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Families in Society

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Cohabitation

Family life professionals in the church are faced with a growing problem in America. Cohabitation is defined as two unrelated adults of the opposite sex living together by the federal government. Between 1970 and 2000, partners living together before or without marriage rose from 500,000 to 5.5 million. In 2007, the Census reported that 6.4 million unmarried same sex couples lived together. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, sixty to seventy five percent of couples live together before their first marriage, and the number rises to eighty to eighty five percent for second marriages. Church workers are faced with a growing practice that contradicts biblical teachings. The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod cites the book of Ephesians when it says that "God's Word is clear: "You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ...Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more" "(1992). This practice not only has negative effects in the spiritual realm, but also has negative effects in the earthly realm.

There are many reasons that couples cohabit. One is the high divorce rate in the United States. According to the Center for Disease Control (2009), about half of all marriages in the United States end in divorce. These statistics rise dramatically when it comes to second marriages, reaching sixty to seventy five percent. The high rate of divorce is one of the popular reasons that couples give for cohabitating. Couples would rather live together without being married than enter into a marriage that has a fifty percent rate of failure. The high divorce rate is one of the main factors that are leading to cohabitation in the United States.

Another reason that may lead to cohabitation is that some people view cohabitation as a stepping stone to marriage. Cohabitation however is not accurately viewed as a preparation or a stage on the way to marriage. David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead stated in their 1999 report *Should We Live Together?* that many couples use cohabitation not only as a stage or a preparation for marriage but as a decision maker. A study by Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu in 1998 concludes that only fifty three percent of cohabitations result in marriage. This statistic is no better than the percent of typical marriages that last in the United States. Using cohabitation as a step in courtship or as preparation for marriage seems like a good idea on the surface, but when put into practice, it does not hold much water.

A 2009 study conducted by Galena Rhoades, Scott Stanley, and Howard Markman gives a quantitative list of reasons for cohabitation. They offered cohabitating couples twenty nine choices as to why they were cohabitating. They split the twenty nine choices into three subsets, the testing subset, the convenience subset, and the time together subset. High levels of agreement were shown in the time together subset, showing that most couples cohabit to

spend more time together. Moderate agreement was shown with the choices in the testing subset. This shows that many couples see cohabitation as a way to test their compatibility for marriage, but it is not the most prominent reason. The convenience factor (which includes financial and housing issues), contrary to popular belief is the lowest of the three reasons. Many people cite the poor economy as a reason for cohabitation, but in quantitative research, convenience is the least of most couples concerns when it comes to the decision to cohabitate.

The religious reasons that prohibit cohabitation are not as clear as some in the religious community would have the population believe. Although the Lutheran Church takes a very clear stance against couples living together before marriage, their 1992 document stating their reasoning contains only biblical implications, not actually clear biblical condemnation of the practice. The closest that the bible comes to condemning the practice of cohabitation is in the gospel of John, where Jesus rebukes a woman for living with a man who is not her husband. Although this may sound very clear, the purpose of Jesus mentioning her living situation seems to be to highlight her promiscuity (she has had five husbands), not to draw attention to the actual issue of cohabitation. (John 4:17, New International Version) One biblical defense against cohabitation comes in the book of Ephesians, where the author tells the congregation in Ephesus "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit"(Ephesians 1:27) While this is a strong defense for moral living, the strongest biblical defense against the practice of cohabitation likely comes in 1 Timothy where the author (Paul) says that the overseers (Pastors) must live "above reproach"(1 Timothy 3:2). This means that they should live not only always doing what is right in the sight of God, but not

allowing others to think that they have done anything wrong. Cohabitation would violate the policy of “living above reproach” because most people will assume that sexual relations take place in a cohabitating relationship. The biblical position against cohabitation does exist, but it is not direct and takes some looking to find.

