

In Search of What God Has Joined Together: A Working Document on the Theology, Ethics, and Rituals of Holy Unions and Marriage



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***A NOTE TO COMPANIONS:
During this interim period,
the Community of Hope is
revisiting some of its
foundational documents
as part of exploring its
present and future.
Study of this document
during the month of June
is part of that exploration.
Please plan to participate
in these discussions.***

***This document was
prepared
on behalf of the
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The Community of Hope: Who We Are

A broken-made-whole chalice is the symbol adopted by our community, the Community of Hope. It represents our experience that we are all broken and wounded people, yet each of us also has strengths and skills, gifts, and knowledge, sometimes beyond our own awareness. In community we find that we can be and do more than any one of us can be or do alone.

As a Christian 'reconciling' community, we acknowledge and value the Christian tradition, and through our worship, mission, and fellowship we seek:

- to respond faithfully to God's unconditional love by living as an intentionally multicultural, inclusive community that seeks, welcomes, and values all people;
- to act as the living body of Christ in imitation of Jesus by seeking justice, compassion, and liberation with and for those whom our society has marginalized; and
- to work towards reconciling gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people with themselves, the church, and God.

As a base community, we model our life together on a non-hierarchical model, binding ourselves:

- to work for social change in concrete, specific ways through love and justice;
- to base our life together on prayer, scripture, study, and working; and
- to provide a vehicle for community participation in decision-making that generates new strengths and models development.

As a shalom community, we are committed:

- to labor in the mission field where the witness of the Gospel is visible in the midst of our broken humanity;
- to create an environment for transforming charity into justice; and
- to invest in hope that is grounded in what is righteous, rather than in how well something is likely to turn out.

Because we have experienced God's love and healing in our journey together as community, we undertake this exploration in what "joined together" means in our midst, and trusting that in our searching together, we will find God's love and will for each of us and all of us.

Toward A Theology of Joining Together

We take as primary to our reflection on this issue our experience as a community, the scriptures, and the theological tradition's reasoned reflection. We take as the beginning point of our reflection Jesus' own concluding statement about what God has accomplished in human relationships: *What God has joined together, let no human tear apart* (Mark 10:9).

God calls together and joins together two human. We believe that this saying of Jesus captures the essence of our experience in constructing right relationships in the Community of Hope. We designate this calling-and-joining-together as a marriage or holy union. Under whatever rubric we name it, we must begin our reflection and practice by acknowledging what God has accomplished in joining two people into a oneness.

The biblical messages are diverse. During much of the period represented by the Hebrew Bible, polygamy was the standard practice, and wives were understood as a husband's property. Polygamy began to break down because of factors related to the shift from the nomadic and early agrarian economic systems to high agrarian economic and cultural base.

From the classic period of Christianity until modern times, the primary model for understanding marriage was contract law. The joining between a couple was a contract. This understanding is still the dominant understanding of marriage in the legal and civil arenas.

Beginning with the Reformation, Christian communities became divided in their understanding of marriage. Some considered it a sacrament while others did not. During the Victorian period, a romantic view of marriage, in which love constitutes a bond between two people, came to

dominate cultural practices. Thus, the understanding of marriage always has been a part of and responded to larger cultural and societal forces.

Once again, we are being called to rethink our understanding as we perceive God's activity among us. This understanding of marriage, of "what God has joined together," is a representation and a living out of the unity of God. Biblically, this has been understood within the terms of covenant. The people's response is to be faithful to God. Marriage, then, is a re-enactment and a representation of God's covenant with the people. The author of

the Epistle to the Ephesians employed this covenant metaphor as a way of understanding both the relationship between Jesus and the church and between husband and wife (Eph 5:25-33).

A negative aspect of the covenant model is that a covenant has always been unequals, a master-servant model of relationship. Likewise, marriage was understood as a relationship between unequals, so that wives were understood to be subject to their husbands (Eph 5:22).

Within a Trinitarian theology, marriage has been understood, also, as a representation of the unitive aspect of God. It reflects the generative aspect of the Trinity, bound together by divine love. In this Trinitarian theology of marriage are the seeds of an understanding of marriage as a loving response of equals.

The unitive understanding of marriage is buried deep in the foundational Judeo-Christian story of human beginnings. The two creation stories in Genesis both affirm the essential unity of a man and a woman. In the first creation story, humans are announced with the following poetic lines:

OUR GROUNDING:

We take as the beginning point of our reflection Jesus' statement about what God has accomplished in human relationships:

What God has joined together, let no human tear apart. — Mark 10:9

Toward A Theology of Joining Together

*God created human beings
in God's own image:
In the image of God they were created;
Male and female, God created them
(Gen 1:27).*

The point of creation, then, is that humans—all humans—are made in God's image, and that image constitutes our essential unity.

