

# Without rings and without strings

## Engaging cohabitation in the church

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When my husband and I courted thirty-five years ago, the pattern went like this: We met at a Mennonite college. We dated for a period of time.

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Then one day, after a long walk in the woods, we declared our love to each other and decided to get married and spend our lives together. I was twenty-one. After a week of getting used to the idea, we announced to our parents that we were engaged and began to make wedding plans. Relatives and friends hosted showers for us, to help us gather the things we needed to establish a household together. Our wedding took place in my home church in the presence of church people, friends, and family, and my father officiated. In a departure from the usual practice, our reception was held not in the church basement but at

a nearby Mennonite camp. A short program followed the meal. It included a few sly references to having children and what we might be doing in our hotel later that evening.

The unfolding of our courtship from dating to engagement and wedding and establishing a household together followed a familiar pattern in the Anabaptist-Mennonite community that formed us. Almost everyone we knew who entered into marriage did so by following this pattern, with only slight variations. It was pattern observable both in Christian communities and in the “secular” world. Thirty-some years ago, when I served as a pastor, on rare occasions when a couple was living together before marriage, I would present the situation to the congregation’s board of deacons, and they would discern under what circumstances I could participate in the wedding ceremony. These might include asking the couple

to stop cohabiting in the interim. Clearly, cohabitating before marriage was the exception to the rule, and in such cases church leaders revisited the usual marriage protocols.

Today, the pattern for moving into marriage is changing. Living together has in many ways become culturally normative, and it may or may not eventually lead couples to marry. The social stigma around cohabitation has diminished, and many couples, both Christian and non-Christian, now regard it as a real option. And the church is left to discern how it will respond to this contemporary reality.

### **Cohabitation isn't just one thing**

A cohabiting couple lives together in a sexual union, without having formalised that union in a legal marriage. But beneath that general definition is the reality that cohabitation is not a uniform phenomenon, a fact that becomes obvious as soon as one encounters real people who are cohabiting. Some couples are *casual* cohabiters. They drift into living together, for convenience or financial reasons, without giving much consideration to the future. Other couples are *cautious* about cohabiting. They are more serious about a future relationship together. They support the institution of marriage and may be tentatively moving toward it. They are not yet fully committed to each other and may consider cohabitation a trial marriage, hoping it will help them decide whether they are in fact right for each other. Still other couples are more *committed*. They have made the decision to stay together, and they hope it will be for life. They expect to get married but have not done so yet for a variety of reasons. These might include lack of resources to foot the cost of the wedding they want, lack of a sense of urgency, complications related to employment or educational pursuits, the need to wait for a divorce from a previous partner to be finalized. Other couples see cohabitation as an *alternative* to marriage. For cultural or philosophical reasons, they see marriage as outmoded. These couples may be committed to each other but are not conventional in formalising that commitment in a marriage covenant.

Clearly, not all cohabitation is the same, and it may be helpful to distinguish the prenuptial cohabitation of those in the committed and cautious categories from the non-nuptial cohabitation of those in the casual and alternative categories. While researchers frequently cite a correlation between cohabitation and divorce rates, a simplistic cause-and-effect interpretation does not adequately capture the nuances of difference between prenuptial and non-nuptial cohabitation. Numerous studies indicate that

cohabiters with plans to marry report no significant difference in the quality of their relationship than do married people.

What is clear is that cohabitation is on the rise. Cohabitation has increased by nearly 900 percent in the past fifty years. In Canada and the United States, more couples are cohabitating than are married. The majority of young adults see cohabitation as a good idea; many would consider it odd not to live with a partner before marriage. Cohabitation is replacing marriage as the first living together union for today's young adults, and increasingly cohabitation is the most common route into marriage. But this does not mean that the majority of cohabiting relationships lead to marriage: some have claimed that cohabiters are just as likely to return to singleness as to enter marriage.<sup>1</sup>

### **Why couples cohabit**

Couples may choose to move in together for many reasons. In what follows, we will identify just a few.

