

CHURCH-SPONSORED INJUSTICE:

The Adventist Church and Polygamous Converts

Ronald Lawson

Polygamy has been the most complex, perplexing and persistent marriage-related problem encountered by churches in their missionary enterprise. The most intense and resistant problems were encountered in Africa, where these forms of marriage were most widespread.

I will divide my presentation into 3 segments: the first will clarify the key terms that will be used, and then consider the functions played by polygamy in traditional African societies; the second will explore how the various Christian missions which preceded Adventists to Africa handled polygamous converts; the third will consider how Adventists related to converts who were already involved in pluralistic marriages, and how this has changed over time.

Terminology:

The word polygamy is a general term that refers to a culture or situation where one person has more than one spouse concurrently. There are two more specific terms that fall under that general category: polygyny is the form of polygamy where one man has multiple wives; polyandry is the form where one woman has multiple husbands. Polygyny is much more common than polyandry: it is found in many parts of Africa, Asia, and Papua-New Guinea; I understand that polyandry is found only in highlands in the Indian sub-continent and in one small island group in the North Pacific. All the examples of polygamy in the Hebrew Scriptures (such heroes as Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon) practiced polygyny; and when Paul instructed the early church that an elder had so be “the husband of one wife,” he seems also to have been ruling out polygynous candidates. I will use the term “polygamy” in this presentation because it is the best-known word, but in fact all cases will be polygynous.

Let me introduce two other terms, patrilineal and matrilineal. In a patrilineal society, the male line is key: when a male there marries, the wife’s kinship group receives a bride price, and she moves to the husband’s community; the children all belong to their father’s group. If a wife is divorced, a rare occurrence in such a community, she is cut loose from that community, including her children, and belongs nowhere. Patrilineal societies are by far the most common in Africa, and it is among them that polygamy has flourished. In contrast, in a matrilineal society the mother’s line is central, and it usually emphasizes her uncle; the husband is a fairly insignificant figure, and divorces are much more common. Polygamy is rare there.

What functions have been played by polygamy in traditional African societies?

Because polygamy is intrinsic to a traditional society's total way of life, it has economic, social, political, and religious ramifications. Polygamy was a legal form of marriage, and it flourished in

rural areas. It was a means of strengthening the lineage, creating a network of alliances for the kinship group, and securing the labor needed to farm the land; it provided for the needs of women in a society in which, because of tribal wars, they heavily outnumbered men, and yet it was unthinkable that single women and widows would live alone, where divorce was often not tolerated since marriages were contracted by groups of kinsmen rather than individuals, where procreation was valued most highly and was the main object of marriage, and the burden of childlessness was heavily felt. The system protected the needy and ensured that no child was illegitimate by allowing for the most privileged men to take the surplus women and establish polygamous families. For example, when a church refuses to allow a member to enter a leviratic marriage with the widow of his brother (a system that was also set up among the Hebrews in Deut:25:5), this destroys the social mechanisms which provide for the widow and orphans.

It was estimated in 1970, soon after the close of the colonial period in Africa, that more than 20% of the families were polygynous in 75% of African societies, and that the mean number of wives per 100 married males in Sub-Saharan Africa was 150. Although economic and social changes, especially those associated with urbanization, have gradually reduced the incidence of the formation of such marriages since then, polygamy remains a central concern to the churches in Africa.

How did other Christian Missions Handle Polygamous Converts in Africa?:

Christianity grew up in what was basically a monogamous world. The first recorded official Christian statement on polygamy dates from 1201, when the Bishop of Tiberius asked Pope Innocent III if polygamous converts should keep all wives or only one, and if the latter, which one. The Pope insisted on strict monogamy, calling polygamous unions adultery, and refused baptism to any parties to such a marriage. The Catholic Church did not face an extensively polygamous society until missionaries entered Asia and America in the sixteenth century, and Protestants not until the nineteenth century--first, to a more limited extent, in parts of Asia and then, much more widespread, in Africa. Both applied what they were used to in their Western monogamous cultures to the new situations. However, their policies proved destructive.

