

Indirect rule? Marriage, polygamy, and the endurance of British Methodist Theology in a post-colonial world

Daniel Pratt Morris-Chapman
Stellenbosch University, South Africa
danielmorrishchapman@yahoo.co.uk
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8954-5186>

Abstract

During the post-War period, British Methodist commentators have sought to portray their denomination in a favourable light by highlighting the manner in which this Church supported movements toward ecclesial autonomy in their former British colonies. This narrative, which at times attempts to contrast British Methodism with the United Methodist Church, holds that the “Methodist Church in Britain is not identical in ethos” to Methodism in “the United States,” which has struggled to retain a global presence (Beck 2002:106). However, while this may be so, it is evident that British Methodism has also continued to exert considerable influence in its former overseas districts which, after obtaining independence, have generally continued to retain the doctrinal standards that they inherited from the founding denomination. Taking the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe as an example, this essay explores the way in which these continue to exert a negative influence on the lives of many Christian people today.

British Methodism and the colonial legacy

British Methodism (BM) is not an established church. Given this fact, it is curious, when we look back upon its course, that it has often mirrored the actions of the British state.¹ For example, during colonial era, when BM planted churches overseas, the majority of its missions were established in British colonies (Pritchard 2013). As a result, these missions often became

1 Indeed the manner in which BM churches were given autonomy resonates with Britain’s initial attempt to retain control of territories as overseas dominions (Valkoun 2021).

entangled with imperialism and, in the case of Zimbabwe, received large areas of ancestral land that had been appropriated deceptively by the white supremacist Cecil Rhodes (Zvobgo 1991:8; Manyoba 1991:58). A similar pattern may be detected in the post war period. When Britain finally recognized the independence of its colonies, BM also began to grant autonomy to its overseas mission districts.² However, while BM speciously prides itself on having accomplished a certain “decolonized” status (Reddie 2020:2), its influence upon these newly independent churches was retained through the preservation of BM’s doctrinal standards. Therefore, before proceeding further, it is helpful to refer to these standards and to clarify their formal role in relation to BM.

The “Deed of Union” the “Title Deed” of the BM Church - agreed upon by three branches of BM (Primitive, United and Wesleyan) which came together in 1932 to form one Church (Deed of Union 1932:303) – set out the “basis of the union, including the constitution and doctrinal standards of this united Church” (Howdle 2000: 92, 231). According to this document, BM doctrinal standards prescribe that Methodist doctrine should be continuous with:

- The “Body of Christ”
- The “Apostolic Faith”
- The “fundamental principles” of the “Historic Creeds”
- The “fundamental principles” of the “Protestant Reformation”
- An unfaltering commitment to “Scriptural Holiness”
- An unfaltering commitment to the “Evangelical Faith”
- “The doctrines of the evangelical faith based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures.”
- “The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation [Holy Scriptures] as the supreme rule of faith and practice.”

2 A common interpretation of this action is that, from the beginning, they conflated overseas mission with colonialism. However, it might also be argued that BM unconsciously conforms itself to the pattern of the British state; unable to differentiate its mission from that of the political climate in which it finds itself. It would be interesting to analyse the extent to which the minutes of the BM Conference echo political trends during the last century.

- “These evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church are pledged are contained in Wesley’s Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons” (Deed of Union 1932:303).

This, according to the Deed of Union (what Stacey refers to as Methodism’s “Foundation Documents”), is how official BM theological proposals should be examined: “all theology purporting to be Methodist has to be tested” against our doctrinal standards (Stacey 1984:107, 266; Shier Jones 2005:6; Wilson 2011:87). Thus, whether or not one deems these standards to be outmoded and archaic, whether or not they consider the nuance of Wesley’s theological orientation (Field 2017), they remain official standards of doctrine for BM. In this regard it is helpful to present an example of the way in which this works in practice.

