



The milestones that mark the journey between life and death once were affirmed by ceremonies in the church. Today, particularly in mainline Protestant denominations, only a few of the old liturgies remain, and congregations miss the chance to celebrate and commemorate life's passages together.

This collection, Sanborn and eleven contributors from several denominations offer resources for affirming a wide range of life's passages:

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- The transition from infancy to childhood
- Growing toward committed discipleship
- Coming of age
- Believer's baptism
- Christian marriage
- Affirmation of divorce
- Women entering midlife
- Men entering midlife
- The transition of later maturity
- Leaving a home
- Death and remembrance

Each chapter includes an essay that explores the theory and theology behind the rite and a sample service or materials for a service that pastors can use or adapt to specific situations.

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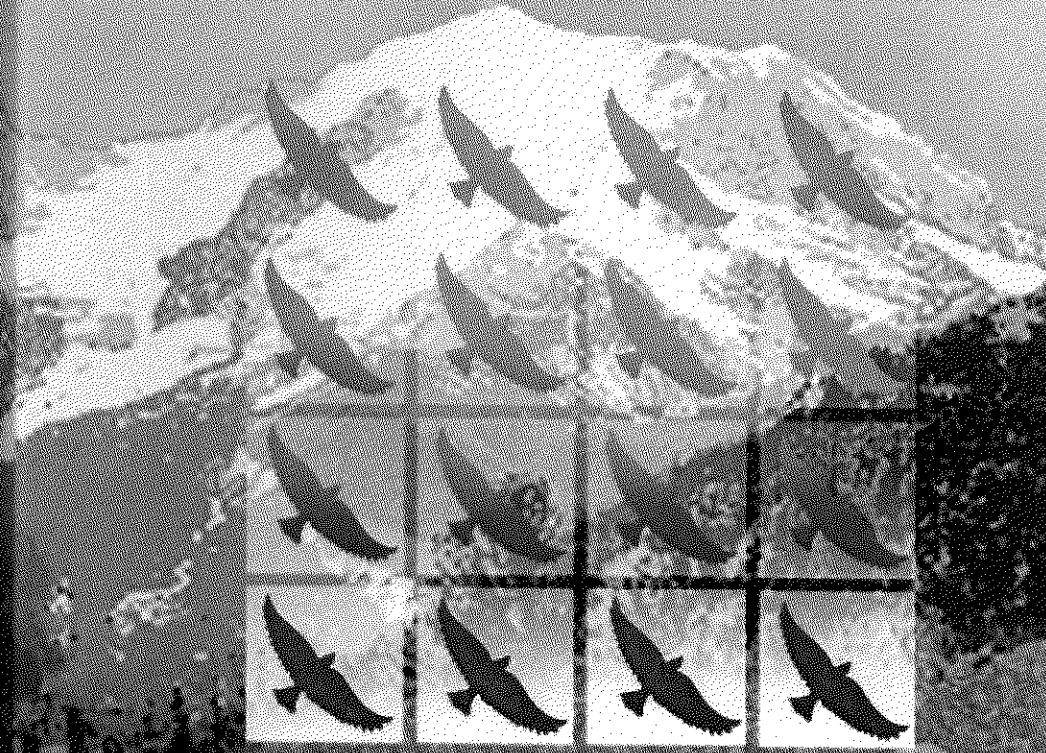


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CELEBRATING PASSAGES IN THE CHURCH

# CELEBRATING PASSAGES IN THE CHURCH



## Reflections and Resources

Edited by  
Hugh W. Sanborn

# 6 Marriage

Paul F. Feiler

## APPROACHING AN AUTHENTICALLY CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

### Introduction

In Thornton Wilder's play *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Mrs. Antrobus says to her husband, "I didn't marry you because you were perfect; I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults and the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married, and it was the promise that made the marriage."<sup>1</sup>

An authentically Christian marriage is not a perfect marriage. From a Christian perspective, authenticity involves commitment, honesty and forgiveness between an imperfect man and imperfect woman, between two people who sometimes make mistakes, who sometimes get angry, feel distant and fall out of love. For this reason, Christian marriage is grounded in the idea of resurrection—resurrection not in the sense of resuscitation, not in the sense that we go back to an earlier time when things were more attentive and passionate, but resurrection in the sense of transformation, in the sense that time holds the possibility that our relationships, even when wounded and dying, can be transformed, re-created into something new and better.

To believe in God's power to resurrect, and to live under the authority or lordship of that power, requires a willingness to live with and work through the tension of unresolved conflict, the state of things before they are transformed, the time, according to the Passion story, between Good Friday and Easter morning. This willingness to suffer ambiguity is at the root of what Mrs. Antrobus in Wilder's play refers to as the promise. In marriage a man and a woman vow to live with one another through the exigencies of life, for better or worse, in poverty or wealth, in sickness and health. The promise makes Christian marriage a broad context in which a Christian man and woman choose to work through whatever they may encounter in life, grateful to God for life's blessing, and affirming always the hope for transformation when life gets hard.

What is God's intention for marriage? As imperfect people of faith, how can we approach and deepen intimacy in marriage? Where do we stand with God when our marriage falls short of God's intention? These questions form the three movements of this section.

### A Christian View of Marriage

The creation stories in Genesis suggest that the existence God intends for us is an existence in relationship, a relationship expressed for men and women in marriage. Genesis 1:26–27 affirms that men and women *together* are the image of God. Inherent in this affirmation is the understanding that just as God in God-self exists in relationship ("Let us create..."), so those whom God creates in God's image (men and women) share a capacity for a similar existence in relationship. When God creates a man and a woman and blesses them to procreate, the ultimate paradigm for human relationships becomes marriage (Genesis 1:28). According to the Genesis story, at least one aspect of "being in the image of God" means that the dynamic relationship of a human marriage expresses God's own existence in relationship, that we are what God intends for us to be, like God, when we are living in an intimate marital partnership.