When the Anglican Church addressed the issue in West Africa in the middle of the nineteenth century, missionaries had little theology of marriage and little understanding of the relativity of social patterns (anthropologists, for example, had not yet studied marriage). Their concept of Christian marriage was what they had known at home. They regarded much of African life as immoral and condemnable, especially polygamy and bride wealth, and they were almost universally repulsed by the practice. Missionaries often assumed that lust was the real reason for polygamy. Since polygamous unions were viewed as adulterous, the missions had little hesitation in ruling that these marriages must come to an abrupt end if the partners wished to become Christians. They thus turned the good news of the gospel into bad news. In 1857, Henry Venn, secretary of the Church Missionary Society, drew up a memorandum which was to influence the debate for the next century: its key statement was "a polygamist cannot be lawfully admitted by

baptism into the Church of Christ." However, some individual missionaries came to understand the human situation better and to have doubts.

So much turmoil surrounded the issue by 1888 that it was brought to the Lambeth Conference, the highest body in the Anglican Church. The bishops there voted that male polygamists should not be baptized as Christians, but kept under instruction until they were in a position to conform to the law of Christ. This position had great and continuing influence not only among Anglicans in Africa but also among other Protestants there, even though several churches continued to baptize polygamists in Asia, especially China. Church policy thus, in effect, made polygamy THE unforgivable sin: only divorce could qualify reformed polygamists for entrance and fellowship in the kingdom of God. The Lambeth document was less adamant concerning polygamous wives, allowing their baptism in some circumstances, these being left to local decision.

The policies generally presented a polygamous male convert with one of two choices. The first, which was initially the most common practice, was that he should put away all but one of his wives before being baptized (there was further variation here, for while some insisted that the first wife be the one retained, others allowed him to choose any of his wives). This choice was wrenching to the kinship system, often separating the discarded wives from their children, and left some so destitute that they were forced into prostitution in order to survive. Although cast out wives were eligible for baptism, the end result of the policy was that they were usually alienated from Christianity.

With the passing of time, Protestants came to view polygamous unions not as adultery but as an inferior form of marriage which, if divorce was demanded, was likely to result in unacceptable dislocation. Many concluded that it was therefore better to maintain them, even though they represented an insurmountable impediment to baptism. Consequently, the pendulum swung increasingly towards the second alternative, under which all wives were eligible for baptism, but the male was kept waiting, without baptism, on the periphery of the church until the death of a wife or wives left him with only one spouse.

Catholics, for their part, were more firmly convinced that polygamous relationships were adulterous, and therefore not marriages. Consequently, their traditional solution was akin to the first choice listed above—the polygamist must send away all but one of his wives before he could be baptized. The question of the possibility of baptizing the wives, and under what conditions, was not ever raised. The concern was with the man, with his baptism.

During the twentieth century, the problem was sharpened once many independent African churches accepting polygamous members began to emerge in West Africa and as the missions became more aware of the harm their policies was causing to the polygamous Africans. For example, it was realized that kinship groups often refused to permit the divorces churches demanded, and that efforts to have a husband support his wife and children without having a

sexual relationship create enormous strains that often end up with pregnancies. Recent studies had shown that the traditional family was disintegrating in the mushrooming urban areas. The Christian policy towards polygamy was held partially responsible for this: it had taught many societies the possibility of divorce. With the breakdown of the family on every hand it no longer appeared so self-evident to the churches that polygamous families should be separated. Instead, a number of churches began to see it as their primary responsibility to promote marital fidelity and stability. They therefore began to rethink the whole issue in the light of contemporary circumstances.

Policy and practice began to change in the decades after World War II--slowly at first, then with increasing pace. The first mission-connected church to decide to baptize male polygamists was the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Liberia in 1951. An All-Africa Seminar on the Christian Home and Family in 1963 recommended that whole polygamous families could be baptized and admitted to communion. This led to a period of intense discussion, and to several smaller missions acted on the recommendation; however, the larger missions did not yet do so. New articles and books urging the baptism of polygamists began to appear more frequently, now in Catholic as well as Protestant circles.