***An increase in nonmarital sexual activity.*** With the advent of effective contraceptive technologies and increasing sexual permissiveness, growing numbers of people are engaging in nonmarital sexual activity. In our current cultural milieu, sexual activity is a taken-for-granted freedom, a prerogative of the young and single. For many men and women, casual sex is expected as part of dating. Only a few take a moralistic stand against it. Simply put, the argument goes: if we're sexually active anyway, why not just move in together? For these, the only disadvantage (if it would be called that) of moving in together is that it constitutes more open acknowledgment of their sexual involvement.

***An increasing gap between puberty and marrying age.*** In the United States and Canada, the gap between puberty and marriage has been steadily widening. Thirty or more years ago it was not uncommon for people to get married around the age of twenty-one. Now people are marrying at a much older age. One young adult asks, "'True love waits' was fine when I was a teenager, but can it wait until I'm thirty or more?"

***Changing attitudes to marriage.*** Many young adults have witnessed or experienced divorce in their families and among their friends, with the result that they are skeptical about or afraid of making their own marriage commitments.

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Thatcher, *Living Together and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 7.

***Living together as a test run.*** The perceived fragility of marriage leads some to see living together as a cautious approach. Both women and men favor living together as a way of gathering vital information about a partner's character, capacity for fidelity, and compatibility. Cohabitation is seen as a way of testing the partners' long-term compatibility.

The reasons couples give for moving in together are not always grounded in reality. For example, the logic that cohabitation can function as a test of long-term compatibility might suggest that couples who have lived together before marriage will have better marriages. But no evidence supports this belief, and some studies indicate that the opposite may in fact be true, that cohabiting before marriage increases the likelihood of divorce, particularly for those who have cohabited multiple times.<sup>2</sup>

### **Engaging cohabitation in the church**

Cohabitation is a new cultural norm which the church needs to contend with. We have observed that the practice of cohabitation is a complex reality. But marriage too is multidimensional: it is personal and communal, psychological and sociological, theological and sacramental, emotional and physical, philosophical and practical, to name just a few of its aspects. This multifaceted quality makes speaking about marriage challenging, but its very ordinariness also makes marriage difficult for us to reflect on. The risk is to oversimplify, to offer a causal analysis of cohabitation that makes it the enemy of Christian marriage and the family without engaging the complexity of the issue or examining the social context in which it is increasingly practiced. This context includes contemporary understandings of marriage which have been implicated in the practice of cohabitation.

What follows are some considerations for Christians to pay attention to as they engage the reality of cohabitation. I do not mean to be offering a justification for or a defence of the practice of cohabitation; it would be difficult to defend cohabitation from a biblical or theological perspective. But whenever there is a disconnect between the traditional teachings of the church and the convictions and practices of its members, we have good reason to think about what the church should do to bridge the gap. What questions should the church be asking? What should guide the church as it engages in discernment around issues connected to the practices of cohabitation?

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2 Thatcher, *Living Together*, 12.

**Remember that the Christian understanding of marriage is not static and has always been influenced by the social context and culture.** Christians throughout history have had to engage in discernment about courtship and marriage practices. The particular cultural contexts in which Christians have found themselves have affected their marriage practices. Biblical teaching on marriage should be seen in the context of the ancient Near Eastern cultures with which the people of the Bible had intimate links, especially the Mesopotamian, Syrian, and Canaanite cultures of the Old Testament, and the Hebrew, Roman, and Greek cultures in the New Testament.

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We know that there were syncretistic tendencies among God's people, that their beliefs and practices were influenced by the cultural practices of societies they lived among. For example, practices of polygamy and concubinage evident in the narratives of the Pentateuch were influenced by the cultural world of the Old Testament patriarchs, but such practices would create significant dissonance in our cultural context, as would the notion that wives are the property of their

fathers and husbands, an idea assumed in both testaments. At the same time, we must remember how frequently Judeo-Christian understandings of marriage and family have been radical amid—even subversive of—prevailing cultural understandings.

