
Welcoming Back the Divorced and Remarried

by Robert W. Gardner and Gerald R. Winslow

For more than a decade now, we have been studying the attitudes of Seventh-day Adventist ministers toward divorce and remarriage. The results of this work suggest interesting and important shifts in how the ministers who were surveyed view divorce and remarriage within Adventism. Before reporting these results, it should be helpful to sketch some Adventist history.

Shutting and Opening the Door

From its inception, Adventism has grappled with the twin issues of divorce and remarriage.¹ At the 1862 business meeting of the Michigan State Conference—the very first of such conferences—one of the early questions for discussion was: “How shall we treat divorced marriages?”² The questioner, Brother Sanborn, was referring to people who had become divorced without “biblical justification” and subsequently remarried. “Shall such persons. . .,” he asked, “be received among us?”

The group handled the issue in a way not at all uncommon for tough questions. They resolved that “the matter of divorced marriages be referred to the Conference committee.”³ Unfortunately, no record of the committee’s work is extant.

In the years that followed, Adventist leaders

frequently warned against becoming lax in the standards for membership, especially in the areas of marriage and divorce.⁴ But it was not until eight decades had passed that a full answer to Brother Sanborn’s question became an official part of Adventist church policy.⁵

That policy, finally voted and published in 1942, is what many Adventists still remember as the denomination’s traditional position. And there can be little doubt that the policy did reflect an established approach that had developed over many years. It can be summarized this way: People who marry should remain married for life. Only the sin of physical adultery can break the marriage bond. If such sin occurs, the “innocent party” has the right to divorce the “guilty party” and marry someone else.⁶ The “guilty party” should be disfellowshipped, whether or not there is a divorce. He or she can be readmitted to church membership by rebaptism after “a suitable period of time” and if repentance is sincere. However, if the “guilty party” divorces and remarries, he or she must not only be disfellowshipped but must never be readmitted to the church so long as the “unscriptural relationship continues.” Such a person is living in a “state of adultery” as long as the second marriage continues, provided that the first spouse remains chaste, single, and alive. In order to be readmitted, the guilty one is expected to divorce the second spouse and either attempt reconciliation with the first spouse or remain single. The local pastor has the responsibility to “investigate all the circumstances” in order to ascertain who is guilty and who is innocent. And the member in question must “produce satisfactory evidence in support of his or her claim.”

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When adultery is not a factor in the divorce, neither party has the right to remarry. The one who remarries first becomes the “guilty party” and is subject to all the above-mentioned provisions. However, people who were not Adventists at the time of their divorce and remarriage may be baptized and admitted into the fellowship of the church without dissolving the second marriage.

As official policy, this traditional position was destined for a short life. By the late 1940s the divorce rate in the United States was climbing sharply. At the same time, Adventists began to prepare changes of the divorce and remarriage policy.⁷ In 1950, these changes were made official.⁸

Many church members, including a number of influential leaders, saw the new policy as a dangerous relaxation of membership standards.

The key difference from the earlier policy was the recognition that the “guilty party” might find that attempts to “bring his [or her] marital status into line with the divine ideal” could present “insuperable problems.” In other words, some second marriages, even though contracted following a wrongful divorce, did not need to be dissolved in order for the “guilty party” to be readmitted to church membership. (Or so the 1950 policy has been interpreted by most congregations.) The new policy then outlined the steps for renewing the membership of those whose second marriages are still intact, so long as such former members are sincerely repentant.

The 1950 revision was not greeted with universal acceptance. Many church members, including a number of influential leaders, saw the new policy as a dangerous relaxation of membership standards. And two members, Doctors Roy O. and Marguerite S. Williams, labored tirelessly for nearly 30 years, writing books and letters directed primarily to the Adventist ministry, in an attempt to bring about a return to the traditional policy.⁹ Despite their efforts, the Williamses did not live to see the policy changes they had sought. In fact,

subsequent refinements of the 1950 policy have simply clarified the steps for reaccepting remarried persons.