In 1970 the Anglican Archbishops of Africa commissioned a report on Christian marriage in Africa. This defined polygamous marriage as "not a number of loose sexual relationships, but of simultaneous stable unions contracted under a form of law, recognized as marriage by the people of the country, entered upon with a lifetime intention, and providing both a permanent home and a legitimate status for offspring... To end a polygamous marriage in the name of Christ, who said nothing explicitly to condemn it, at the expense of effecting a divorce, which Christ explicitly forbade, is to pay too high a price to achieve a theoretical conformity with one part of the Christian marriage pattern." It was also noted that Christian men felt obliged to divorce a barren wife rather than merely add another, thus learning the American practice of serial monogamy. Later it also became obvious that the rejection of polygamy resulted in much more adultery, venereal disease, and HIV-AIDS. The Anglican study therefore urged the baptism of intact polygamous families that had existed prior to conversion. The fruits of this study were harvested at the 1988 Lambeth Conference, which, at the initiative of the East African bishops, reversed the ban on baptizing polygamists unless they retained only one wife. The bishops argued that the existing policy resulted either in women and children being abandoned or the loss of converts to other faiths. The resolution voted by the Conference upheld monogamy as the ideal, and forbade converted polygamists from taking additional wives. It said nothing about polygamists not being able to hold church office. These decisions by the 1988 Lambeth Conference made the Anglican Church clearly the leader in trying to contextualize the Christian message for the cultures of Africa.

3.

Adventism and Polygamy:

Adventists entered Africa when the Christian mission enterprise there was already well established. The first Adventist missionaries were sent to South Africa in 1887, and from there they spread north into Southern and then Northern Rhodesia (what are now Zimbabwe and Zambia) during the next 15 years. They entered English West Africa, beginning with the Gold Coast (Ghana), in 1894, German East Africa (Tanzania) in 1903, Kenya in 1906, and Ethiopia in 1907. The French and Belgian colonies were not entered until after World War I. However, Adventist outreach has been especially successful in Africa: At the end of 2019, 44.4% of its 21.6 million members were located there.

Since Adventists thought of themselves as God's special Remnant Church, they kept their mission efforts quite separate from those of other churches. Consequently, they developed their own responses to polygamy. However, because their missionaries were also drawn from Europe and America, and they were often very conscious of their reputations with the major religious bodies, their policies often reflected the practices of other missions. They were wary lest the standard that they adopted be deemed too low by others.

Adventists steered an erratic course on polygamy for several decades. Their first attempt to reach consensus on a policy towards polygamous converts was made in 1913, when the missionaries present at church headquarters in Washington, D.C., were called to a "round table conference" to discuss a recommendation drafted by a "committee on the question of polygamy in heathen lands." Their discussion revealed considerable variation in practice. While most Adventist missions refused baptism to polygamists, Adventists in India followed the practice among other missions there, baptizing converted polygamists but not allowing them to hold prominent church offices. There were wide differences in how the wives involved in a polygamous marriage were treated. While most missions encouraged polygamists to put away their additional wives, those in Korea and South Africa required the man to support all his wives while living with only one of them. Missionaries from China and Java found fault with their insistence on divorce as being unfair to the women and children. The group eventually recommended that when a polygamous man became a Christian "he be accepted into the church on condition that he support all his wives and children, but that he lives only with his first lawful wife as husband and wife"; he would not be eligible to hold church office. Similarly, a plural wife would need to separate from her husband before being granted membership. That is, no would-be convert who continued to live polygamously could be baptized. Although the original recommendation coming to the group had allowed wives who could not obtain a divorce from their husbands to be accepted as members, this was rejected when missionaries reported that other mission churches would not tolerate this [Bouit 1982: 118, 123]. These recommendations were then voted by the General Conference as guidelines for missionaries in the field.

However, the 1913 guidelines failed to achieve uniform practice among Adventist missions. The extent of diversity in practice was revealed by a second missionary round table conference held in 1926. The main difference there was between two of the church's divisions, each of which had a Western-dominated home base and responsibility for a "mission field" in Africa. This

conference was called shortly after the African Division, which was based in South Africa with a mission field that extended as far north as the Congo, had adopted a liberal Working Policy towards polygamous converts. This had been done after W H Branson, the president of the division, had realized the weight of opposition among some peoples to the imposition of divorce on polygamous families and had discovered the variety of responses to polygamy within his socially diverse territory. Since the division included both matrilineal and patrilineal societies, in some parts divorce was easy and in other parts it was impossible: "For that reason we agreed to compromise somewhat, and we agree to baptize those who come to the knowledge of the church straight from heathenism;" however, "according to the Scriptures," such members were not eligible to hold church office. In contrast, the European Division, whose mission field encompassed most of East and West Africa, which was mostly patrilineal and highly polygamous, abided strictly by the 1913 statement, and therefore baptized no practicing polygamists. Although it was sensitive to the human and social problems caused by requiring people to break up their polygamous unions--its spokesperson referred to "the necessity of having to refuse baptism to genuinely converted polygamists as one of his saddest experiences in Africa"--they felt that compromise was too dangerous in this "stronghold of heathenism." Church practice on the issue was also divided in Asia, where polygamists were baptized in India but not in most of the Far Eastern and China Divisions.