In 1981, the BM Conference requested its Faith and Order Committee “to explain its judgement by reference to the Doctrinal Clauses of the Deed of Union,” as to whether or not BM should embrace the “Historic Episcopate” – whether or not such a move would “violate our doctrinal standards” (BM Conference 1982:181). In keeping with this requirement, the subsequent faith and order report examined the question of episcopacy in relation to the whole raft of doctrinal standards listed in the deed of union.³ For example:

No case can be made that episcopacy violates the Apostolic Faith or the historic creeds. The creeds were composed, and the Faith was preserved for centuries within a church that was episcopally ordered. Neither can it be argued that the repudiation of episcopacy was one of the fundamental principles of the Protest Reformation (BM Conference 1982:3).

3 In view of this, it is indeed curious that the BM Conference did not ask its Faith and Order committee to undertake the same task before revising its conception of Marriage? While it has been argued that this is not a theological question it is difficult to see how such an argument holds water (given the plethora of theological literature on this subject). Nevertheless, if this point be granted one might also make the same argument – that episcopacy is not so much a theological but an ecclesiological question. Either way it is quite incomprehensible that pastoral, practical and ecclesiological questions of this importance have not formally been discussed in relation to the official doctrinal standards of BM (GLUU 2019).

Here we see, in accordance with the Deed of Union, how this Faith and Order report examined whether or not the “fundamental principles” of the “historic creeds”, the “protestant reformation” and so on would prevent Methodists from embracing the Historic Episcopate. While the BM church ignored the committee’s conclusion, “that these standards would not be violated” if BM embraced episcopacy (BM Conference 1982:4), this report illustrates how (according to the Deed of Union) official BM theological proposals should be examined by the conference (Stacey 1984:266).

What is interesting for our present purposes is that the doctrinal standards cited above are found, in their entirety, in the constitution of the Methodist Church Nigeria (2006:8-10), Kenya (2015:4), Ghana (1964:7), Ireland (2018), Sri Lanka (2020), the Bahamas (2019), Zimbabwe (1997) and many others globally.⁴ Whether or not these newly independent churches were forced to retain them, the near global presence of BM doctrinal standards in the constitutions of BM founded churches raises serious questions about the kind of theological autonomy envisaged. However, while there is an important discussion to be had concerning this, and the ongoing role played by these criteria in Methodism globally (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2021), our focus here will be specifically upon how the doctrinal standards bequeathed by BM continue to influence the theology of church membership in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ).

Marriage and church membership in the BM overseas “District of Rhodesia”

The first Methodist Mission to Zimbabwe began in 1891 and, from its inception, it became entangled in Britain’s colonial malaise (Zvobgo 1991:6-8). For example, in line with the racist political system in which it found itself (Pape 1990), the church forbade the union of black and white people:

The synod desires to emphasise the importance of extending the Immorality Suppression Ordinance of 1903 to make intercourse between a white man and black woman equally an offence as it is

4 The American founded, United Methodist Churches have a different doctrinal standard and are not under discussion here.

already when committed between a white woman and a black man (Gondongwe 2011:194).

The above illustrates the way in which diabolical structures within the political domain infiltrated the church.⁵ Moreover, as was indicated earlier, many of the lands upon which the Church established its mission were “grants” from Cecil Rhodes’ British South Africa Company (Nkomo 1991:2). However, in addition to its political and economic captivity to the colonial state, the BM mission was possessed by a Eurocentrism which manifested itself in a variety of ways. This is illustrated particularly in the way in which the missionaries conflated Christian marriage and membership.

The BM missionaries were irredeemably ethnocentric. While they did make serious efforts to translate the bible into the vernacular languages, they viewed African culture negatively, believing that people had to be “culturally circumcised before becoming Christians” (Nkomo 1991:1). People wanting to join the church were placed on trial for at least two years until they satisfied the minister that they were ready for membership. However, to do this, they had not only to demonstrate an understanding of the faith but to ensure that their lives cohered with “the Christian view of marriage” (Zvobgo 1991:34-5). For example those who had been married for decades, according to what was pejoratively described as “heathen custom”, were forced to remarry inside the church if they wished to be considered for baptism (Gondongwe 2011:193). However, for women whose husbands had multiple wives, the situation was perilous.

The first wife of a polygamous man could remain married and become a member of the church. However, any subsequent wife who desired to become a member was required to give consent for the husband to “put her away” (Zvobgo 1991:35). For example:

When a polygamous husband turns to God and desires to join the church, he will be required to retain the first wife and to put away others, making due provision for them and their children if any ... he could [then] be received as a full member of the church (Gondongwe 2011:193).