The 1950 revision does not represent the first time in the history of Christianity that changes in practice have preceded correlative changes in theology. Indeed, in the dialectic between faith and practice, this pattern may be the rule rather than the exception. Theoretical justification often comes tumbling after practice. During the past 35 years in Adventism, much of the confusion over divorce and remarriage can be described in terms of fitful attempts to find a theology that will harmonize with increasingly established practice. The 1950 revision opened the door, at least a crack, for repentant adulterers and adulteresses to regain church membership along with their second spouses. Through this thin opening have come thousands of remarried members and their families. However, a large percentage of the membership, and the pastors who lead them, have retained the belief that neither God nor the church can fully forgive these divorced and remarried ones because they are living in a state of adultery. This theological and ethical conundrum was not resolved by the 1950 revision, and it is still unresolved.

One solution would be to return to the policy of 1942. No doubt this would please many members, who would see it as the Doctors Williams would have—a “cleansing of the camp,” ridding the church of members who are living in adulterous second marriages.

Such a return, however, is not at all likely. As they develop, religious movements, such as Adventism, do not normally gradually stiffen their membership requirements.

Widening the Open Door

Since 1973, we, one of us a sociologist and the other an ethicist, have been studying changes in the ways Seventh-day Adventist ministers think about divorce and remarriage. By studying the attitudes of Adventist ministers, we are attempting to understand better

how one group with sectarian roots is developing in an important area of its membership standards. We anticipated that forces of social accommodation would lead to modifications of the Adventist clergy's attitudes toward divorce and remarriage. In the now common language of the church/sect typology, we supposed that the boundaries of membership would shift away from the sectarian type and toward those more common among the established churches.¹⁰ We expected that the traditional position would become more and more relaxed as ministers expressed a willingness to work with problem cases rather than permanently expelling them.

Our report is based on data from two surveys of Adventist ministers in the North Pacific Union

Conference, the first conducted in 1973 and the second in 1984. The 1973 questionnaire was developed from the results of in-depth interviews with 10 pastors. It was pretested for validity and reliability and modified accordingly. Two items, not deemed essential, were deleted from the 1973 instrument in order to shorten it for use in 1984. All ministers listed in the various local conference directories were mailed one wave of the questionnaire. Both the 1973 and the 1984 survey mailing resulted in a response rate of 60 percent.¹¹ The total number of people returning questionnaires was 199 in 1973 and 220 in 1984.

Early in the questionnaire we presented the following case:

"Mr. Brown has been married for several years.