The 1926 conference revealed such a divergence of opinion and practice that church leaders decided to appoint a committee "to give careful study to the question of polygamy, and the stand that should be taken with regard to it." This drafted a conservative resolution, countermanding the new policy of the African Division, which was given highest authority when it was passed by the General Conference in session: henceforth, "in no case should a man living in polygamy be admitted into the fellowship of the church."

The 1926 decision caused upset in the African Division. For example, one of the missionaries there sent to church headquarters a manuscript arguing forcefully against the policy of breaking up families, stressing the "hardships and the degrading consequences that the native women endure who are forced to give up their homes, and oftentimes their children, when they are put away by their husbands because of his having accepted the Christian faith." The Division's appeal succeeded in having a committee appointed to study "Polygamy among Primitive Tribes," with Branson as one of the three committee members. This committee's report was treated with such urgency that it was taken to the annual meeting of the leaders of the world church in 1930 rather than waiting until the 1932 General Conference Session. The resolution voted there dramatically reversed the 1926 decision, permitting the baptism of polygamous converts in those cultures where tribal customs would result in "great injustice" to innocent castoff wives and their children. This gave the Adventist church a policy that was much more liberal than those of the major mission churches in Africa, and remarkably independent of their views. However, the European divisions rejected this policy on the ground that a decision made by a General

Conference Session had been overturned by a lower body, and continued to adhere to the more restrictive 1926 decision.

It was easy for hard-liners to arouse opposition to a liberal policy towards polygamy in the US and Europe. A major element in the opposing case was that the liberal position gave other missions a reason to complain that Adventists were “easy” on polygamy. Church leaders, moved by the barrage, established yet another study committee, which resulted in the voting of new resolutions at the 1941 General Conference Session. These had the effect of overturning the 1930 policy. The new position stated that “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.” In order to enforce unity and overcome the previous situation where two rival policies existed, the resolutions declared that the new policy "supersedes all previous policies on polygamy."

The Adventist church thus settled on this conservative stance only a few years before such rules came under close critical scrutiny within the broader Christian community in Africa. This policy is still the official position of the Adventist church.

Current Practice

Almost everywhere the first option mentioned by Adventists I interviewed in Africa is for the polygynous man to divorce all wives except one before baptism is permitted; some referred to an additional waiting period before baptism to insure that such a man is sticking to his decision. In some areas he is expected to continue to support the wives he has cast out.

However, because the experience in most of Africa has been that husbands are unwilling or unable to divorce their wives, a second option was usually listed. Under this, those wives who are converted are baptized (they are usually not regarded as polygamous because they have only one husband), but their husband is kept in a sad state on the periphery of the church, without baptism or access to communion, usually as a Sabbath School member. It is this second option which has increasingly become most used. Indeed, in Nigeria it has become the only practice, with no attempt being made to persuade the husband to divorce his wives. In Zimbabwe the policy is interpreted more strictly: if the second option is chosen, only the first wife is baptized, on the grounds that she is the only innocent party.

Beneath this pattern lies another level of diversity, which has appeared throughout Adventist history in Africa. This is the degree of flexibility allowed or encouraged by influential church figures—initially missionaries, later more frequently administrators--in different areas. One missionary reported that "we always tried to not disrupt a family if children were small," another told of a division president who had often said to baptize everyone if people were going to be hurt badly--but who never put it in writing. While some administrators have tried to enforce the policy to the letter, others, noting the human disasters such actions have caused, have learned to back off.

When I asked interviewees to assess the policy as implemented, their evaluations differed considerably. Although administrators were divided, they were on the whole more positive. Pastors were also deeply divided, often according to age. However, the leading laity, and especially teachers at all levels, spoke negatively of the official policy. Assessments differed most, to the point of being polar opposites, on how well the castoff wives were provided for and how frequently wives being supported by their former husbands become pregnant to them: administrators generally tended to give favorable reports, while pastors, who are much closer to how the system is put into practice, cited many examples of former wives becoming pregnant if their former husbands agreed to support them and of abandoned wives being separated from their children and being left so destitute that they are forced into prostitution.