Likewise, in the second story of creation, after God created man and woman from ADAM, the man acknowledges, "*This one, at last, is bone of my bones, flesh from my flesh! She shall be called 'woman', for from man she was taken*" (Gen 2:24). Again, the same point is made: the man proclaims the woman not different from him, but like him. The narrator reinforces this notion by concluding, "*That is why a man leaves his father and mother and attaches himself to his wife, and the two become one*" (Gen 2:24). The great mystery, here again, is that the image of God constitutes our essential unity, that the image of God sets aside even gender differentiation. In relationship, we are not separated, but united; we are not two, but somehow, we are one (Eph 5:32-33).

Jesus returned to this foundational story when questioned about divorce. Divorce affirmed the slave character of a woman. By divorce, she could be dismissed, reduced to poverty, or even worse, abandoned. After quoting the Genesis 2 passage, Jesus concludes, "*It follows that they are no longer two individuals: they are one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no person tear apart*" (Mark 10: 8-9).

By forbidding divorce, Jesus is affirming the equality of man and woman. God's justice demands equality between all humans. Even more, Jesus proclaims the joining together as coming from God. The joining together is an affirmation of our essential unity in the face of our obvious differentiation. The love between two people, the love they see and reflect in each

other, is a response to God's call, and the love between them is God's life. In the other, they become united with God and with one another.

The ceremony of public witness to what God has joined together is a response a couple to the unitive call of God. In committing themselves to each other before the community, the couple is acknowledging God's unity, with us and in us.

Marriage, or holy union, follows from our baptismal call. When a couple discerns the call of God, this joining together is a further claim upon the grace of baptism, a grace that invites us into a continuing unity with the life of God. The couple is living out the grace of baptism, incarnating and witnessing to the unity and life of God, discovered in their mutual love, devotion, and commitment.

Since God first calls and welcomes us, not we ourselves (Rom 14:7), we, the community of the baptized, acknowledge and witness to the justifying grace of God, expressing the in the faithful joining of the couple. What God has blessed, is not ours to forbid, but to celebrate. "What God has joined together, let no person tear apart." In the joining together ceremony, we, the community, are acknowledging that in our experience and life as a community, God has already joined these two people together. We are witnessing and blessing what God has already accomplished.

The church has long held this it the couple themselves who are the true ministers or priests in the service of marriage. They are the true servants and servers, responding to God's call as they discern it. It is not the church that licenses the joining together, but the couple who recognizes and accepts the call of God.

If a minister participates in the service, we recognize that he or she does not "perform" the joining together. Rather, the minister leads the people in worship and prayer,

Toward an Ethic of “Joined Together”: Living in Right Relationship

To discern the call of God demands that we walk righteously with God (Micah 6:8). Righteousness, or right relationship, flows from discerning the call and love of God. To “love one another” means to cherish one another spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Therefore, if we are to live in right relationship with one another, then our relationships in all times and in all places must be grounded firmly and unconditionally in honesty, mutuality, and respect.

In right relationship, each partner wants and hopes for the other the abundance of life that God wills for all of us; each partner is committed not only to the other’s present, but to their future welfare. This involves a commitment to honest and respect, and to the growth and fulfillment of one another’s potential as bearers of the breath of God.

In addition, our experience as a community has confirmed what the Christian tradition long has held: that sex touches and affects human beings so deeply that our well-being requires that it be reserved for those rare right relationships within which there is not only mutuality, respect, and honesty, but also a commitment to monogamy and the growth of the relationship. Relationships that have been tended, nurtured, and worked at long enough, honestly enough, and deeply enough that both partners are coming to know the whole person with whom they are in relationship, and to love, honor, and cherish that whole person.

We believe and have experienced that such a relationship can only be honored with one person. Authentic, life-giving sexual intimacy is not possible when sex is entered into casually, and we cannot commit ourselves fully, wholly to two

different people. Causal sex does not honor personhood or relationship, and therefore frustrates God’s reconciling action by alienating us from one another.

OUR ETHIC: RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

If we are to live in right relationship with one another, then our relationships at all times and in all places must be grounded firmly and unconditionally in honest, mutuality, and respect.

As Christians, we are called out of alienation and into reconciliation. *In Christ, God was reconciling the world to God’s own self and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation* (2 Cor 5:19).