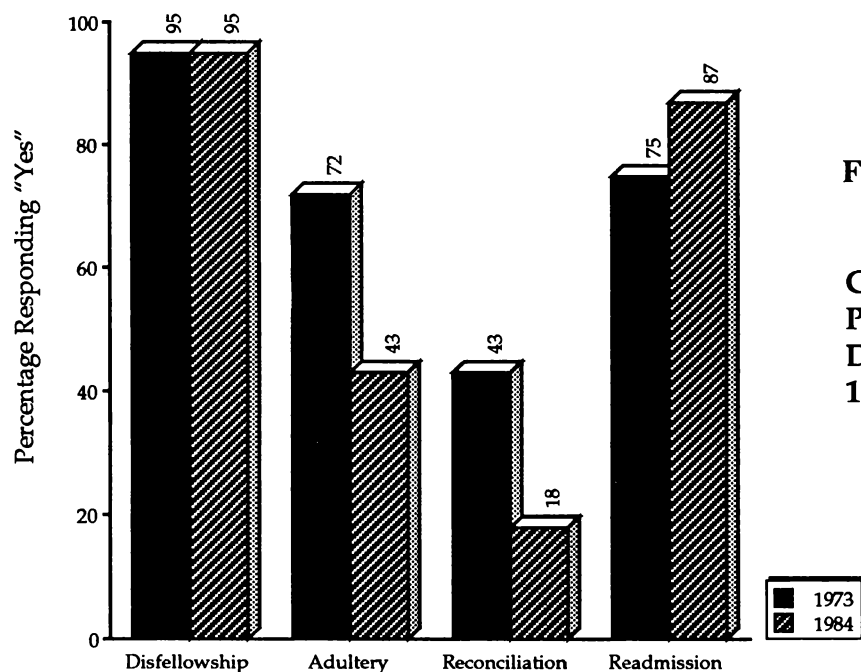


Figure 1

Comparison of Ministerial Perceptions on Divorce/Remarriage, 1973 and 1984

1. Disfellowship: Would you ordinarily advise the local congregation to disfellowship Mr. Brown and his second wife?

	1973	1984
Yes	95%	95%
No	4%	4%
No Response	1%	1%

2. Adultery: Would you consider Mr. Brown and his second wife to be living in adultery as long as they continued living together?

	1973	1984
Yes	72%	43%
No	20%	51%
No Response	8%	6%

3. Reconciliation: Would you advise Mr. Brown to divorce his second wife and attempt reconciliation with his first wife?

	1973	1984
Yes	43%	18%
No	42%	76%
No Response	15%	6%

4. Readmission: If Mr. Brown and his second wife had been disfellowshipped, can you envision a time when you might advise the church board to readmit them?

	1973	1984
Yes	75%	87%
No	18%	11%
No Response	7%	2%

Both he and his wife have been members of the SDA church in good and regular standing. Eventually Mr. Brown 'fell in love' with a younger, single SDA woman with whom he worked. Mr. Brown divorced his wife and married the second woman."

This case was followed by four questions that will be the focus of the analysis presented here. These questions and the results are presented below.

1. **Disfellowship:** Would you ordinarily advise the local congregation to disfellowship Mr. Brown and his second wife?

2. **Adultery:** Would you consider Mr. Brown and his second wife to be living in adultery as long as they continued living together?

3. **Reconciliation:** Would you advise Mr. Brown to divorce his second wife and attempt reconciliation with his first wife?

4. **Readmission:** If Mr. Brown and his second wife had been disfellowshipped, can you envision a time when you might advise the church board to readmit them?

The responses to the question on disfellowshipping an individual for remarriage show remarkable consistency over the 11-year period. The overall percentage responding "yes" or "no" did not change at all. However, responses to the item on adultery changed dramatically. In 1973, 72 percent of the group responded "yes" to the view that Mr. Brown is living in adultery with his second wife. This view of "perpetual adultery" appears to be changing. In the 1984 data, we found only 43 percent who would agree with the position that Mr. Brown and his second wife are living in adultery.

Although the shift is not as dramatic, a change has also occurred in attitudes toward solutions. In 1973, 43 percent of our respondents reported that they would advise Mr. Brown to divorce his second wife and attempt reconciliation with his first wife as a means of rectifying his mistake. This approach, although not absent, has nearly disappeared in 1984. Only 18 percent of the ministers responding would seek such a solution.

Finally, the attitudes toward readmission to the church were examined. While adultery and reconciliation are primarily matters of theology and

ethics, readmission is a question of church policy. Ministers in the later 1984 survey were more likely to encourage readmission after a divorce/remarriage episode than they were 11 years earlier. This increased willingness to readmit erring members fits with the decreased belief that the second marriage is continually adulterous. It may also fit with a growing emphasis on church growth.

It seems clear that from 1973 to 1984 there has been a dramatic and highly interesting shift in the attitudes of the Adventist ministers we surveyed. These attitudes also appear to be an indication of a change in Adventist theology and ethics relative to adultery. These findings invite further analysis and interpretation.

Who Is Widening the Door?