When divorce is imposed or chosen, Adventists usually allow the husband free choice concerning which wife will be retained, and this is often the youngest. The wives have no choice here--in the words of a former union president, "wives must submit to what their husband chooses." It is very sad for a woman to be cast out in old age, yet for a young woman to be considered no longer a wife, especially where she is not eligible for remarriage, must be devastating.

It is often the more conscientious husband who refuses the divorce option. While his wives are eligible to be baptized, become church members, and to partake of communion, he must remain at best on the fringe of the church so long as his plural marriage continues. He is always a second-class citizen: his tithes and offerings are expected, but he must leave when it is time for communion. Since he is not baptized, he worries that he may be eternally lost. The practice leaves him in spiritual limbo, marginalized from the community of faith--an almost impossible situation for a member of a communal society. Communities can never be "one in Christ" when there are two such distinct statuses.

It is not surprising, then, that many husbands tire of their ambiguous situation and disappear from the church, and that cast-out wives lose their conversion experience and often become embittered with the church. Consequently, the children are also often lost to the church. The progress of Adventism is slow among polygamists, whether animists or Muslims. Potential converts frequently reject the Adventist invitation once the rules concerning polygamy are explained to them and turn instead to the indigenous African churches or to Islam, where polygamous families are accommodated without problems. This leaves Adventist churches often so short of men that women have to provide leadership--a most surprising situation in societies where women are traditionally seen as very inferior. It also renders the Adventist church in Africa, although growing rapidly overall, economically poor since women can usually only give if their husbands are generous to the cause and the policy on polygamy tends to exclude those men who are the most wealthy.

Divisions, Debates, and Demands for Change

The deep divisions among African Adventists revealed in these questions reflected a bitter debate in progress since the 1970s. The clearest divide was between the older and younger pastors; this was strengthened by the fact that the older pastors had received much less formal education. The latter tended to see the policy which keeps practicing polygamists from membership in the church as a litmus test, without which the church could not have a pure and noble profile. Since they have a stake in the traditional policy--their own marriage options were shaped by it--they would feel deeply humiliated and betrayed if it were now abandoned. Moreover, enforcing the policy has given them great authority, which would be undermined if it were changed. A majority of church administrators and one or two educators also supported the policy, being unwilling to admit the magnitude of its problems, arguing that "it is known, biblical and Christian," and that since the practice is weakening before social change, there is no need to shift position. Several explained that they want to keep the standard, unlike the record of the American church on divorce.

Younger pastors, on the other hand, tended to regard the policy as doing more harm than good, as fatally flawed and morally bankrupt. These pastors talk about the problems with the policy a great deal among themselves, critiquing it for its lack of compassion and its negative impact on the church's economy. Their sentiments are shared by educated laypersons, who write frequently on the issue to church papers, by a number of church administrators, most of the vocal missionaries, and prominent educators. For example, a D.Min. thesis completed by the then president of the Adventist college in Nigeria was an impassioned call for change: "Is the proclamation of the gospel supposed to threaten family stability, disrupt social covenants, and even separate mothers from their children?...Is it not possible, at the very least, for the church to permit the baptism of a repentant, holy and consecrated polygamist and his wives, if the gospel has reached them in this situation?"

Attempts to Change the Policy.

The vigorous debate among African Adventists during the 1970s and early 1980s prepared the way for attempts to change policy. When what had previously been parts of three divisions were combined into the Africa-Indian Ocean Division [AID] in 1980, it was found that the varying degrees of flexibility allowed by the former administrations had created considerable diversity in practice. The need to clarify the policy in the new situation joined together with the discontent that was being expressed with it. This was articulated initially by the other major African division, the East African Division [EAD], which had elected its first African president, Bekele Heye from Ethiopia, in 1980. He told me that "The policy was wrong--the church was forcing divorce, women were left derelict, deprived of their homes and legal husbands. This was not in harmony with the Bible! We should have accepted polygamists as we found them, with multiple wives, and merely insisted that they add no more. So I brought it to the attention of the General Conference, at Annual Council."