The creation story in Genesis 2 opens with the observation, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18). In contrast to the rest of creation which is repeatedly in the story called "good," something here is "not good." Man is incomplete, incapable in his solitude of being what God wants him to be. So God makes a "helper," a "partner," appropriate for him—a woman inherently related to him yet different, so that the relationship might culminate in a true partnership, a marriage (Genesis 2:24). It is significant that the term here used of woman is "helper." The Hebrew term behind "helper" is frequently used of God and is certainly not a designation of a subordinate. It is used in the Hebrew Bible often of superiors and occasionally of an equal, but never of an inferior such as an assistant. The term "partner," which connotes mutuality rather than subordination, is a more accurate understanding of the term. With a partner, the humans that God created become complete—the two become one. Through the intimacy inherent in a marital relationship ("bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh...") the goal of creation is realized. Terms such as "mutuality," "partnership," "intimacy," "oneness," and "harmony" express the dynamic way of being that God intends for us through marriage.

God's beautiful intention for us in marriage expressed in Genesis 1–2 unravels in the events of Genesis 3. With self-centeredness and pride asserted, mutuality and trust are broken. Men and women become aware of their own nakedness and feel a sense of shame. They cover themselves and hide from God. Fear overwhelms them and they blame and accuse one another rather than accepting responsibility for their own actions. Separate from God, ousted from the garden, they are separated from one another. Woman becomes subordinate, man becomes lord. Competition and bondage replace mutuality and freedom as defining marks of their relationship. Over against what God intends for marriage, marriage is now portrayed as we frequently know it today: conflicted, unfulfilling, unbalanced and fractured.

For Christians, the gospel of Jesus Christ provides hope that we can begin to realize in marriage the wholeness and intimacy God originally intended. In his message about the coming of the kingdom of God, Jesus proclaims a new reality. In love God now comes to us to triumph over all that distorts and

inhibits life as God intends it: guilt-ridden, we are forgiven; broken, we are healed; grieving, we are comforted; afraid, we are encouraged; even in death, we are made alive. Illustrating this new transforming power by forgiving sinners, exorcising demons, and healing the sick, Jesus calls his followers and us as Christians to words and deeds consistent with this new reality. Confirming Jesus' message through the resurrection, God calls us to a new way of living in response to God's grace. The indicative engenders an imperative. The reality of God's loving presence, the indicative, calls us to work for what God intends, the imperative. Therefore, Jesus could say, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48); and the apostle Paul could write, "For sin will have no dominion over you" (Romans 6:14), since "in Christ there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). While as fallible Christians we may experience the difficulty of attaining a marriage characterized by oneness, mutuality and harmony, there is nevertheless always the potential to move toward this reality as we experience the transforming power of God's love. The creation account points us to the possibilities of marriage as God intends it; the love of God, the good news proclaimed by Jesus Christ, experienced in our lives empowers us to cultivate and to realize those possibilities in our relationships.

There is still the practical question of how we are to reach this God-intended potential for wholeness and mutuality in our marriage. The Bible is not a marriage manual that answers this question with a "how-to" approach. Instead, we are encouraged to move toward God's intention for our marriage through love. Experiencing the love of God, reflecting the effect of God's love on our lives, we are called to love one another, including our spouses ("We love because [God] first loved us," 1 John 4:19). The love that moves us toward mutuality is not the self-possessed, possessed, need-based, romantic love that pervades our culture, but a love lived out of the security we know in God's love, a love which places God and others (our spouses) as the foci of our lives rather than ourselves.

In Ephesians 5:21-33 the apostle Paul supports this understanding of mutual love as the avenue toward God's intention for marriage. Often this passage is misunderstood. Paul's statements "wives submit to your husbands," and "husbands love your wives" are taken to imply that a "submissive" wife and a "loving" husband will ensure an "authentic" Christian marriage. Important elements of the text suggest a different interpretation. Paul uses here a household code borrowed from Stoic philosophy. The meaning of the passage is carried not only in the tradition Paul uses, but in how he uses and modifies it to make his point. Unlike the Stoics who based their understanding of marriage on "natural law," "wives be submissive," implicitly, "because women are inferior," Paul qualifies the Stoic tradition with reference to "Christ" and "Lord." Christ is both the model and the source for accomplishing the kind of marriage God intends and that Paul here describes. Most important, Paul sets a summary preface above the entire passage, "Be subject to one another

out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). Mutual submission, therefore, becomes the key for understanding the whole passage. On the one hand, the wife "submits" to the husband (Ephesians 5:22, 24). Within a Christian context, as Paul uses the term here, "submit" clearly means "to love and respect." When the church "submits" to Christ, it carries out Christ's will and desires. Submission in this sense is a synonym for "love," considering another's well-being and desires as of primary importance. On the other hand, similarly, husbands are "to love" their wives (Ephesians 5:25), just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. In this Christlike, sacrificial sense, "love" clearly means "submission." Mutual submission, mutual love is therefore Paul's way for the "two to become one" and achieve what God intended for us in marriage (Ephesians 5:31-33).

The promise to love mutually, to submit to one another, as we love and have been loved by God, holds a marriage together for better or worse. The fundamental affirmation of Christian faith, the resurrection (God's bringing life out of death, God's love transforming us) gives us the confidence to make that promise in the first place and the will to keep it throughout our lives.

While such an approach to mutuality and wholeness in marriage sounds good in theory, how this works out for us personally and practically is more involved. It remains for us as Christians to experience God's love and to apply its liberating, intimacy-building power to our lives and our marriages. The teachings of the Bible suggest the basic principle: "love," "mutual submission," understood in terms of the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. Still, in our experience of this freeing, forgiving, challenging love of God, we must become men and women who are secure enough in God's love that we are able to consider and to work for the well-being of our spouses as much as, and sometimes more than, our own, men and women who are learning practical ways to care deeply. When through time a husband and wife mutually learn practical ways to express their love, and when such words and deeds are experienced as loving by the other, the result is intimacy.