The greatest non biblical argument against cohabitation comes from the statistics associating cohabitation with divorce and unhappy marriages. Research has always seemed to support a detrimental effect of cohabitation on marriage. Scott Stanley, Ph.D., a research professor and co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver says “There is a lot of evidence over many decades by many researchers that living together prior to marriage is associated with greater risks for divorce or lower quality marriages.” Stanley says that any statement refuting the detrimental effects of cohabitation on marriage (such as shown in recent New York Times and USA articles) must result from a misinterpretation of the data.

The first and most important piece of research against cohabitation is that cohabitation increases the chance of divorce. A 1992 study by Alfred DeMaris and K. Vaninadha Rao (although the study is nearly twenty years old, it is still valid because it is based on twenty two years’ worth of cohabitation statistics) estimated that the rate of marriage dissolution was forty six percent greater between cohabiters than non-cohabiters. Linda Waite of the University of Chicago says that the reason why cohabitation ends in more divorce is obvious. “cohabitation's biggest attraction is the relatively easy exit with few responsibilities,” says Waite. It seems obvious to Waite and other researchers that a relationship based on convenience and non-commitment would have such a high rate of failure. Popenoe and

Whitehead's research has determined that in the first five years of marriage, 14.5 percent of marriages end among non-cohabiters, whereas cohabiting relationships end 22.6 percent of the time (1997). A 2009 Study published in the Journal of Family Psychology was conducted over the phone and contacted 1,050 men and women married in the past ten years. Nineteen percent of those surveyed who cohabitated before engagement reported that they or their spouse had suggested divorce. Only ten percent of those who did not cohabit until marriage had suggested divorce. Researcher Galena Rhoades even goes as far to say that "Cohabiting to test a relationship turns out to be associated with the most problems in relationships. Perhaps if a person is feeling a need to test the relationship, he or she already knows some important information about how a relationship may go over time."

The other important research finding combating cohabitation is the impact of cohabitation on marital satisfaction. A 2003 study by Claire Dush, Catherine Cohan, and Paul Amato shows that happiness is reported less frequently in marriages that came out of cohabitation. Marriage problems also seem to arise more frequently in marriages that begin in cohabitation. Catherine Kenny and Sara McLanahan stated in their 2001 study that cohabitations when compared to marriages were more likely to be violent. In marriages, twelve percent of couples reported arguments that led to violence. In cohabitating relationships, twenty nine percent reported violent arguments. Although there are other variables than cohabitation leading to this statistic, it is still worth noting that on average, the married couple makes 8,000 dollars more than the cohabitating couple. Cohabitation issues are not unique to the United States. The Office of National Statistics in the United Kingdom made a report that marriages were more stable than living together. This may seem obvious, but many couples feel

as if the reduced commitment in cohabitation will result in less pressure which will result in more stability. Cohabitation shows flaws across the board from marriage problems to decreased happiness to higher divorce rates to decreased stability.

As stated at the beginning of the paper, the cohabitation rate is a major issue that faces professionals in the church. As a pastor, youth pastor, or family life educator, it is a job of the church professional to improve the quality of families and marriages in the congregation. This begs the question: "What is the church doing about the problem of cohabitation?" The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod produced a pamphlet in 1992 to address the subject. The entire first page of the document deals with the biblical view on the subject. Evidence from the scientific realm is used only on the second page of the document. As discussed earlier, the biblical evidence against cohabitation is mostly based on implications. The scientific evidence against cohabitation however is very conclusive. One could look at the biblical evidence and be unsure of the almighty's perspective on living together before marriage. It is nearly impossible, however for a reasonable person to view the scientific data without understanding the negative effects of cohabitation. The best way for the church to present cohabitation is using a dual biblical-scientific view.

Cohabitation is a significant problem in many countries. The church's efforts to this point have not been successful in changing the trend of cohabitation. It is important for church professionals to be aware of the statistics on cohabitation, the reasons that couples cohabit, and the negative effects of cohabitation. It is also important that church professionals shift their presentation of the issue from a strictly biblical argument to a partnership between the biblical

and scientific arguments. This will be a more effective approach to change the current trend of cohabitation.

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