MARRIAGE AND FAMILY
IN
AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

edited by

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INTRODUCTION
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Many Christian Families in Africa are in crisis. The crisis is about how to face change. Christian missionary activities, colonialism, westernization, urbanization, and other contemporary factors have destabilized African families and communities almost to destruction. The question is, will African families succumb to modernity or will they re-emerge with alternative stronger family structures? Every crisis is a challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge because the old models are no longer feasible in the changing social environment. The pangs of this re-birth generate great anxiety. It is an opportunity because something more beautiful may eventually emerge. Our own creative reflections, discussions and assessments are vital contributions towards the reconstruction of African families. The Tanzanian Theological Colloquium (TTC) focused on this crisis during the Third session in Lyamungo, Moshi, in June 2002. TTC is an ecumenical circle of theologians. Most of them are in academic work, and the rest are pastors.

The book deals with the theme of Christian marriage from both the doctrinal and the pastoral perspectives. It is both deductive and inductive in approach. Biblical exegesis is invoked at the same time that local experiences are cited for illustration and elaboration. The book takes both analysis and synthesis seriously. It is Pastoral in scope, and at the same time, biblical in emphasis. The contributors belong to a wide spectrum of Christian denominations. However, the views they express are based on their respective research, not necessarily echoing the official policy of their respective churches.

Laurenti Magesa. Citing a previous study done by him and his colleague among the Bakwaya of Musoma, Tanzania, he argues that institutional changes introduced through Christian missionary activities among the people have contributed greatly to the present crisis in marriage and family in that area. So he

raises a question: in these times of change in marriage and family forms, how is the Church to view and treat such new forms, particularly in its sacramental theology and pastoral practice? He suggests that it is imperative and urgent for the Church to revisit its theological and pastoral thinking with regard to the validity of marriage. This review, he anticipates, may lead to the revision of the relevant Canons of the Church.

Auli Vähäkangas' chapter explores the crisis of Christian marriage. In her well-documented research, she looks at a series of problems that accompany this crisis: polygamy, single parents, HIV/AIDS, separated couples. She also makes some constructive suggestions to deal with the problems she has identified. Alluding to the Congolese Professor Katanga wa Kasonga, she suggests the African Christian *Palaver* as a workable solution in healing the wounds of marriage. Her contribution illustrates a sociological approach to research in African Christian Theology. Evaristi Magoti continues the sociological discussion on Christian families taking into consideration the recent developments in the contemporary world towards globalization. He articulates a critical appraisal of the globalization process in its various dimensions. His main focus is to show how the various aspects of globalization drastically affect Christian families in Africa. He outlines the impact of globalization on the African family. He also proposes a response of faith to this impact. We need to "reclaim our history", he suggests, because "to reclaim our history is to reclaim our identity."

Michael R. Guy's contribution is entitled, "An Approach to a Christian Theology of Marriage through a Consideration of Culture". He suggests that "Marriage has to be seen in the light of the culture of which it is a part". He makes a comparison between traditional African culture, centred on the community, and the contemporary English culture which stresses the importance of the individual. In Africa marriage has been the framework within which the community raised children. In England marriage and cohabitation are seen primarily in terms of a relationship between two individual spouses. In this context he proposes a theology of marriage and sexual relationships which addresses two of society's greatest needs: the need of the community to provide a secure environment in which children can be raised; and the need of an individual for a meaningful sexual relationship with another person. His major argument is that the biblical attitude to marriage is culturally defined, differing between the Old Testament, the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of Paul. "In building a new doctrine of marriage relevant to our own culture we must be free to draw upon all three theologies, and be prepared to accept different approaches for different cultures."

Ronilick E. K. Mchami contributes another element to the theological reflection on Christian families in Africa – the biblical dimension. He focuses on a specific aspect of the crisis – divorce. He explores the concept of 'divorce' and its practice in the New Testament (NT) communities. Using an inductive approach he describes the traditional African notion of 'divorce', or the absence of it, among the Sangu community, and the procedures for divorce in the Tanzanian Marriage Act. Having drawn parallels between the NT and the Tanzanian Marriage Act, he outlines relevant lessons that African Christianity can learn in order to strengthen the marriage bond.