The missionary president of AID, Robert Kloosterhuis, joined in the enterprise because of the problems he had found in his new territory, and the president of the General Conference, Neal Wilson, added his support. Wilson knew, from spending years in the Middle East, that the Adventist policy on polygamy was a major problem among Muslims, who were only likely to convert as family units. Moreover, he was frustrated by a policy that declared large numbers of converts ineligible for baptism. He was therefore interested in searching for an alternative policy. This search was made the more appropriate by the fact that other Christian missions were looking again at the issue. Adventists showed considerable interest in the changing policies of the other missions. Consequently, Wilson activated a new committee in the Fall of 1981 to consider the requirements which Adventism made of new converts who had already entered polygamous marriages. However, the committee was unable to come to consensus, and there were repeated calls for further study. The committee continued for several years, during which its polarization deepened.

Few Americans and Europeans understood the issue, they found the thought of polygamy distasteful, and the prospect of admitting polygamous members made them fear for the reputation of their church. However, when Africans charged that the Westerners had been willing to countenance serial monogamy in the form of widespread divorce and remarriage in their own divisions, even though this clearly contravened statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, but they were now unwilling to support existing polygamous families in Africa merely because these were so foreign to their culture, even though there was some biblical support for this familial form, they softened their opposition. The prospects for a new policy collapsed when African unity eroded. Older pastors, who had been restricted to one wife by church policies, bridled at the thought that polygamous men would be allowed to retain their wives. Many African pastors also expressed fear that an about-face on this issue would encourage lay members to question other positions held by the church. As a result of this opposition, the issue was shelved after discussion at the 1987 Annual Council.

Meanwhile, however, Adventist practice concerning polygamy changed gradually in spite of the earlier failure to update policy. Increasing numbers of pastors and evangelists quietly changed their practice, extending the flexibility with which the policy was implemented in different parts of Africa. For example, American evangelists conducted large crusades resulting in baptisms that were so large that it was impossible to check whether the converts were polygamously married. One pastor commented to me, "American evangelists are after numbers, not saints." Perplexed administrators explained that it was impossible to disfellowship such converts for situations that were in place earlier once they had been baptized. Increasing numbers of local pastors, who were also under pressure to meet higher goals for converts, also chose to baptize entire families. Some pastors reported to me that they had allowed polygamists to hold office in their churches. A number of pastors reported that they had chosen to baptize polygamous men who had been long-term Sabbath School members when it seemed that their deaths were approaching. Some added that they did this without informing administrators, others that administrators, when

informed, chose to look the other way. The gap between the official policy and actual practice continues to widen.

Summary

What factors shaped Adventist policy and practice?

1. In spite of Adventism's separation from other Protestant missions, its policies towards polygamous converts have usually been influenced strongly by the prevailing consensus among them. The Adventist leaders did not want to appear lax, so they felt comfortable when Adventist policies were aligned with those of conservative significant others.
2. Americans viewed polygamists as being stigmatized--they were both sinful and perverse, rather like the way the majority regarded homosexuals. Since Adventism is centered in America, its leaders were undoubtedly aware of the disrepute which Mormon polygamy had engendered there.
3. Many, especially some of the decision makers most closely involved, were moved by compassion for the human victims of the policy. While this was the motivation behind the policy changes in the African Division in 1926 and at the General Conference in 1930, it was usually expressed individually more than organizationally. The generally lower priority afforded to compassion for most of the period is confirmed by the fact that although the church was pressuring polygamous men to cast out their additional wives, the church did little to help the outcasts. Indeed, a schismatic movement broke from Adventism in Zimbabwe in the 1950s because its leader was so disappointed with the failure of the church to support its widows, who would have been married polygamously to kin of their husbands if the church had not outlawed levirate marriage.
4. When Adventists failed to understand the functions of polygamous unions, and instead labeled them adulterous, when they responded with revulsion to the thought of polygamy and demanded that a husband cast out his wives, they were failing to contextualize the Christian message and imposing Western values on Africans.
5. The history of this issue shows an astonishing number of committees inquiring into the Adventist policy and coming to differing conclusions. It also shows a remarkable amount of individual flexibility within a centralized, hierarchical system. When we focus on changes in practice towards polygamous converts rather than the failure to change the church's official position, the wish to be compassionate is increasingly trumping the rules. This pattern is similar to the issue of women pastors, where changes in practice are increasingly circumventing the rules. It also reflects the gradual unofficial shift towards a compassionate embrace of LGBTQ members and their relationships and families in Adventist schools, churches, and families in the Developed World.