5 The Immorality Suppression Ordinance punished interracial sex with several years in prison and even death (Pape 1990).

The above illustrates the brutal manner in which the BM mission treated women and children whose husbands had married more than one woman.

Marriage and church membership in the post-war period

While British colonies in Asia and North Africa obtained independence soon after the Second World War, white rule lingered for another four decades in “Rhodesia”. While it is true that, over time, the growing number of African ministers had a positive impact upon the contextualization of the mission, initiation continued to be confused with marriage in the BM Overseas “District of Rhodesia” – as the 1955 regulations illustrate:

No person may be a member of the Methodist Church who does not accept the Christian view of marriage. All persons converted to the Christian faith who desire to marry must take the Christian vows of marriage, except in the case of a first wife of a non-Christian who may be received on probation and for instruction and afterwards be baptised and received into full membership if her husband refuses or is not eligible to be married by Christian rites. All male members and Christian workers are required to enter Christian marriage before cohabitation – A male polygamist or the second or subsequent wife of a polygamist may on conversion be received as catechumen and become a member “on- trial” but may not be received as a full member as long as polygamous marriages continues (Gondongwe 2011:199-200).

Here it is apparent that while there were concessions for women whose husbands were not Christian, women ensnared in polygamous marriages could not become members unless their husbands abandoned them. Moreover, as time passed, the considerable growth of lay movements within the church compounded their awful situation.

The Ruwadzano/Manyano,⁶ is essentially a mothers’ union for adult women to pray and evangelize other women (Holness 1997:31). While it might be assumed that an organization of this kind brought empowerment for

6 These, respectively, are the names given by the Shona and Ndebele peoples for this movement.

women effected by polygamy, the church's theology of marriage prevented this from taking effect. This is because only full members of the church, or members on trial, can join. However, one's exclusion from the group is highlighted by the fact that only full members of the church are allowed to wear the complete uniform, which consists of a red blouse. This uniform has had a double effect in that while it confers a sense of pride on those who can wear it, women in polygamous marriages are unable to wear the blouse and thus experience a sense of humiliation. To be clear, though the first wife in a polygamous marriage is able to wear the red blouse all the other wives cannot (Gondongwe 2011:72-73). The male equivalent of this group is the Men's Christian Union (MCU). While many of the rules governing the Ruwadzano/Manyano apply to the MCU those who have more than one wife are not permitted to become members since they are unable to become members of the church. Those who want to join are thus classified as adherents. If their other wives die, or they abandon them, they can become full members (Gondongwe 2011:74). Essentially, entry into a uniformed organization is intrinsically bound up with the acquisition of a Marriage Certificate (Mujinga 2020:6).

The above illustrates the enduring influence of the BM mission's conflation of marriage and membership and its devastating impact upon families today. According to Mujinga:

Although the church became autonomous from the British Methodist in 1977 the missionary interpretation of marriage found its way into the Constitution and mainstream organisation of the autonomous Methodist Church (Mujinga 2020:6)

In sum, at autonomy, the BM rendition of the "Christian view of marriage" was embedded in the constitution of the MCZ. The following extract from the *Deed of Church Order* illustrates this well:

The names of those to be received into full membership of the Church must be approved by the Local Leaders Meeting (the local meeting). Proof of marriage where relevant should be obtained. Where no marriage certificate is available, each case should be considered by the Leaders Meeting. The meeting should verify that the marriage is life long, monogamous and has been stable for five years. (MCZ 1997:111)

Here we see how the constitution of the MCZ continue to reflect a British, Eurocentric, conception, which erroneously conflates membership with monogamous marriage. However, while the MCZ faithfully adheres to the constitution imposed upon it by the BM missionaries, the BM church ignores the doctrinal standards preventing Zimbabwean women in polygamous marriages from full membership in the church.