### Approaching Intimacy in Christian Marriage

Intimacy is an art, not a science. There are many satisfying ways of relating, and many types of constructive relationships. Some are formed between couples who are alike, who are "made for each other," whose life together is quiet and comfortable, whose personalities complement one another. Some are formed between couples who are different, who balance deep passion with frequent and vigorous arguments, whose personalities compensate for what the other lacks. In their book, *The Intimate Marriage*, Howard and Charlotte Clinebell write,

Intimacy is an art with as many expressions as there are artists to express it. It is often expressed in the sharing of thoughts and ideas and feelings. It is expressed in shared joys and sorrows, in respect for the deepest needs of the other person, and in the struggle to understand

him. Intimacy does not suggest a saccharine sentimentalism; it can be expressed in constructive conflict which is the growing edge of a relationship. Intimacy is not a constant, but is expressed in varying degrees in the ebb and flow of day-in, day-out living. And intimacy is never a once-and-for-all achievement but must be nurtured throughout marriage; with this care, it grows and changes with the stages and seasons of marriage.<sup>2</sup>

Christian marriages, that is, marriages between imperfect men and women who seek to ground their relationship spiritually in God's love and to live out their relationship in mutually satisfying partnership, require work to cultivate intimacy. Certain qualities of a husband and wife individually and of their interaction together, qualities fostered and strengthened through faith, will deepen intimacy. These include *congruence, respect, tolerance, open communication, sexual intimacy, trust, friendship, purpose* and *transcendence*. My description of these qualities is tentative. They are difficult to describe adequately, certainly they are interrelated (e.g., as trust and communication are related to sexual intimacy), and, as was suggested above, they receive various expressions in different relationships. Nevertheless, the general descriptions which follow are useful for identifying the kinds of actions and conditions necessary to keep us close, words and deeds which, taken together, fill out what is meant and felt by the words, "I love you."

1. *Congruence*. Psychologist Carl Rogers uses the term "congruence" to refer to one's ability to be a real person.<sup>3</sup> A congruent person accepts himself as he is. She realizes that she has strengths that can be useful for herself and her relationships, and weaknesses that can be addressed and sometimes overcome. When we are congruent, we know and own our emotions and "ring true" as human beings. There is an inner honesty and consistency about us which makes it possible to know and relate to us. We know we make mistakes. We are able to admit them and to make good use of them as we move along life's journey. Self-acceptance and self-knowledge are, for Christians, products of faith. When we know the unconditional love of God, that our destiny is fixed in this love, life becomes a free educational process. We are able to accept honestly where we are now and hold a vision of what we might become. When self-esteem is weak, we sometimes feel a need to hide behind masks of self-sufficiency and self-justification which can build a wall between us and our spouses and block intimacy. Congruence, honest self-knowledge and self-acceptance is a precondition for our approach toward intimacy.

2. *Respect*. Intimate marriages are built on respect, the ability of each spouse to accept the inherent value and worth of the other both inside and outside the marital relationship. As Christians, respect for others is grounded in the affirmation that all people are God's children, created uniquely in God's image and loved unconditionally by God. Respect involves discovering some quality or ability to esteem in the other. It may be that your spouse is a good parent, or writes beautiful music, or it may be his or her professional competency, or

admiring the way she or he takes care of herself or himself. Respect also involves the recognition of the other's autonomy, for his or her need for solitude and privacy. Intimate relationships are not necessarily ones in which husbands and wives do everything together. Some people do not need relationships in the same way that other people do. Some people may not require as much "togetherness" as others to feel close. People in intimate relationships are able to stand apart from their loved ones and admire, to enjoy the realization that they are connected with spouses who are beautiful and gifted, whether they are present or not. Respect for abilities, autonomy and privacy cultivates intimacy.

3. *Tolerance*. Two persons in an intimate marriage are tolerant of each other. They recognize themselves as fallible, vulnerable human beings and therefore can accept each other's shortcomings. Two ideas out of the context of faith are related to the idea of tolerance: forgiveness and suffering.

Forgiveness is based on the Christian affirmation that as God has accepted us, fallible and finite as we are, we ought also to deem others as acceptable and justified ("just as if they had not sinned"). Dietrich Bonhoeffer concludes his "Wedding Sermon from a Prison Cell" with these words, "In a word, live together in the forgiveness of your sins, for without it no human fellowship, least of all a marriage, can survive. Don't insist on your own rights, don't blame each other, don't judge or condemn each other, but accept each other as you are, and forgive each other every day from the bottom of your hearts."<sup>4</sup>

To understand the meaning of suffering, we must first unlearn our most common definition. Suffering is not the same as pain. Suffering is rather what we do with our pain, what we do with any disruption that seeks to steal our freedom and vitality. The word "suffering" comes from two Latin words: *fero*, which means "to carry" or "to bear," and *sub*, which means "from beneath" or "below." To suffer means to come up under something and bear it, to carry it along toward the point of understanding.

When a relation is disrupted or broken, we have options for dealing with our pain: we can despair before it; we can anesthetize ourselves against pain, with drugs or alcohol, or any number of diversions; we can ignore pain, stoically denying that we are hurting; or we can use our pain as an excuse for feeling victimized, for blaming others for our predicament. But love's way of dealing with pain, love's way of countering the disruptions in relationship, is the way of suffering: to bear it courageously; to keep it in our awareness, using it as an opportunity for an honest exploration of our own souls; to share it with those who love us, who will suffer with us, and so deepen our intimacy; to carry it intentionally, while it carves in us a place for a new self-understanding. Tolerance, forgiveness and suffering aid us in our approach toward intimacy.

4. *Open communication*. Intimate marriages depend on open, honest communication, on the willingness to risk a genuine encounter. No couples agree on everything. Conflict is inevitable in any relationship. Through

communication, by talking through our differences, conflict can lead us to deeper intimacy. Open communication allows us to negotiate quid pro quo's, to come to agreement on common goals and to make progress toward those goals. Further, no relationship remains static. Over time we change, and change requires that we keep working on our relationships, keep talking about our thoughts and feelings until the day we die. Sometimes words or actions once considered loving are no longer perceived as such. Sometimes we need something about which our spouses are unaware. We learn new things. We meet new people. We experience new feelings. Intimacy depends on clear, honest communication about our lives through time. In his book *To Understand Each Other*, Paul Tournier writes this:

In order to have peace, many couples put aside certain subjects—those that are emotionally charged—those that are important for their coming to a mutual understanding. Thus, bit by bit the transparent window which the relationship of man and wife should be, becomes blurred. They are starting to become strangers to one another.<sup>5</sup>

Open communication, dialogue is a central element as we move toward deeper intimacy.