The contribution by Mika Vähäkangas is a Lutheran appraisal of the understanding of 'family' according to the Synod of Catholic Bishops for Africa, 1994. He critically examines the reference to 'African family' in the *Lineamenta* (preparatory document), the *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document) and the post – synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*. Vähäkangas contends that the notion of 'African Christian families' according to the Synod is caught between the horns of a dilemma— between *the ideal* and *the real*. While the Synod proposed a new ecclesiology of 'Church as a Family', it could not assess the realistic situation of African families. Consequently, it failed to propose workable solutions to the existing crisis.

Faith Lugazia discusses the effects of "Church Discipline" on Christian families. Here 'Church Discipline' refers to the measures taken by a church to ensure that its members follow the established norms of conduct, particularly in marriage customs. She observes that punishment is the main tool used by

churches to enforce compliance. She laments that such enforcement tends to be partial and often inconsistent, especially when applied with regard to offenses about sexual relations and conduct. She supports her arguments with insights from Martin Luther, regarding the theological weakness of Church Discipline, which exaggerates the human effort and downplays the role of grace in salvation. George Fihavango's contribution is a brief but an insightful contribution on leadership and family in the New Testament. He outlines the models of leadership presented in the NT, and then draws lessons on how leadership should be practiced within the Christian family. He also sees the Christian family as the training base for the formation of leaders.

Andrew Kyomo focuses on pastoral care and counseling to families. He brings together Psychology and Theology. He also contrasts African traditional concepts and practices on the one hand, and the contemporary ones, on the other. He enlists skills that are necessary for dealing meaningfully and constructively with the challenges that the African families face today. He echoes the old adage that "prevention is better than cure." Sahaya G. Selvam outlines ten maxims which, in his view, need to be stressed in molding young people towards building good Christian families in Africa. Formation of the youth is a necessity if we want to face the social crisis afflicting African families today.

Jesse Mugambi discusses marriage as a rite of passage, together with the others—birth, puberty and death. He suggests that the undermining of these rites in tropical Africa through colonial and missionary indoctrination has eroded African self-confidence, and identity. In the endeavour to resist cultural invasion Africans have from time to time re-asserted their sovereignty through the affirmation of their rites of passage which missionary Christianity and colonial schooling condemned. African Christianity will mature only when constructively it comes to terms with African rites of passage.

We hope every reader will enjoy reading this book. One insight clearly emerges: if we care for the Church – the Body of Christ – our attention at this moment in our history, should be focused on the Family – the vital cell of that Body.

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RECONSTRUCTING THE AFRICAN FAMILY
Laurenti Magesa

1. Introduction

"Define your terms!" When I was studying philosophy in the late 1960s, this phrase was often heard shouted during discussions among students in our seminary. We all knew why we used it to one another so much. Many among us used it to show-off what they thought was their philosophical sophistication (which, alas, did not then amount to much!). Others, moreover, employed the phrase as a clever put-down of the opponent, to make him lose his train of thought. Often, as well, it was used as a delaying tactic, to make one catch one's intellectual breath when one sensed that one was losing an argument.

There was, however, another, more serious use of the expression, one that our professors were endeavoring to impress upon us in the classroom. Essentially they were telling us that, in a discussion, meaning, understanding and truth might be gained or lost depending on the clarity of the terms employed. The philosophers of antiquity, Socrates in particular, had had an insight into this fact and used it in his dialogues. It is an insight that not only philosophers (who strive after meaning or love of knowledge/wisdom) but also theologians (who seek after the Ultimate Truth) cannot afford to ignore. I think that this is particularly important in the rapidly changing world of the century we have just begun. And here I am thinking particularly of many aspects of life in Africa.

2. The Inter-generational Conceptual Gap

Among the things that are changing rapidly in our contemporary world and in the African continent are social structures and relations. Of course, there is not one precise point in time at