, and thus opens the avenue for deviating from God's ideal.<sup>38</sup> Given the fact that polygamy is as a result of man's sinful choice; that more than 83% of the societies of the world allow for this form of marriage<sup>39</sup>; and that it has been "the most complex issue with which African Church has had to deal with in its missionary enterprise,"<sup>40</sup> there is then, the need for the Church in Africa to have some sort of consensus on how to deal with this endemic, societal as well as long-age cultural issue.

Therefore, this paper proposes, that the church in Africa, as part of her mission of the saving of souls, should accept prospects who became polygamous in their heathen state but are willing to be part of Christ's body through baptism. This is because even the case of Elkanah in 1 Samuel 1:1-5, suggests that polygamists were tolerated in Israelites worship setting at Shiloh. Elkanah participated in the temple worship and even in the offering of sacrifice like every worshiper of Yahweh in his days (1 Sam. 1:3). Moreso, in the New Testament, the phrase "husband of one wife" was applied as a qualification for the offices of elder (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6) and deacon (1

---

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, W. Kurt (2008). *Face to Face with Jesus*, (Accra: Advent Press), 24, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Murdock (1967). *Ethnographic Atlas*, 47-48.

<sup>40</sup> Russell, (1982). September "Must Polygamists Divorce?" 44.

Tim3:12) and not as a pre-requisite for conversion. In fact, it further implies that polygamy was tolerated in the church of Ephesus where Timothy was the pastor. Moreover, the commission in Mark 16:15-16 to preach the gospel to everyone and baptize those who accept does not exclude polygamists who are receptive to the gospel call. Their salvation is also important. Therefore, this work recommends that other denominations should, in line with the Anglican Communion, seek for ways of accommodating polygamists who so became in their 'heathen' state and are willing to be part of the Christian faith.

## References

- Etok, Sylvanus, (1995). *Hebrew History and Religion*, University of Port-Harcourt, 31.
- Christo, Gordon, Rosenita (2007). *For better For Worse: Lessons from Old Testament Couples*, Silver Spring: General Conference of SDA.
- General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, (1990-1991). *Working Policy*, 73-74, Review and Herald Publishing Association.
- Gitari, David. (1984). The Church and Polygamy in *Transformation*, 1.1:4.
- Flowers K. & Flowers, R. (2004) *Human Sexuality* Silver Spring, MD: Department of Family Ministries, General Conference of the Seventh Day Adventist, 85.
- Igenoza, A. O, (2005). Polygamy and the African Churches: A Biblical Appraisal of An African Marriage System. (Ibadan, NI: Nigerian Publications Bureau), 27-28.
- Kaiser, Walter C., (1983). *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publications), 288-90.
- Kunhiyop, Samuel Waje, (2004). *African Christian Ethics*, (Kaduna: Baraka), 317, 320.
- Kurt, Johnson, W. (2008). *Face to Face with Jesus*, (Accra: Advent Press), 24, 27
- Lower, F., (2002). *Covenant Marriage* (West Monroe: Howard Publishing Company), 86.
- Murdock, George, (1967). *Ethnographic Atlas*. (Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press), 47-48, 62-122
- Nichol, Francis D., (1954). *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Volume 1, Genesis to Deuteronomy*, (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association), 317.

- Nwankpa, Onyebuchi Pu, (2014). *The Ethical, Social and Spiritual Angst of Polygamy: A Pastoral and Spiritual Challenge cum Strategies*, (Aba: Okman Prints Ltd.).
- O'Donovan, Wilbur, (2000). *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective*, (Ilorin: Peternoster), 280.
- Pipim, Samuel Koranteng, (2005). *Here we Stand*, (Michigan: Adventist Affirm), 601.
- Russell, Staples, (1982). September "Must Polygamists Divorce?" *Spectrum*.13: 44.
- Stringer, I. A, (1990). *Dictionary of Bible Knowledge*, (London: Grace Baptist Mission), 150.
- The Lambeth Conference Resolutions Archive, (1988). Index of Resolutions, Published by the Anglican Communion Office © 2005 Anglican Consultative Council.
- The Lambeth Indaba *Capturing Conversations and Reflections from the Lambeth Conference* (Aug., 3, 2008). Equipping Bishops for Mission and Strengthening Anglican Identity.
- Tenney, Merrill C. (1975). *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible*. (Michigan: Zondervan Publications), 93.
- Uduma, Mmagu, M. (1980). *Polygamy in Igboland of Eastern Nigeria*, Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Michigan, 16.
- Wenham, Gordon J. (1979). *The Book of Leviticus, NICOT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publications), 257-58.
- White, Ellen Gould (1948). *Testimonies to the Church, Volume 7*, (California: Pacific Press), 75, 76.
- White, Ellen Gould, (1959). *Patriarchs and Prophets*, (Washington DC: Pacific Press), 145.
- Whiteset, Dwight,( 2006). *Polygamy Vs God's way*, (Arlington: Mission Pointing), 1, 2.