

SOUTH RIDGE COMMUNITY CHURCH

Statement of Position Related to Cohabitation

Cohabitation¹ is a prominent practice among many people in modern America. Linda Waite, a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, has noted that there are at least four million couples living together outside of marriage and that almost two thirds of young adult men and women choose to cohabit first rather than marry directly.² This emerging lifestyle is rapidly increasing in prevalence and creating a cognitive divide between many young couples who see cohabitation as a viable option and other older couples who have more traditional views of marriage. South Ridge desires to interact with this rising phenomenon and present in this paper some of our key positions regarding cohabitation. It is our hope that this will guide future interaction with couples who are in serious relationships in which cohabitation is either being considered or practiced.

There are numerous reasons that couples today consider cohabitation to be a good idea or even a necessary step before marriage. One of the foremost among these is the expectation that living together is the only realistic way to prepare for marriage. Proponents argue that one simply cannot know a partner well enough without first cohabiting. In such a situation one can see all of a partner's flaws and bad habits and decide whether or not marriage remains appealing. Financial factors can also influence a couple to cohabit. Moving in together reduces numerous expenses such as housing, groceries, and other essentials. Another reason that many couples cohabit is because they are sexually active and living together allows for a more accessible sexual partnership. They reason that it simply makes no sense to keep going to one another's place when they could just as easily live together.

In spite of the seemingly reasonable nature of these incentives to live together, there are substantial problems and dangers inherent in cohabitation. First of all, even though couples often treat their cohabitation as a "trial marriage" or a way to test their relationship to see if it will work, cohabitation does not prove to be a helpful preparation for marriage. This is first due to the fact that the binding commitment of marriage is absent from cohabitation. Thus, when the relationship grows difficult and things get hard neither partner has an obligation to work things out. There is no legal, binding commitment at hand to push partners to grapple with relational challenges. Cohabiting partners can get used to "trying it" and develop an inhibition to establishing committed relationships. Cohabitation is an entirely different type of relationship than marriage because of its lack of complete commitment and thus fails to prepare a couple for being married.

Such lack of absolute commitment actually forms the very foundation of cohabitation and makes it a remarkably poor preparation for marriage. One important point is brought up by Al Mohler:

Cohabitation weakens marriage—even a cohabiting couple's eventual marriage—because a temporary and transitory commitment always weakens a permanent commitment. Having lived together with the possibility of parting, that possibility always remains, and never leaves.³

¹ For those who are not familiar with the term, cohabitation is the practice of a couple living together without the commitment of marriage.

² Linda Waite, "The Negative Effects of Cohabitation," *The Responsive Community* Volume 10 (Winter 1999/2000):1.

³ Al Mohler, "Permanence Before Experience—The Wisdom of Marriage." Accessed July 27th, 2011. <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/03/02/permanence-before-experience-the-wisdom-of-marriage/>

It is a battle for couples who have cohabited to alter their perspective on their relationship once they get married. Absolute commitment was lacking during the stage of cohabiting and few external details have been changed by marriage so it is remarkably difficult for partners to view the relationship differently. This means that the level of commitment within marriage may often look minimally different from the commitment in cohabitation, which can lead to immense marital difficulties and even divorce later on.

Second, there is a high probability that cohabitation can actually get in the way of a couple being married. In the National Study of Youth and Religion⁴ evidence indicated that “The basic orientation of the majority of emerging adults⁵ lives is to make the most of current opportunities for developing future opportunities as fully as possible. Emerging adults are generally loath to close doors or burn bridges. Instead, they want to keep as many options open as possible.”⁶ This propensity to keep options open creates a barrier to the commitment of marriage. Once one gets married, the door has been closed. Relational and sexual intimacy is thus limited to one person through marriage: an option which is often less than appealing to young adults today. Christian Smith also notes, “While most emerging adults do want to hold off [commitment], they-- again, especially women, it seems-- also yearn for the kind of intimacy, loyalty, and security that only highly committed relationships can deliver.”⁷ Thus, the option of cohabitation is often the only alternative to marriage for the close relationship without commitment that many young people are seeking.

Another barrier to marriage for cohabiting couples exists in the different ways that men and women view the relationship. Many women who choose to cohabit view the decision as a step toward marriage. They consider cohabitation to be a merely temporary transition which will soon result in a proposal and marriage arrangement. Numerous men, on the other hand, are quite content with the situation of freely living together and see no real need to move on to marriage. This is because the cohabiting setup serves as a venue for sexual intimacy without binding commitment. Thus, men are left free to have secondary sexual partners in addition to their cohabiting partner. Once a man and woman begin cohabiting, the woman has little more to offer the man in order to entice him to marry her. As a result, in many cohabiting situations the woman desires marriage, but has no way to draw the man, who is content with the relationship status, to commit more seriously.