5. *Sexual intimacy.* From the beginning, God created us for physical intimacy, "the two shall become one flesh." Sexual intimacy is more than sex. It is more than just the physical act of bringing together sexual organs, more than the mutual arousal of partners, more than the sensual-emotional fulfillment of orgasm. It is the merging of two persons, self-abandonment, and the deepest form of sharing. A friend once expressed it beautifully, "When we make love, I feel as if his very soul is coming into me, and my soul is going out to surround him." In this sense, sexual intimacy is an expression of the total experience of love between a man and a woman so prominent in our relationships. In a healthy marriage, sex is enjoyed to such an extent that it gives a warmth and resiliency to the total relationship. In *The Transparent Self*, Sydney M. Jourard writes this, "Sex is that something deeply enjoyed, freely given and taken, with good, deep, soul-shaking climaxes, the kind that make a well-married couple look at each other from time to time, and either wink, or grin, or become humble at the remembrance of joys past and expectant of those yet to be enjoyed."<sup>6</sup> Sexual intimacy enjoyed throughout marriage is a quality central to cultivating oneness.

6. *Trust.* Trust is based on a commitment to faithfulness through time (fidelity and continuity). It is difficult to build intimacy in a climate where one or both spouses are open to an easy dissolution of the relationship when things go bad, or to substitute emotional or sexual intimacy outside the marriage as a solution to a marriage's failure to provide intimacy. Trust is the confidence that we will keep our promises "to stay in this thing together" no matter what crises, conflicts or challenges come along, and that we will use such difficulties

to strengthen our relationships. When things are going well, trust develops as we consistently say and do for our spouses that which makes them feel safe, cared for and secure. Intimacy depends on a feeling of trust, that spouses can be counted on to stay with one another and work with each other in good times and bad, "for better or for worse."

7. *Friendship.* Kahlil Gibran begins his essay "On Friendship" with these words, "Your friend is your needs answered."<sup>7</sup> A marriage approaching intimacy is one that is mutually need-satisfying. It is a friendship in which a man and a woman enjoy each other's company, whether in conversation, activity or silence; it is a friendship in which lovers do fun things together, mutually care for each other and are responsive to each other's wants and needs, whether in conversation, activity or silence. There is an element of mutual self-sacrifice in friendship ("No greater love has anyone than this, to lay down one's life for one's friend." John 15:13) Friends intentionally expend their time and energy to learn to do and enjoy what their friends do and enjoy. Over time such a responsiveness to one another becomes spontaneous. But in the beginning, we learn it. If there is one key approach to intimacy to be emphasized above others, it is the psychological principle behind friendship, "feelings follow behavior." Intimacy between friends deepens to the extent that we learn to treat one another in ways we each perceive to be loving. It is difficult to learn about one another without specific communication about needs and wants. If partners in a marriage could regularly take time to identify words and deeds that would reinforce the other's feeling of being loved, and if partners could learn to speak and act in these ways, they would feel closer. If a newlywed couple took fifteen minutes each week to communicate just one thing they could do for each other that would make each feel loved, by the end of one year each would have a repertoire of more than fifty things known to please the other. These could be updated or changed as each person in the relationship changed through time. Feelings follow behavior. We approach intimacy through friendship when the words and deeds of our relationships, our communications and activities together, are mutually need-satisfying.

8. *Purpose.* Intimacy is strengthened in marriage when a couple shares a common purpose, when they have something to work for together. In the beginning it may be getting one or both of them through school, or working toward making a down payment on a house. For many marriages, family is the primary purpose: having children, providing a secure physical and a loving emotional climate in the home in which they can grow into mature adulthood, providing an education for them from preschool through college, and participating with them in a wide range of nurturing experiences (athletic, artistic, spiritual) in the community and in church. For marriages with or without children, a whole range of benevolent and political purposes can deepen intimacy. In *The Intimate Marriage*, the Clinebells call this "the outreach of intimacy." They caution couples about limiting their purpose to family life alone:

The family which operates on the principle, "We'll make our home an island of sanity and the world be damned," will itself be damned to isolation. Isolated couple or family fulfillment is not full, healthy intimacy. Outreach to the needs of the extended family, to the community, to the world stimulates the family to transcend the confines of the nuclear boundaries. This transcendence is the essence of the wholeness of a family. The healthy closeness of a marriage and a family as social organisms is directly related to the vitality of the relationships and concerns beyond the family.<sup>8</sup>

Together serving meals-on-wheels, together reading for the blind, together working for a political party, together serving in a church as Sunday school teachers, or together coaching little league baseball, couples discover that "the outreach of intimacy" deepens their closeness. A common purpose, inside and outside the home, cultivates intimacy in marriage.

9. *Transcendence.* There is a sense of mystery at the center of intimate marriages. It involves a sense of awe at the complexity of our loved ones, a sense that while we may know them better than we know anyone, we sometimes feel that we know them hardly at all. It involves our bafflement before love, before its profound passion and depth, on the one hand, and its sometimes sudden, wrenching disappearance, on the other hand. Above all, it involves a deep sense of gratitude to God, toward God's ultimate power and love, for bringing into each of our lives this other one who knows us, cares for us and incarnates so much of what God desires to do for us, so much of what makes us whole. For those in intimate relationships, there is a "wow!" hard to experience in any other context of life. We find this mysterious sense of transcendence at the heart of intimate marriages.

### Reality

Realizing intimacy in marriage is a profound accomplishment. For this reason throughout this chapter I have used expressions such as "approaching a Christian marriage," "approaching intimacy," or "cultivating intimacy." In reality, many and perhaps most marriages are not intimate, or approach intimacy only in limited ways. They may be stable, satisfying or workable, but fall short of the mutually fulfilling, connected partnership God intends for marriage. In some cases, for a variety of reasons, people feeling broken and hurt by their marriages, not whole and complete as God intends, seek divorce. Sometimes a spouse dies or is physically or mentally incapacitated. Some individuals who want to be married never find a mate with whom to share their lives. God's goal for marriage is beautiful, but often the realities in which we live are bleak.