BM doctrinal standards and the “Christian View of Marriage” enforced in MCZ

As was indicated above, the constitution of the MCZ contains the same doctrinal criteria as BM (Deed of Union 1932:303). The very first page of the MCZ *Deed of Church Order* states that:

The doctrinal standards of The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe as stated in the Deed of Foundation are as follows: The Methodist Church cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ. It rejoices in the inheritance of the Apostolic Faith and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation. It ever remembers that in the Providence of God, Methodism was raised up to spread Scriptural Holiness by the Proclamation of the Evangelical Faith and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission. *The Methodist Church rejoices in the movement towards unity within the universal Church and seeks to play its part towards that end.* The Doctrines of the Evangelical Faith which Methodism has held from the beginning, and still holds, are based upon the divine Revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice. These Evangelical Doctrines to which the preachers *both Ministers and Laymen* of the Methodist Church are pledged are contained in Wesley’s Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons. The Notes on the New Testament and the 44 Sermons are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist Preachers, but to set up standards of preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the Gospel of Redemption and ensure

the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation (MCZ 1997:1).⁷

In view of the above, it is interesting at this juncture to probe how these doctrinal standards might relate to the “Christian view of Marriage” cemented into the constitution of the MCZ by the BM missionaries. In exploring the question, as to how far doctrinal standards imposed by the BM church impact the lives of ordinary Zimbabwean women and children, we will highlight the extent to which BM has blatantly ignored these criteria in its recent discussions concerning marriage and divorce (BM 2019). Before proceeding it is useful to highlight the sharp contrast between BM commentators, who stress the ambiguity in these doctrinal standards, and BM missionaries, who applied them dogmatically in Zimbabwe.

The “Apostolic Faith”

BM commentators often criticize the doctrinal standards for their ambiguity (Stacey 1984:266; Shier Jones 2005:7). This indeed is an apt question in relation to the phrase “Apostolic Faith” For example, a BM conference report received in 1959 on “The Christian view of Marriage” states that, from Apostolic times right “down to the present,” the “life-long union of one man with one woman” has “remained the norm and standard of marriage in the Christian Church” (Methodist Church of Great Britain, 1959:98). However, what precisely is meant by Apostolic is not delineated. If it relates to what have been called the Apostolic Fathers then, yes, they do affirm monogamy.⁸ If it relates to later writers, up until the schism between the East and the West in 1054, then it is also apparent that second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth century writers reinforce monogamy as the norm (Martyr 2003:201; Tertullian 1951:52; Irenaeus 2018:69; Methodius 1869:8; Basil of Caesarea 1962:25; Augustine 2015:320; Gregory the Great 2004:11.45; Maximus the Confessor 1985:194;

7 The slight changes between the BM Deed of Union and the MCZ Deed of Foundation are in italics.

8 For example in the Letter to Diognetus, written in the second century, it states: ‘Any Christian is free to share his table, but never his marriage-bed.’ (Staniforth 1982:129, 177).

John of Damascus 1989:97).⁹ Either way, whatever is to be understood by “Apostolic”, the general disapprobation found in Christian antiquity is reflected (dogmatically) in the following extract from the synod of the BM overseas “District of Rhodesia” (1943):

In some countries before Christian teaching was given a man might have many wives and in few countries a woman might have many husbands in accordance with the custom of the country. There is little doubt the custom of the polygamy grew up not because there were too many women or for any real necessity of life, but as a privilege of the powerful and rich at the expense of the weaker and the poor. We should remember that Africans of ancient times made laws and encouraged customs to safeguard women, to show the importance of virginity and of marriage. Christians everywhere believe that the right way is for a man to marry one wife, and a woman one husband and that a marriage should not be broken as long as they both live (Gondongwe 2011:57).

Here it is clear that the BM missionaries ensured (uncompromisingly) that polygamous men jettisoned their wives and children in order to become members of the Methodist Church.