The sexual freedom that is permitted in cohabitation often serves as a factor in undermining the relationship’s success. Cohabiting partners do not hold exclusive sexual rights to one another, thus one or both of the partners may be sexually engaged elsewhere. Such sexual involvement outside the relationship seriously undermines trust. This weakens the relationship both before and after marriage because exclusive commitment is not expected, evidenced, and encouraged. Additional sexual partnerships can also cultivate immense disrespect between partners. If a man is cohabiting with one woman, but still having sex with others, she can very easily develop immense disdain for the man. Cohabitation is often chosen because it allows for these extra sexual relationships, but such choices are often made without the knowledge of the way this behavior breaks down respect between partners. Thus, cohabitation often takes the form of settling for one person while keeping one’s eyes open for any better prospects that may come along. Such an attitude simply cannot cultivate mutual love, respect, care, and compassion. It is instead a selfish pursuit of one’s own needs without any ultimate and lasting regard for a partner.

⁴ The National Study of Youth and Religion is a longitudinal study which began following a large sampling of teenagers in 2001 in order to study and analyze the religious lives of that particular generation.

⁵ Emerging adulthood is a category defined by Christian Smith as a stage of “intense identity exploration, instability, a focus on self, feeling in limbo or in transition or in between, and a sense of possibilities, opportunities, and unparalleled hope” that encompasses 18- to 29-year-olds (*Souls in Transition*, 6).

⁶ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press), 79-80.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

It appears then, that cohabitation fails to prepare or provide for long-term commitment in a meaningful and caring relationship. We believe that the only appropriate context for the things cohabitation grasps at is marriage. It may seem insane to argue that a couple should not cohabit before marriage, but we think this is the wisest decision. Marriage is a covenantal commitment which requires dedication and perseverance. **This commitment helps couples work through the difficulties which are sure to come and persevere together in spite of hard times.** Such protection is absent from cohabitation and often results in difficult breakups. Christian Smith says of this, “Their accounts [of breaking up] suggested the experience of getting a hard divorce without ever even having gotten married.”⁸

Marriage is a far more successful relationship because it is rooted in self-sacrifice and true love. The marriage relationship is described in Ephesians 5:25-33 as follows:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church-- for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

The sacrifice which Christ made for the church is to be the model of the sacrifice which husbands and wives make for the good of one another. The vow to love and care for one another in such a way is only taken by married couples, thus only they have an obligation to serve one another. Cohabitation, on the other hand, requires very little in terms of actual commitment. It is often a self-centered arrangement which seeks immediate satisfaction without considering what is best for one's partner. The attitude which produces this is presented by Christian Smith who summarizes the attitudes of emerging adults toward giving to others as follows:

Nobody has any natural or general responsibility or obligation to help other people... Any notion of the responsibilities of a common humanity, a transcendent call to protect the life and dignity of one's neighbor, or a moral responsibility to seek the common good was almost entirely absent among the respondents. In the end, each individual does what he or she wants and nobody has any moral leverage to persuade or compel him to do otherwise.⁹

Such failure to see the need to give to others creates an entirely self-centered attitude which can be grasping and impatient. Marriage, on the other hand, requires patience, commitment, and giving of oneself. These qualities equip couples to sustain a long-term, loving relationship.

A second argument for cohabitation is that it is a financially wise step which allows a couple greater economic gains. Such reasoning is especially understandable here in Hunterdon County because it can be a rather expensive place to live. Nevertheless, there are some financial problems with cohabitation. It is certainly true that two can live together for less than they could separately, but cohabiting introduces financial risks that are not present in marriage. For example, if a cohabiting couple contributes together to live in an apartment or house and then they break up, the law is not present to divide the resources fifty-fifty. Cohabiting partners do not have any of the financial security that marriage would provide in such situations. Also, cohabiting couples often keep their resources to themselves whereas married couples pool their resources. If partners are married