We end this section where we began. We are imperfect people who live in an imperfect world. What we as Christians have to say to those who are hurting, divorced or single is taken up in other chapters of this book. Here we say at least this: While from the Bible and in the theological thinking of the church

we are able to articulate God's intention for marriage, imagine an intimate marriage, work toward intimacy and sometimes achieve it, God stands with us wherever we are. For us imperfect people in hurting relationships, God sets out ways to deepen intimacy, to make us as individuals and partners more whole and better related than we would otherwise be. For us as imperfect people, God stands with us when we are conflicted, despairing, and alone, even when we give up, so that we might have second chances and new beginnings, discovering intimacy in unexpected places and at unpredictable times.

Intimacy in marriage is a profound accomplishment, requiring careful attention and grace through time. As pastors we are invited into the lives of engaged couples at the beginning of their journey. How we get them started, aware of God's intention for marriage, aware of their imperfections, aware of potential barriers to intimacy and how they can overcome them, and, most important, how we fill them with an enthusiasm for the beautiful possibilities of their future partnerships together, is the subject of the following section.

## PREPARATION FOR A MODERN WEDDING SERVICE

### The First Session

Of all the couples I have married, I can count on one hand those who were enthusiastic about the prospect of premarital counseling. In fact, one of the first questions many couples ask is, "Do we have to have premarital counseling?" I always answer "No." Coerced counseling, in my experience, is seldom productive. Hearing this, couples are immediately relieved. By the end of the first session, however, they almost always agree to meet for several hour-long sessions in the months before the wedding to explore their relationship (if not in my office, then over lunch at a nearby restaurant). Moving from reticence to openness about exploring the relationship during the engagement period is a goal of the first session.

I begin by expressing my gratitude to the couple for inviting me into their lives during this special time. What I love about being a pastor is the great privilege of being invited into people's lives in ultimate moments, at times when we clearly recognize our finitude and our need for God—at birth and baptism, at confirmation, graduation and leaving home for college, in marriage and divorce, in worship, in times of celebration and trouble, in sickness, and in death (and for an occasional golf game!). A wedding is an ultimate moment, a transition from living alone to living together in a committed partnership, a transition that raises many questions about who we are individually and as a couple, about who we were in the past and who we will be in the future. I tell the couple that I am committed to them, that I will pray for them, that I will do my best to help them with any difficulty they might face before and after they are married, and that if I am not available or if what they are facing is over my head, I have phone numbers of counselors I know who can

help. I give them my home phone number and tell them that they can call me there if they cannot reach me at church. I tell them that for me one goal of the engagement period is our friendship—that they might know on the day they are married that the person who is conducting the service knows them, cares about them, and is someone they can turn to in the future should they need to talk.

To emphasize the importance of exploring and deepening their relationship during the engagement period, I sometimes tell the couple an African folk tale taken from Robert Johnson's book, *Lying with the Heavenly Woman*:

A father tells his son that one night a heavenly woman will come and ask to lie beside the son. The father describes her beauty and seductiveness and tells the son that he will be dead in the morning if he agrees to the offer of the heavenly woman. As time goes by the father becomes increasingly worried about this danger to his son and moves to another village so that the heavenly woman may not find the son (perhaps he knew the heavenly woman earlier in his own life?). But one night, when his parents are away, the heavenly woman comes to the son and asks to lie with him. Though he had been warned, the son is so dazzled by the beauty of the maiden that he agrees to let her lie beside him for the night. In the morning the son is dead. The heavenly woman is horrified, since she had no wish to harm the youth. She goes quickly to an old shaman who lives nearby and asks for help. The shaman comes and after some time builds a huge fire and tosses a lizard into the hottest part of the fire. He says that anyone who loves the dead youth enough to walk into the fire and retrieve the lizard will return the youth's life to him. The heavenly woman tries, but fails; the fire is too hot. The boy's mother fails, his father fails; the fire is too hot. Then a plain girl from the village who loves the boy but has never let it be known walks into the fire and retrieves the lizard. Her ordinary human love has the power to bring the boy to life. The boy awakens and we might wish that the story ends here in so much happiness, but there is one further episode. The old shaman tells the celebrating villagers that one decision remains. He builds the fire again, throws the lizard back into the middle of the flames and tells the boy that he must make a decision. If he retrieves the lizard from the fire (a power he now has), the plain maiden will live, but his mother will die. If he leaves the lizard in the fire, the plain maiden will die but his mother will live. The story does not tell us which decision the youth makes.<sup>9</sup>

I use this story at the beginning of my relationship with an engaged couple to point out that it will take intentional effort (walking into the fire) for them to know one another and to nurture their marriage. The story raises the possibility that our understanding of our partner might be limited or distorted by a set of hopes, expectations, and projections that we bring to the relationship

out of our own personal histories. It is interesting that often at the beginning of a relationship our friends and family members are able to see the weaknesses in our partner while we cannot. This is because this one with whom we have a romantic attachment has become for us the heavenly woman or man, the projection of all we have hoped for, all we have ever wanted, able to meet our every need, the most handsome, the most beautiful, the most sensitive, honest, creative, caring man or woman in the world. When we marry this heavenly man or woman, this idealized, romanticized understanding of our partner, we are headed for trouble (dead by the next morning). No man or woman can live up to the level of our romantic projections.

If the marriage is going to work, each person in the relationship must be willing to "walk in the fire and get the lizard," to do the hard work of getting to know, in a real way, the "plain" woman or man who loves him/her. The engagement period is a time for a couple to separate understanding of each other's partner from that of mother or father. It is a time to distinguish how they will relate to each other from how their parents related. It is a time for each to identify what is needed and wanted and what each will be able to give to make his or her partner feel loved. At the beginning of this process I hold out for a couple a goal: that on the day they marry, as they face each other to say their vows, they will both carry a full confidence that they are each individually known and accepted by the other, that they each have the ability to love the other in ways that will be experienced as loving, and that they will be able to deepen their intimacy through time. The Bible's version of the story of the heavenly woman is this: "Leave your mother and father and cleave to your husband or wife" (Genesis 2:24, paraphrase).