There is something deeply troubling in the above: while the lives of ordinary Zimbabweans today are seriously impacted upon by theological standards inherited from BM, the majority of contemporary British Methodists dismiss these criteria altogether (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2021). Indeed, in 2019 the BM conference voted (overwhelmingly) to receive a report proposing: (1) a redefinition of Christian Marriage, (2) affirmation for certain forms of cohabitation and (3) the production of liturgical texts for divorce (BM 2019). The report in question, “God in Love Unites Us” (GLUU), does not even begin to relate these questions to BM doctrinal standards which exclude women and men from membership in the Methodist Church Zimbabwe. Indeed, GLUU does not even mention the

9 Indeed this is the norm throughout Christian history. To take just a handful of examples, Theophilus of Antioch: ‘monogamy is observed’ (1860:94). Origen writes: ‘the woman is married to the man’ (1981:123); Chrysostom: ‘one man must dwell with one woman continually, and never break off from her’ (1851: 841) Gregory of Nazianzen: ‘If there were two Christs, there may be two husbands or two wives; but if Christ is One, one Head of the Church, let there be also one flesh, and let a second be rejected’ (2012:8).

majority of these standards. Nevertheless, in a harrowing twist of irony (at least for Zimbabwean's), the report concedes that within the "Divine revelation recorded in Holy Scripture" there are many examples of polygamy (BM 2019).

The divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures

It is true that in the Old Testament there are many cases of polygamy. Indeed GLUU, after an extensive discussion of the scriptures, maintains that:

In the area of relationships and marriage, biblical texts originating from earlier times provide for polygamy in the form of a man being able to have many wives ... without that being seen as a contradiction of a man and a woman becoming "one flesh" (BM Conference 2019).

This is a fair assessment of the variety of instances of polygamy found in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, it is also apparent that Jesus teaching seems to affirm monogamy (Mt 19:5–6; Mark 10:6-18). Likewise, the letter to the Romans appears to discourage polygamy (7:2–3), as do the letters to Timothy (1 Tim 3:2) and Titus (1:6) – which state that Christian ministers may not have more than one wife. Nevertheless, while the evidence in the New Testament is weighted toward monogamy GLUU stresses that, Jesus (Mk 10:18–27) "never [explicitly] countermanded" polygamous levirate marriage when "a man marries his brother's widow in order to provide for her and preserve his brother's inheritance (BM Conference 2019). Whether or not this is the case, it is helpful at this juncture to expose the methodology that seems to be in operation in GLUU. While earlier BM reports, and BM missionaries in Rhodesia, considered the Bible to be very clear on these issues (BM 1990:117), GLUU repeatedly stresses that the Bible is inconclusive on these subjects (BM 2019:4). This contrasts sharply with the findings of earlier BM Conference reports – that shaped the theology of BM missionaries – which concluded that the scriptural evidence is unambiguous in its conception of marriage. Thus, while contemporary Zimbabwean polygamists are strictly condemned, GLUU considers that the New Testament could possibly condone polygamy (of a particular kind).

Tragically, while the BM conference readily takes the liberty of completely disregarding its own doctrinal rules in order to revise its conception of Christian Marriage, the BM Missionary society ensured that the “District of Rhodesia” applied its interpretation of the teaching of the New Testament rigorously:

It is quite obvious that the problem of marriage and its subsidiary difficulties have created as much difficulty in Rhodesia as elsewhere in Africa and we sympathize very much with those who have to deal with these problems at first hand. The thing to watch, as I know you are fully agreed, is that the ideals of Christian marriage be not lowered by permitting present alliances which the church really wishes to discourage (Gondongwe 2011:57)

As a result of this rigorous application of the scriptures, polygamy and even marriages between Christians and non-Christians were forbidden:

Most certainly the marriage of a Christian man to a non-Christian woman should be forbidden, and any Christian man entering into such marriage should be disciplined (Gondongwe 2011:57).

Furthermore, marriages not registered with the civil authority were deemed invalid – even if the persons had been faithfully married for decades (Mujinga 2020:5). The regulations were even more strict for pastors:

Every candidate for ministry must inform the synod whether he has had a previous wife, or wives and if so, whether she, or they, is/are deceased or divorced, if the latter, under what circumstances and whether with the knowledge of the church? (Gondongwe 2011:59)

The above indicates that, in accordance with the New Testament scriptural texts cited above pastors received the most scrutiny in this regard. In sum, while contemporary BM enjoy the freedom to cohabit, divorce and engage in different forms of marriage, Zimbabweans continue to abide by criteria still present on the BM website today (BM Website 2022).¹⁰