As we have journeyed in community, searching the Scriptures and tradition together toward a life-giving ethic of right relationship and sexual intimacy, we have discerned that relationships in which each

partner hopes for and wants abundant life for the other are not determined by gender; relationships in which each partner is committed not only to the other’s present but to their future welfare, are not limited to heterosexuals; relationships within which we fully know and are fully known; relationships that have been tended, nurtured, and worked at long enough and honestly enough that both partners have come to know and love the whole person to whom they are relating...these are not limited to relationships between a man and a woman. Relationships in which each partner is willing to fully commit the wholeness of their life to the wholeness of the other’s life monogamously are sometimes relationships between two women or two men.

Our community has experienced that right relationships between such life companions, whether they be between a man and a woman or two women or two men, are a gift of God. They are a response to God’s call to right relationship. They are what God has joined together. Such relationships are ours to celebrate and witness.

Toward a Ritual of Joining Together

The rituals of joining together celebrated in and by our community should reflect not only the wishes of the couple, but also, the life and theology of the Community of Hope. There should be no distinction between rituals of joining together for homosexual and heterosexual couples. Therefore, we strongly suggest that any legal action associated with the joining together, such as the signing of marriage licenses and/or powers of attorney, be done at another time and place, and not in connection with the worship ritual.

Since the couple serves as the ministers of the ritual and God is the one who joins together, the ritual of joining together should acknowledge and reflect the role of the community as witnesses. Toward that end, we suggest that the rite include the following elements:

A community declaration, wherein the community declares its intention to witness and to honor the joining together of the couple; examples include:

All: _____ and _____, ***we rejoice to be a part of this celebration, and we are honored to stand as witnesses as you share your vows of commitment to one another.***

All: _____ and _____, ***as your family and community, we are honored to be part of this celebration. We have known and loved you individually; we have experienced your being called together***

by God, and we are honored to stand as witnesses as you share your covenant vows. We affirm your love for one another as holy and honor your covenant as sacred.

OUR RITUAL: COMMUNITY WITNESS

Since the couple serves as the ministers of the ritual and God is the one who joins together, the ritual of joining together should acknowledge and reflect the role of the community as witnesses.

Toward that end, we suggest that the rite include the following elements:

- A community declaration
- A call to commitment
- A community affirmation.

All: _____ and _____, ***in our journey together, seeking hope, justice, and wholeness, those of us who have walked with you as your community of faith have come to know your relationship to be from God. We are grateful to be present to witness and affirm your commitment to one another, and we commit ourselves to honor your relationship and stand in solidarity with you in the struggle for justice, even when the struggle becomes uncomfortable.***

One: *The joining together of _____ and _____ unites their families, given and chosen, and created a new one. They ask for your blessing.*

All: ***We rejoice in your union, we witness your vows with joy, and we pray God's blessing upon you.***

One: *Will all of you, by God's grace, do everything in your power to honor, uphold, and care for _____ and _____ in their marriage/union?*

All: ***We will.***

Toward a Ritual of Joining Together

A call to commitment, wherein the community invites the couple to share their vows, for example:

All: _____ *a n d*
_____, *we rejoice with you on this day and pray for God's blessing on your life together. We now invite you to share your vows of commitment with one another before God and this gathered community.*

A community affirmation, wherein the community affirms and celebrates the joining together they have witnessed; examples include:

One: The vows have been spoken!

All: ***Rings have been exchanged!***

One: A relationship has been blessed, a holy union affirmed!

All: ***What God has joined together, let no one tear apart.***

All: _____ *a n d*
_____, *we have witnessed the sharing of your vows and the giving and receiving of your rings. We affirm your union of love! What God has joined together, let no one tear apart.*

All: _____ *a n d*
_____, *we have witnessed and affirm the joining together of your lives! We commit ourselves to honor your relationship and stand in solidarity with you in the struggle for justice.*



Toward a Ritual of Joining Together

As we reflect on this document together, please consider the following questions:

- In 1997, when this document was developed, we were connected to the United Methodist Church, and this was a response to the action of the 1996 UMC General Conference statement, "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our (UMC) ministers and shall not be conducted in our (UMC) churches." Where were we then as a community, staking our theological ground in a defensive posture with respect to our denominational family?
- In 2000, we were adopted by and entered into covenant relationship with the United Church of Christ. An action of the 2005 UCC General Synod "affirms equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender and declares that the government should not interfere with couples, regardless of gender, who choose to marry and share fully in the rights, responsibilities, and commitment of legally recognized marriage." Where are we now, reviewing this document in light of covenant relationship with an affirming denomination? (Note: We will be exploring specific UCC resources related to this issue in the next few weeks.)
- As we look to the future, does this document still reflect who we are and who we wish to be in the future? What are the points of similarity and the points of departure between this document and who we are today as a community of faith and hope?