⁸ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 62.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

they often are able to invest better because they make financial decisions together and put together all their resources. Married couples are also more productive because they more often divide labor and are able to cooperate to build a home. Cohabitors, on the other hand, typically are not as productive because they keep tasks, finances, and other matters separate. **It is also worth noting that while something may be financially helpful, it is not necessarily a wise or morally upright decision. For instance, cheating on income taxes would put more money into the wallets of many people. Nevertheless, such action is not wise, healthy, or right. We believe that the decision to cohabit, while in some instances a financially helpful move, is ultimately an immoral decision.**

A third reason that many couples cohabit is simply because of the convenience of sex, but we believe that there are significant problems with this motive. Studies show that cohabiting couples have about one extra sex act per month than married couples.¹⁰ However, cohabiters are also generally less faithful to their partners than married couples. The National Survey of Women found that four percent of married women had a secondary sex partner compared to twenty percent of cohabiting women.¹¹ While infidelity is not the situation in every cohabiting setup, there also exists the risk of having children. Children brought up in cohabiting homes are often at risk of economic hardship, separated parents, and other prominent issues. Unfortunately, contrary to expectations, having children does not always incline cohabiters to marry each other. Thus, cohabitation can leave great emotional scars on children and parents alike.

A major concern which we have with the sexual lifestyle of cohabiting couples is the fact that Scripture indicates that sex outside the covenant of marriage is sinful and thus damaging. One especially concise verse is Hebrews 13:4 which states, “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”¹² While there are *many* passages in the Bible about sexual immorality, this one points out very particularly that the marriage bed is the only place where sexual intimacy is appropriate. It is radically counter-cultural to conclude that sex outside marriage is wrong, but we believe that the Bible’s testimony is true and that there is deep wisdom in its commands. Sex is designed as the covenant sign of the marriage commitment and ought not to be experienced outside those boundaries. It is meant to be an opportunity for close and committed intimacy which can only be securely experienced in the marriage bond. Sex outside of marriage is fraught with immense risks which can all be avoided through faithful commitment in marriage.

In addition to being immoral, the sexual relationship of most cohabiters also removes from them the opportunity to cultivate delayed gratification, an important quality in marriage. Relationships can grow very difficult and in order to make them work, one often has to set his or her immediate satisfaction aside in order to resolve relational difficulties. If two partners are used to immediately grabbing at whatever they want, their relationship together can be undermined because they are not prepared to put off their individual desires. Delayed gratification is crucial to a successful long-term relationship, but cohabitation does nothing to develop this quality in couples.

As a result of these things, cohabitation stands as an insufficient alternative to marriage. It is a performance based relationship that is fraught with risks. Marriage, on the other hand, is a costly relationship, but one that is rooted in unconditional love and service. We believe that cohabitation is incapable of properly fulfilling one’s need for deep and lasting love. Such benefits can only be sufficiently found in marriage. While we recognize that there are many broken marriages in the world, we think that as an institution it is far more sufficient, wise, and pleasing to God than cohabitation.

¹⁰ Waite, “The Negative Effects of Cohabitation,” 2.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² It is not entirely clear what the judgment of God refers to in this verse addressed to believers, but what is clear is the fact that the writer to the Hebrews condemns sexual relations outside marriage.

The actions of South Ridge in situations where cohabitation is either being considered or practiced will be diverse because we recognize that every one of these situations is unique. Nevertheless, we here aim to establish some general guidelines for these arrangements. First of all, we do not approve of cohabitation as a viable option for couples. As a result, if a couple is seeking marriage in our church we will generally counsel that they separate for a time if they are already cohabiting. However, in some situations, such as a couple with a child, it may be unwise to separate them and we will not do so. Also, if a member of the church is considering or practicing cohabitation we will counsel against it and may have to invoke church discipline in some situations.

Equal Yoking

Another issue pertaining to marriage which we would like address here is the spiritual status of partners. Paul states in 1 Corinthians 7 that if a widow is to remarry, her husband must be “in the Lord” (1 Cor 7:39). He also states in 2 Corinthians 6:14, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” In both of these passages, Paul is establishing the fact that a believer in Christ ought not to marry someone without that same faith. Thus, we at South Ridge will not marry any believers who are seeking marriage with an unbeliever. We also believe that the principle of equal yoking applies to the spiritual maturity of partners seeking marriage. If a spiritually mature man were seeking marriage with a woman who is a rather uncommitted Christian, we would discourage the marriage and may, in some instances, not perform it. The issue of equal yoking is complex and the situations are diverse, thus we cannot cover all of them. Where these instances arise, those with oversight in the church will give guidance and direction, getting to know those involved and determining the appropriate course of action.