We usually talk together for a few minutes about the story, about how it relates specifically to their relationship and their hopes for the engagement period. We then discuss a potential agenda for the engagement period. I show them a list (see next page) of some topics we could cover if they would commit to a series of sessions to explore their relationship. I ask them what on this list interests them and whether they have other concerns they might like to discuss. If they agree to meet, we set up a schedule. On occasion, when a couple is ambivalent or refuses, I ask them if they would have lunch with me a few times before the wedding "just so we can get to know one another a little better." If they agree to this, we set up those dates. One way or another we will usually find a way to talk about their present relationship and future marriage.

I usually close the first session with two pieces of advice. First, I encourage the couple to plan a great honeymoon: "The longer the better. If you have to go into debt to pay for it, do so. If you need me to call your employer, let me know. Get in the habit of creating and regularly contributing to a repertoire of great memories that you share together." Second, I encourage the couple to find friends who will do the little jobs and handle the emergencies that usually pop up on the wedding day (e.g., going to the airport to pick up your stranded uncle after you have just returned from the airport with your

grandmother): "I want you to have enough energy to enjoy the service, the reception, and the rest of your evening together." At the conclusion of the session, I give the couple a brochure that outlines our wedding policies and procedures (96-98).

### A Potential Agenda for Premarital Counseling

During the first session, I give the couple a list of topics we could explore together during the engagement period. I ask each of them to check their preferences. On the basis of their responses we establish an agenda, usually a five- to ten-week course:

- \_\_\_ personality types and conflict in marriage
- \_\_\_ compatible vs. complementary relationships
- \_\_\_ premarital medical examination
- \_\_\_ overcoming barriers to intimacy and building trust
- \_\_\_ skills for keeping communication open
- \_\_\_ skills for resolving differences and compromise
- \_\_\_ the wedding itself
- \_\_\_ finances
- \_\_\_ work-related issues
- \_\_\_ issues arising out of your parental home or your parents' marriage
- \_\_\_ potential in-law problems
- \_\_\_ sexual adjustments in marriage
- \_\_\_ faith and worship
- \_\_\_ different faith traditions and marriage
- \_\_\_ the outreach of intimacy and the purposes of marriage
- \_\_\_ attitudes about divorce, issues emerging from previous marriage(s)
- \_\_\_ merging two families

For each of these topics I have handouts or readings I give the couple the week before we discuss them. In the beginning, I often ask the couple to take the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which a psychologist scores and analyzes, to which we refer in connection with a number of different subjects. In each session I encourage the couple to talk through their particular issues or concerns. When a particular subject needs more time, we are flexible with the agenda. In fact, several times when a couple thought they were not through with the process by the wedding day, we continued to meet during the weeks following the wedding.

For couples who prefer to meet outside my office over lunch or for those who hesitate to identify specific areas to explore, I have found the following "Lunchtime Questions" to be helpful discussion starters:<sup>10</sup>

- How did you meet?
- How long has your love been developing?
- How did you come to the conclusion that he/she was the one?
- What qualities originally attracted you to each other?
- What is your concept of the ideal wife/husband?
- Who will be the president and secretary/treasurer of this organization?
- What can you get from being married that you can't get from being single?
- If neither money nor training were an issue, what would you do with your life?
- What is your greatest fear as you approach marriage?
- Why will your marriage succeed when so many are failing?
- What are your parents like?
- What are your parents' attitudes toward their marriage?
- What are your parents' attitudes about your marriage?
- How do you handle conflict, individually and together?
- What makes you angry and how do you handle it?
- What changes are you willing to make that will benefit your relationship?
- What gets on your nerves?
- What pleases you the most about your partner?
- What are your plans about children and family?
- How do you see the church contributing to your marriage?
- What do you do together for fun?

Most of the time, by the end of this process, we are close to achieving the goals set out at the beginning. We are friends. I have a good sense of who they are. They know that someone is conducting the wedding who cares about them. They have learned a lot about each other, they know potential sources of conflict in their relationship, they know specific ways to love each other that their partner perceives as loving, and they are confident about their future together.

Sometimes, however, pastors who take seriously their responsibility to the couple may come to the end of this process and refuse to conduct the service because of their ambivalence about the viability of the relationship, even though the couple does not share such doubts and still desires to be married. This situation has not yet arisen in my ministry, but if it did, I would feel obligated to communicate my reservations to the couple and not conduct



the service. In one case, both the couple and I shared serious reservations. We mutually agreed to postpone the service. I referred them to a professional counselor while we continued to meet monthly. They were married a year later and still have a strong marriage. In another case, I refused to marry a particular couple, not because I felt their marriage would not work, but because I was aware that for me to conduct the wedding would be hurtful to a number of people in our congregation who were still grieving over the recent dissolution of both of their previous marriages and who still had strong relationships with each of their previous spouses. After dialogue with the couple and the families involved we reached a compromise. The couple was married in the parlor of our church, not the sanctuary, by another minister.

What to do in situations like these entails difficult pastoral issues which can have churchwide ramifications. Each circumstance merits special consideration. It helps if a pastor has developed beforehand some general guidelines for situations such as these with the session, church board or worship committee.

In all cases I try to keep in touch with couples in the months and years following the wedding. I regularly see members who married at the church. Also, a number of non-members who were married at the church have since joined our congregation. If specific concerns have been discussed during the engagement period, I call to check up on these several months down the road. I know some pastors who send cards or call the couples on their anniversaries. It is especially enjoyable, as years go by, to see the couple back in front of the church, there to baptize their daughter or son.

### Preparation for the Wedding Service

From the perspective of the pastor, beyond premarital counseling, preparing the couple for the wedding service itself involves helping the couple with plans and arrangements for the wedding and conducting the rehearsal.

### Making Arrangements—the Wedding Brochure

I am the pastor of a Presbyterian church. Our church polity gives the Session (elders and pastors) the oversight of all worship services. Accordingly, the elders of our church and I have prepared a wedding brochure which sets forth approved policies and procedures for weddings at our church and which guides a couple as they make arrangements for their service. By the end of our first meeting each couple is given a brochure.

The brochure begins with a letter I have written which defines briefly a Christian marriage, describes the wedding as a service of worship, and admits our willingness through dialogue to be flexible about the policies and procedures outlined in the brochure. The brochure is organized under the following categories:

1. *Scheduling.* Here we describe how to reserve a date and a time for the wedding; the importance of scheduling a premarital conference with a minister;

church policies regarding weddings on holidays, holy days, or Sundays; and special procedures for nonmembers who desire to schedule a wedding.