Increasingly, theologians are recognizing that Christian visions of the traditional family look remarkably like the bourgeois or middle-class family that rose to dominance in the nineteenth century alongside capitalism and with the industrial revolution. It is no accident that family and free enterprise came to be linked.<sup>3</sup> The capitalist narrative has shaped an understanding of marriage and family as separated and autonomous. This idea of the family is nuclear in the sense that it consists only of parents and their children and also in its inward orientation. David Matzko McCarthy writes, "Two people who join together in marriage carve out a distinct sphere of life, distinct not only from other families but also from social and economic structures. Husband and wife set up a home, and

<sup>3</sup> This correlation is developed significantly by Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

home, as an ideal of intimacy and love, stands apart from economic judgments or concerns for profit and productivity. Family is, rather, sustained internally by emotional investment.”<sup>4</sup> This closed conception of family has in many ways been co-opted by the church, a strange development in that the nuclear family does little to open a door to the sacred. The practices of the nuclear family are isolated from the social body of the church, and the church’s role is reduced to sustaining the family unit.

The cultural context of the church has always influenced Christians’ practice of marriage. In every generation and culture, the church has had to read the biblical story anew in light of the particular challenges associated with that context; the church cannot simply reproduce the patterns of its biblical or Christian predecessors. Now too, the church must discern how it will engage the current sexual milieu—including the pervasive practice of cohabitation—which will inevitably affect societal practices of courtship and marriage. At the same time Christians must recognize that the God of scriptures is a God who deigned to enter into human history and into relationship with humankind, who is the living and dynamic source and sustainer of all life and who will continue to sustain the church in days to come.

***Contemporary practices of cohabitation present an opportunity for Christians to reflect honestly on their understandings of sexuality, marriage, family, and singleness.*** In a cursory reading of Christian literature on cohabitation, the most common concern I note is about the impact of cohabitation on Christian understandings of marriage. Specifically, this literature expresses the conviction that we have good reason to fear that cohabitation threatens the Christian ideal of marriage.

Yet cohabitation may provide a much-needed opportunity to re-examine this presumed ideal of Christian marriage. Several theologians have begun to ask whether current Christian understandings reflect a glorification of marriage and family that effectively makes an idol of them.<sup>5</sup> They suggest that this idolizing of family and kinship relationships is something Jesus knew the risk of; his own singleness could be interpreted as a form of resistance to it.<sup>6</sup> Further, as noted, our idealized view of the “traditional family” is not a model lifted out of Old Testament patriarchal society or

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4 David Matzko McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 2.

5 See, for example, Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

6 Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*.

from the New Testament but is a model of family that comes out of industrialized Europe and North America of the nineteenth century.

This analysis raises questions for our consideration. What makes marriage Christian? What distinguishes the practice of marriage from cohabitation? How can Christian marriage theology and practice be strengthened, so that it doesn't simply become another version of cohabitation? Christians have long believed that there is in fact something Christian about marriage, something revelatory about who God is. For this reason, many Christians consider marriage a sacrament, an avenue for experience of and insight into the divine.

According to the Old Testament, Israel was not chosen by God and rescued from Egyptian slavery because of its merit or great numbers. Instead, "it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery" (Deut. 7:7-8). Through its history, Israel had come to know the Creator God, the sovereign Lord, and one of the most important characteristics they encountered in God was unyielding fidelity and unwavering grace. The Psalmist confesses, "Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds" (Ps. 36:5).

Eventually Israel came to see the relationship of husband and wife at its best as reflecting God's fidelity to Israel, and for this reason Israel

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came to practice monogamous marriage. Later, for Christians, the marriage relationship was to be a reflection of Jesus Christ's relationship with the church. Not surprisingly, Christian marriage is frequently described using the language of covenant, language that points to the relationship of God with God's people. Of course, it is not only marriage that is capable of reflecting God's fidelity to God's people, nor does the New Testament suggest that everyone should marry.

