THE BAPTISM OF POLYGAMOUS FAMILIES:
THEORY AND PRACTICE
IN AN EAST AFRICAN CHURCH

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This paper is based on a survey carried out at the request of the
Theological and Liturgical Panel of the Church of the Province of
East Africa. The dioceses are represented by numbers. In the tables
the dioceses have been grouped according to both country and founding
mission.

The survey was in response to some Kenyan bishops' plea for
guidance in a particularly difficult pastoral problem. In the years
following independence in Kenya (1963) evangelistic effort has pro-
duced larger numbers of converts than during the years preceding
Uhuru. This did not cause any surprise, but the very high proportion
of elderly men coming forward for baptism did. Practically all of this
age group belong to the old traditional Kenya and consequently are
polygynist. Accordingly they are disqualified from baptism under
existing Canon Law. Some Kenyan bishops felt that to refuse them
baptism or to make them monogamist or to cause them to wait until
they were incapable of sexual intercourse imposed a burden contrary
to the gospel. The fact that polygyny is becoming quite rare among
the educated younger generations persuaded these bishops that the old
fears that baptism of polygynists would undermine the Church's mono-
gynist ideal could be safely ignored.

The survey covered two groups of church officials. The first was
the bishops of the Province. A questionnaire was sent to each of them
and 100% cooperation obtained. Many of the bishops not only answered
the multiple choice questions but also volunteered valuable information
regarding their own attitudes towards this vexed problem. Their ans-
swers are summarized in Table 1. The notes accompanying this table
are in the main direct quotations from the bishops' replies, subsequent
remarks or synodal decisions.

The second group was those parish priests who attended Trinity
College, Nairobi, during the years 1967 to 1969 inclusive. Their answers
are recorded in Table 2. Since I did not personally conduct the inter-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mission Tradition</th>
<th>Anglican/Protestant/Conservative</th>
<th>Anglican/Catholic/Conservative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Founding Mission</td>
<td>C.M.S.* (U.K.)</td>
<td>C.M.S. (Aust./N.Z.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Tanzania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diocese</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>6  7  8  9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Are polygynists baptized?</td>
<td>No (a) No (b) No (c)</td>
<td>No (d) No (e) No (f)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conditions for baptism? (j)</td>
<td>&quot;If left with one wife&quot;</td>
<td>i. If polygynous before evangelization</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Old age</td>
<td>ii. Old age before evangelization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Not necessary&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;If he puts away additional wives&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;When (k) he is reckoned monogamous&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Are wives baptized?</td>
<td>Yes (l) Yes (m) Yes (n)</td>
<td>Yes (o) Yes (p)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes all wives only</td>
<td>Yes all all all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Are the children of baptized wives baptized?</td>
<td>Yes (s) Yes (t) Yes (u) Yes (v)</td>
<td>Yes (w) No (x)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Church Missionary Society. This society now comprises independent self governing bodies in England, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.