2. *The Minister.* This section sets out our understanding of a pastor's responsibility to use discretion in marrying a given couple: "Whether a couple may be married at St. Philip is a decision for the minister to make. The Presbyterian Church does not require its ministers to marry anyone but expects them to serve the people in a responsible and 'pastoral' manner." The church's requirement that one of our pastors be present at every wedding held in our sanctuary, and procedures for inviting other pastors, priests or rabbis to participate in the wedding, are also described here.

3. *The Church Wedding Coordinator.* Our church's wedding coordinator helps the couple with the details of the wedding. She is knowledgeable about local florists, a range of locations at which receptions may be held and other details which ensure a smooth and carefully planned wedding. Her name and phone number are included here.

4. *Wedding Music.* Since a wedding is a service of worship, the music chosen must be appropriate to the sanctity of the occasion. The church organist meets with the couple to plan the processional, recessional and supplementary selections. This section describes how to make an appointment with the organist, the procedures to follow if an outside organist is desired, and how to find qualified instrumentalists and vocalists.<sup>11</sup>

5. *The Rehearsal.*<sup>12</sup> Here we answer these questions: Who is in charge? When does it usually begin? How does one schedule rehearsals for vocalists and instrumentalists?

6. *Services, Fees and Facilities.* This section of the brochure sets out our fees for members and nonmembers. For members, fees are charged only for the wedding coordinator, the organist and the custodian. For nonmembers these fees are increased and, in addition, a fee is included for building use and for the minister. Here also is described when fees must be paid (at the time the church is reserved for the wedding) and to whom checks are payable.

7. *Decorations.* Procedures regarding flowers, decorations, candles, treatment of the woodwork in the church, ribbons, communion elements, rules about the throwing of rice and birdseed, and policies about post-service inspection of the church facilities are included.

8. *Photography.* Since a wedding is a worship service, it is contrary to our procedures for flash pictures to be taken during the ceremony. Time exposures are permitted from the balcony or rear portion of the sanctuary. Other policies about photographs and videos are set out here.

9. *Deliveries.* To which part of the church should the delivery of dresses, flowers, and decorations be made? When will someone be at the church to receive them? How can arrangements be made with the Wedding Coordinator for deliveries? What is the church's responsibility for these items before, during, and after the service?

10. *Marriage License.* Laws regarding marriage vary from state to state. This section sets out the legal requirements for marriage in our state and county, how a couple may obtain a marriage license, the cost of the license, the requirements for a premarital blood test, the pastor's responsibility for filling out and returning the license to the County Clerk, and how copies of the license can be obtained by the couple at a later date.

11. *Receptions.* A couple can secure a place to hold the reception on their own, the church can help them find a suitable place, or the reception can be held in the church fellowship hall or parlor. The procedures and fees for holding receptions in church facilities are set out here.

### The Wedding Rehearsal

To adapt a familiar Bible verse, "Information casts out all fear." We have a wedding rehearsal to prepare and reassure participants in the service. The rehearsal also gives the pastor an opportunity to interpret for the whole wedding party the character of the ceremony as a service of worship.

When everyone arrives and is seated in the front of the sanctuary, I greet them with a prayer and some introductory words about the couple and their love for one another. I tell them that I am happy to be participating in the service. I describe the nature of the service as a service of worship and tell them what we are about to do in the rehearsal.

I normally begin the rehearsal by placing everyone in the front of the church in the positions they will be in after the processional. We then move through the entire service, we practice the recessional, practice the processional, go through the service again, practice the recessional, and conclude with a second run through the processional. Along the way, the Wedding Coordinator and I give stage directions about where to stand, about handing flowers to the maid of honor, buttoning coats, adjusting the veil, about where men should put their hands (at their sides or folded behind their backs), about chewing gum, about what happens if someone comes to the wedding drunk, and about what happens if the ring falls to the floor and rolls down into the air conditioning vent. The most important of these is my instruction to the bride and groom that they are expressing their vows to and exchanging rings with one another and therefore should face, look at, and speak to one another rather than to me. I like to create an atmosphere that is light, fun, and inspires confidence.

I conclude the rehearsal with a humorous anecdote about a wedding I attended twenty years ago in which several catastrophic things happened—a true story in which a fight broke out between the mothers-in-law, the groom and a bridesmaid fainted, the minister brought in chairs for the whole wedding party, and the flower girl..., well let us just say that there was a small yellow puddle under the feet of the flower girl that worked its way up the left side of the bride's dress. I assured them that even this couple was still happily

married and that nothing like this could possibly happen at this wedding. What makes the wedding beautiful is the love being expressed between the bride and groom, not a perfect performance from every participant. We check the times when everyone should arrive for the wedding, and we make sure that everyone is informed about when pictures are going to be taken. Then I offer a prayer, and we are off to the rehearsal dinner.

### The Wedding Service<sup>13</sup>

The church has not always conducted wedding services. The first Christians married according to the laws and practices of the Roman Empire. Civil ceremonies were normally performed in the home and contained customs still observed today: the giving of consent, the joining of hands, the exchange of rings, and the wedding feast with a wedding cake.

With time, the influence of the church on the marriage ceremony grew. At first, pastors simply encouraged fellow Christians to marry within the faith and provided guidance to betrothed couples. Later, a Christian blessing was added to the end of the civil ceremony. By the end of the twelfth century, the Catholic Church developed a full marriage rite, which took place at the front door of the church. During the Reformation, the service moved inside the church building itself. The Reformers modified the Catholic service, translating it into the language of the people and simplifying it. Recently the church has reexamined and revised the language and theological purposes of the service consistent with an understanding of marriage as a steadfast covenant between two people—a partnership rather than the property contract that marriage had been considered in past centuries (e.g., changing the action of the "giving away" of the bride to that of giving a blessing). In recent years, several denominations have sponsored and published their own revisions of the marriage service.