10 Available here: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/doctrine-of-the-methodist-church/>

The “fundamental principles” of the “Protestant Reformation”

While the hermeneutical approach contained in GLUU maintains that the Bible can be interpreted in a multiplicity of different ways - particularly with regard to the meaning of marriage - a fundamental principle of the Protestant Reformation was the perspicuity of Scripture; the Bible is sufficiently clear (Abraham 1998:147). A survey of the Reformer’s thoughts on marriage implies, yet again, that the BM church’s decision to redefine marriage is in violation of its own doctrinal standards. At the same time, the influence of the Reformers teaching on the question of polygamy is commensurate with the MCZ conception of marriage:

Where God compares polygamy with divorce, he says that polygamy is the worse and more detestable crime; for the husband impurely connects himself with another woman, and then, not only deals unfaithfully with his wife to who he is bound, but also forcibly detains her, thus his crime is doubled (Calvin 1849:560).

Hence, while acknowledging the fact that the Old Testament Patriarchs engaged in polygamy, Calvin strongly condemns polygamy and Luther states that “*Polygamy* is not allowable amongst Christians” (Michelet 1846:171). They deem this principle to be the norm. Nevertheless, while it is clear that the reformers affirmed monogamous marriage in principle their own pastoral practice conflicts sharply with the approach taken by MCZ. Indeed, if the MCZ were to give close attention to Luther’s writings they would find a pastoral sensitivity toward these issues – totally absent in the practices of the BM missionaries to Rhodesia.¹¹

Wesley’s notes on the New Testament

At this juncture, on the basis of the doctrinal standards, it is apparent that while the weight of the evidence seems to be in favour of monogamy,

¹¹ Though Luther was clearly on the side of monogamy, he considered that in exceptional ‘cases of absolute necessity’ it was possible for a person to be polygamous; in cases in which one member was seriously unwell with a prolonged illness. Luther also wrote: “I confess that I cannot forbid a person to marry several wives, for it does not contradict the Scripture. If a man wishes to marry more than one wife, he should be asked whether he is satisfied in his conscience that he may do so in accordance with the Word of God. In such a case the civil authority has nothing to do in the matter.” Letter to Chancellor Gregory Bruck, January 13, 1524 (Michelet 1846:171).

there are perhaps exceptional cases in which polygamy could perhaps be permitted. However, while GLUU maintains that polygamy was both accepted and rejected in the scriptures, the report makes no mention whatsoever of John Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament*. To be clear, the current doctrinal standards of the BM church stipulate that Wesley's Notes "are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology" upon the church, nevertheless, the Deed of Union indicates that they "set up standards of preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the gospel." In short, according specifically to these criteria, those in doubt about what the scriptures say about polygamy or the various forms of marriage approved by BM may consult Wesley's commentary in order to ensure that their interpretation of the bible remains loyal "to the fundamental truths of the gospel." While the writers of GLUU were uncertain about the bibles teaching upon marriage, it seems BM missionaries were commensurate with Wesley's understanding of Marriage. Commentating on Mark (10:11) Wesley states emphatically that "All polygamy is here totally condemned" (Wesley 2020). Moreover, Wesley believed that if something was at variance with "the whole tenor of Scripture" then it was clearly not supported in Scripture (Wesley 1872). From this, it seems safe to assume that BM missionaries believed polygamy would be completely ruled out by Wesley.

Conclusion

In light of the above it would seem, when examined specifically in relation to the doctrinal standards officially upheld by these churches, the case against polygamy is greater than that which would permit it. That being said, it is utterly scandalous that doctrinal standards, flouted by contemporary British Methodists, are imposed rigorously by the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. This outrageous hypocrisy detonates the formers pretensions to having acquired a "decolonial status." On the contrary, British Methodism's theological-colonial legacy is very much alive in Zimbabwe today, where

ordinary people are prevented from becoming members of the church because of the formers indirect theological-rule.¹²

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12 While I do not wish to condone the practice of polygamy, I have no right to impose my theological position upon the people of Zimbabwe. I personally believe Martin Luther's pastoral theological reflections are helpful in navigating this delicate and sensitive pastoral issue.

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