As followers of Jesus we live between the ideal and the actual. The Master summons men and women to wholeness—but His invitation reaches us in relationships so broken by sin that they sometimes can never be restored to the model. We see this especially in marriage.

Jesus made quite clear His ideal for marriage: a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman (Matt 19:4-6). The church, for her own and society’s good, must reinforce this goal by every means at her command.

But Jesus also calls us to minister—to help men and women mired in sin. As we take the good news to them, we find that many have already married and divorced, perhaps several times over. The actual stands in stark disparity from the ideal.

What then should we do? Tell them to return to their first spouse before they can be baptized? Instruct them to separate from their current spouse?

No, we accept the situation as it is. We do not break up an existing home; we will not disenfranchise the children. The church seeks the best good in an imperfect world, and that means we have to live between the ideal and the actual.

Jesus, of course, took that approach. Strong as He stood for the marriage ideal, He recognized how human frailties caused the marring of God’s plan. “From the beginning it was not so,” He said (verse 8).

Likewise in Adventist history, Ellen White, counselor supreme who upheld the tenets of Scripture, dealt pragmatically with men and women in broken human relations. In no instance did she advocate dissolution of the existing marriage when faced
with the cases of people who had divorced and remarried.

Plural Marriages
Adventists in the Western countries understand this tension between the ideal and the actual in marriages in our society. Most, however, don’t know about a parallel problem that confronts the church in some Third World countries. The situation? Plural marriages, usually in the form of polygamy.

Current church policy, adopted in 1941, permits believing wives of a polygamous family unit to be baptized but withholds baptism from the man unless he puts away all wives except one. (The logic is that wives in a polygamous relationship have only one husband, whereas the husband has multiple wives.) As the church in these areas strives to follow the Master, she wrestles with questions of conscience and compassion:

The Good of the Church at Large Versus the Good of the Individual
The church seeks to do nothing that will weaken the marriage institution; she also wants to preserve her own reputation.

But she has to deal with men and women—and children. Society and law—tribal, religious, and civil—recognize the polygamous family unit: will she call for its breakup? What will happen to the wives who are put away? To the children?

The Evil of Polygamy Versus the Evil of Divorce
Polygamy is a far cry from the biblical pattern of marriage; nonetheless, it is a form that Scripture recognizes although not approves. The Bible nowhere endorses polygamy; however, nowhere does it specifically condemn it. Stalwarts such as Abraham, Jacob, and David practiced it.

Adventists do not mention polygamy in the fundamental beliefs. Nor have we regarded a polygamous relationship as adulterous.

Divorce also is evil. Unlike polygamy, it was specifically condemned by Jesus. If we grant a polygamous family unit validity (although acknowledging its imperfection), the requirement to dissolve a polygamous relationship before baptism is tantamount to the church’s calling for divorce.
Evangelism in Polygamous Societies Versus Evangelism in Others

As Adventists we see our mission in terms of Revelation 14:6, 7—the evangelization of every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. So far, however, we have almost no penetration among one of the largest religions worldwide—Islam, with more than 500 million adherents [1986]. Since Islam permits a man to marry as many as four wives, the biblical commission to take the good news of the kingdom to all the world finds itself in tension with the biblical ideal of monogamy.

The church also has to consider the worldwide impact of her decisions. If, for instance, she should make some concession to new believers who are bound by a polygamous relationship, would this weaken her moral force in other societies?

The Biblical Ideal of Family Versus the Biblical Doctrine of Baptism

Not infrequently all members of a polygamous family unit seek baptism. The husband, while desiring to join the church, cannot bring himself to break up the family. Some have suggested that he be accepted into quasi-membership: he can attend church services but not be baptized and received as a full member.

Such a course of action preserves the biblical ideal of marriage and the church’s reputation but runs directly counter to the Lord’s command to go and baptize (Matt 28:18-20). And baptism is one of the 27 fundamental beliefs of SDAs.

Polygamy and Evangelism

The church’s stance toward people already bound by polygamous relations who become believers has changed over the years. Although present policy excludes polygamous husbands from baptism, between 1930 and 1941 policy cautiously included them.

Our church today enjoys unparalleled growth. Especially under the impact of the 1,000 Days of Reaping and Harvest 90, Adventism is reaching out to the unreached on a global scale. Not surprisingly, the problems raised by evangelization of polygamous societies have come into renewed focus.

For the past six years leaders in Washington, in conjunction with those from the world divisions, have pondered this issue, considering whether the church should make adjustments to its current policy (for example, see...

Recently I participated in a study committee that included representatives from the world division of the church where the problem is acute and weighed the pros and cons of the matter. After two days of discussion the issue boiled down to this: the imperatives of evangelism and baptism versus the ideal of marriage and concern for the church’s reputation.

By a strong majority the committee favored an uncompromising standard for people who enter upon marriage after baptism but a modification of policy to allow for the retention of the polygamous family unit in special circumstances. The committee, of course, had no power to change policy. Thus, the 1941 policy is still in effect.

Adventists are idealists; may we ever remain so! But the world isn’t ideal: men and women have been broken by sin. Faced with the situation, we could opt for one of two extremes—make the church the exclusive province of those who measure up to the ideal, or capitulate to the norms of the world.

But the Master calls us to a different course. It is more difficult than either of these, because it lacks the simplistic approach of “either-or” and is fraught with dangers. He challenges us to uphold the ideal but also to minister to people in their brokenness. If we would do His work, through compassion, courage, and conviction we must act to draw all people in all circumstances into His kingdom.

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**Call for Papers:**

“Adventism in Africa”

You are invited to contribute to an academic publication with the proposed title *Adventism in Africa: Varieties in a religious movement*. It will be part of the *Adventistica* series published by the Archives of Adventist History, Friedensau, with Peter Lang Publishers.

With its 5 million members and 10 million adherents in Africa, Adventism is a growing and significant movement on this continent. There is some literature on this denomination in particular African countries, but this book will be the first scholarly monograph on Adventism in Africa as a whole. It aims at bringing together chapters about different regions, historical epochs, and themes, written with diverse perspectives, approaches, and disciplines by Adventists.