Our church encourages a healthy balance between tradition and order, on the one hand, and liturgical freedom and flexibility on the other.<sup>14</sup> The wedding ceremony is first a service of worship that reflects a Christian understanding of marriage for a Christian congregation (see the previous section). In God's presence, we voice certain claims, promises, prayers, and blessings that embody the Christian faith, express thanksgiving to God for the gift of marriage in general and the love that joins this couple in particular, and ground their vows in God's word. While the ceremony is first a service of worship, it is also very much a personal and family event. Within a general liturgical framework we encourage a couple to compose certain elements of the service in a way that reflects their personal faith, the nature of their commitment to God, and their love for each other. Certainly the service should also reflect the couple's ethnic and cultural background, and if either the bride or groom comes from a different faith tradition, it is important to have some way to acknowledge this (e.g., an invitation to a priest or a rabbi to participate in the service).

For the weddings I conduct I use *The Marriage Service*,<sup>15</sup> an older, beautiful, and dignified service taken from The Book of Common Worship. The structure of the service follows its logic: (1) with reference to scripture, the opening sentences set out God's intention for marriage and our corresponding responsibilities; (2) the invocation asks God to be present with the couple as they now make their vows and to bless them as they seek throughout life to fulfill their responsibilities to each other; (3) the couple expresses to their family and to the congregation their intentions to commit themselves to one another; (4) speaking for the family and congregation, a representative, often the bride's father, either gives a blessing or "gives away" the bride, affirming the couple's intention to wed; (5) with the bride and groom, family and congregation now in agreement about this potential marriage, the bride and groom exchange vows; (6) the making of vows is symbolized by the exchange of rings; (7) a prayer asks God to bless the couple and to help them keep the vows they have made; (8) in the declaration, the pastor declares that the man and woman are now husband and wife; (9) the pastor faces the couple and gives them a blessing.

At the discretion of the pastor and the couple, other elements may be inserted into this basic structure. These include scripture lessons, a homily, vocal or instrumental selections, and a unity candle. In traditions that do not include a brief wedding homily, pastors sometimes write a personal "wedding letter" to the couple expressing their love and hopes for them. The letter is either sent or given to the couple following the service. It is also appropriate for the service to include a celebration of the Lord's supper. The eucharist was one of the first ways the early church connected marriage to worship.<sup>16</sup> As an expression of Christ's presence, it represents for us the source of the strength that empowers us to keep and fulfill throughout our lives the responsibilities of marriage.

The wedding service is a deeply personal, tender moment that pastors are privileged to witness. On the day of the wedding I usually arrive about an hour before the service. I meet both the bride and groom individually and then their parents to ease any general pre-service jitters and to resolve the specific concern about "whether or not the minister will forget to come." I also pray with them. A few minutes before the service I meet with the groom and groomsmen, and at the appropriate time we walk into the sanctuary together. Having established a relationship with me during the engagement period, several brides and grooms have reported that they have been able to draw strength from our friendship to keep their composure during the service. Eye contact, a smile, a slight nod keep us focused and centered.

I have felt a deep affection for each couple I have married, whether they were young or old, getting married for the first time or entering a second marriage and merging two families. To see a couple confidently in love hold hands, look each other in the eyes and say, "I take you to be my wife," "I take you to be my husband," is to witness one of the great triumphs of life.

<sup>1</sup>Thornton Wilder, *Three Plays* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 200.

<sup>2</sup>Howard J. and Charlotte H. Clinebell, *The Intimate Marriage* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 24–25. In addition to this book, the following have been helpful in formulating my thoughts on developing intimacy in marriage: Morris Fishbein and Ernest Burgess, *Successful Marriage* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963); William Lederer and Don Jackson, *The Mirages of Marriage* (New York: W. W. North, 1968); Thomas Moore, *Soul Mates* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994); Ethel Person, *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters* (New York: Penguin, 1989); Gibson Winter, *Love and Conflict* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961).

<sup>3</sup>Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 47–49.

<sup>4</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 31–32.

<sup>5</sup>Paul Tournier, *To Understand Each Other* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967), 14.

<sup>6</sup>Sydney M. Jourard, *The Transparent Self* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1961), 31.

<sup>7</sup>Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 64.

<sup>8</sup>Howard and Charlotte Clinebell, *The Intimate Marriage*, 204.

<sup>9</sup>Robert A. Johnson, *Lying with the Heavenly Woman: Understanding and Integrating the Feminine Archetypes in Men's Lives* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 48–49. Johnson uses this story to distinguish between the light anima (the heavenly woman), which can incapacitate a man for ordinary life and the dark anima (the plain girl), which represents the human capacity for relationship. As I use this story, I make clear that the gender roles can be interchanged; the story works for both men and women: women often come to marriage with their visions of a heavenly man, men often come with their visions of the heavenly woman, while in both cases the real person (the plain man or woman) stands there ready and willing to love them.

<sup>10</sup>This list of questions is adapted from one I found in an article titled, "Questions I Ask Engaged Couples," *Eternity* (June 1977), 19–20. One thousand ministers from 25 denominations were asked, "What are the four most important questions that you ask couples during premarital counseling?"

<sup>11</sup>*Christian Marriage: The Worship of God* (Supplemental Resource 3), prepared by the Office of Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 103–11, lists music appropriate for the wedding service, including pre-service music, processions and recessions, hymns, music from Black, Hispanic, and Asian American sources, musical settings from the Psalms, and selected vocal repertoire.

<sup>12</sup>A more complete description of the wedding rehearsal follows below.

<sup>13</sup>Resources on the history of, the theology behind, and the various rites of a Christian wedding service include: *Christian Marriage*, 81–102; "Marriage," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 349–64 (includes a summary of marriage rites and practices in fourteen different Christian traditions plus bibliography); Kenneth Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of Christian Marriage Rites* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983); James White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, chap. 8, "Passages" (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980); Geoffrey Bromiley, *God and Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

<sup>14</sup>*Christian Marriage*, 83.

<sup>15</sup>*The Marriage Service* (Philadelphia: The Board of Christian Education of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1945). See *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 841–81. Other denominations have recommended wedding services in their respective books of worship, such as *Chalice Worship* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1996), 34–45; *Book of Worship* (New York: United Church of Christ Office for Church Life and Leadership, 1986), 323–46; *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 115–33.

<sup>16</sup>*Christian Marriage*, 85.