In fact, it presents a positive view of singleness in the life and teachings of Jesus and the apostle Paul.

Perhaps the feature that most distinguishes marriage from cohabitation is community. At its best, marriage is a community-building act from the outset, while cohabitation is not. To marry is to celebrate a couple's

love and commitment publically in the presence of family and friends and the church. Marriage begins in the context of a community and from the start acknowledges that we are part of a larger human family. It recognizes that one's life is more than one's own, that one's actions affect more than oneself and one other. It in essence proclaims that marriage is more than a private affair between two people; it finds its meaning in the context of a broader community, the church, the body of Christ.

Living together seems to imply that the central relationship of a couple's life is nobody's business but their own. To live together is a decision most often reached privately and put into effect without wider involvement. No community blesses or celebrates the decision. And sadly, what the community does not bless, it does not feel responsible for. But the same is true when marriage is understood as a private affair, an autonomous decision between two individuals, when the communal dimensions of this union are not recognized and practiced. Then marriage risks becoming just another version of cohabitation. The desire for privacy, for individual self-expression, for autonomy, looms large in North American culture, and the church is left to discern not only how the Christian community can find its way into the commitments of cohabiting couples in order to bring them into covenants of marriage but also how it might strengthen communal notions of marriage.

***Current practices of cohabitation have many implications for ministry.*** A consistent complaint I hear from the university students I teach is that they have limited opportunity in the church to talk about sexuality, marriage, and ethical issues such as cohabitation. As the temporal gap between puberty and marriage increases, the need for ongoing dialogue and support becomes critical. And pastoral care is needed as people cope with negative experiences of marriage relationships, which lead them to suspect and fear marriage.

Perhaps most significant is the need for the church to remain in relationship with those who are cohabiting. Sadly, though understandably, when a Christian couple chooses to cohabit, they recognize their divergence from the church's traditional teachings, with the result that they often leave the church. Cohabitation, unlike sexual relationships that can be hidden, is public behaviour that still elicits the disapproval of many Christians.<sup>7</sup> The question remains: How can the church hold fast to the

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7 Thatcher, *Living Together*, 33–34. Church people express religious approval for going directly from singleness to marriage, and it actually increases religious involvement, while church people still think of cohabitation as something less religious people do.



significance of marriage and at the same time accept the reality that cohabitation is, for many people, a step along the way toward marriage? How can the church remain in relationship with those who are currently living together without being married?

Christian theology is a human intellectual endeavour. It entails listening. Christians believe that God has spoken decisively in Christ, and that God's word comes to us in every generation, so it makes sense that listening is a significant practice for those engaged in doing theology. Listening is hard work. But part of doing Christian theology, part of our theological discernment around ethical issues, is listening to what social scientists, sociologists, cultural theorists, anthropologists, and psychologists are saying. These voices can help us as we make connections between our faith and ordinary life.

In addition, the church needs to listen to young adults as they reflect on their current cultural context and as they make choices. Many of the church's pastors and leaders and teachers have been formed into adulthood in communities and in a culture significantly different from our current cultural milieu: it's a different world out there. Our young adults experience cultural pressures that have an impact on their understanding and practices of sexuality, and they face significant cultural and social pressure to cohabit. The church needs to be attentive to this reality. From the point of view of many, living together seems to make sense: it respects their right to express themselves as sexual beings, often in monogamous relationships, before they are ready to take on the responsibilities and obligations of marriage. They may even see it as honouring the sanctity of marriage by not pushing them to enter into it lightly or prematurely. And they may see it pragmatically, as a fiscally advantageous choice, one that reduces their living expenses.

How will the church care for those who are living together, without letting their cohabitation diminish support for Christian marriage? How will the church faithfully tell the Christian story of sexuality, marriage, and family amid the competing narratives of the social context in which we find ourselves?

### **About the author**

Irma Fast Dueck is associate professor of practical theology at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. This article was first published unabridged in *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 45, no. 2 (2016): 180-91. This abridged version appears here with the permission of *Direction's* publishers.