When compared to the 1973 study, the pattern emerging from the 1984 data suggests that a growing number of ministers do not view Mr. Brown's second marriage as a continual state of adultery, and they do not think that Mr. Brown should divorce his second spouse and live singly or reconcile with his first wife. This group of ministers tends to be those who are younger (below 45) and better educated (graduate degree). Of the two, it is education more than age that explains these differences in attitudes toward divorce and remarriage.

In our 1973 survey we expected to find some significant, age-related differences in attitude toward adultery, reconciliation, and readmission. We hypothesized that the 1950 change in policy would tend to result in two distinct views: One held by ministers who received their education and entered the ministry before 1950 and another by those who received their education and entered the ministry after 1950. However, the 1973 data revealed no such significant difference in attitudes relative to age and corresponding with the time of the policy change. But analysis of the 1984 data does reveal an important pattern relative to age.

The graph below shows the results broken down by age. We have chosen the midpoint of a ministerial career (45 years old) for a division.

Figure 2 shows that the attitudes about divorce and remarriage differ by age. Clearly the greatest difference is on the item about continual adultery in the second marriage. Younger ministers are far less likely to view second marriages as being continually adulterous. Older ministers, on the other hand, are more likely than their younger counterparts to advocate divorce of the second

spouse and reconciliation with the first spouse.

The second variable that we examined is level of education. Does graduate education or advanced ministerial training affect attitudes toward divorce and remarriage? We compared ministers who hold an undergraduate degree (B.A. or B.Th.) with those who have a graduate degree (M. Div., B.D., D.Min., or other doctorate). These data, like the data on age, show an important shift in perspective. The data are presented in Figure 3 on the following page.

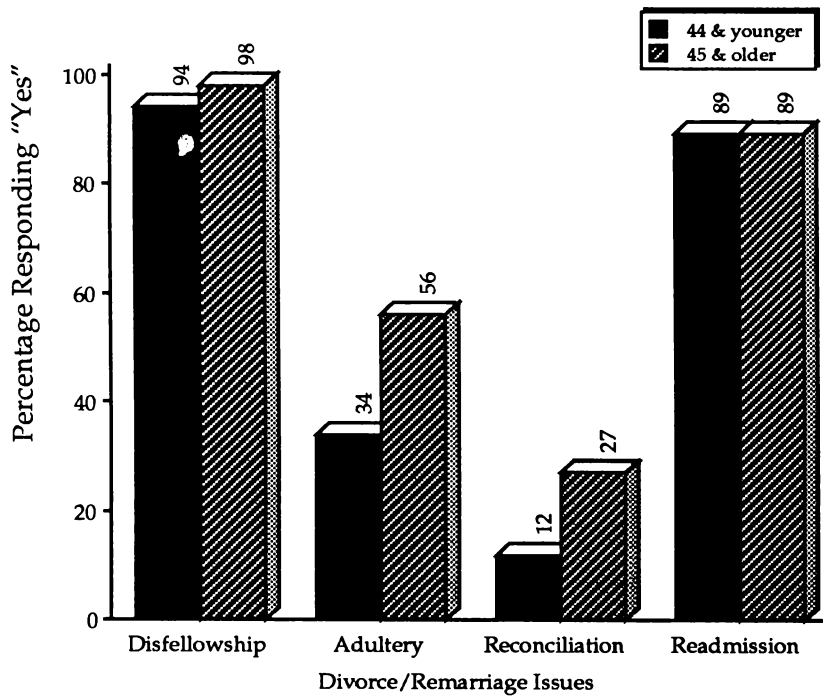


Figure 2

Comparison of 1984 Ministerial Attitudes on Divorce and Remarriage by Age

1. Disfellowship: Would you ordinarily advise the local congregation to disfellowship Mr. Brown and his second wife?

	<u>44 and younger</u>	<u>45 and older</u>
Yes	94%	98%
No	6%	2%

2. Adultery: Would you consider Mr. Brown and his second wife to be living in adultery as long as they continued living together?

Yes	34%	56%
No	66%	44%

3. Reconciliation: Would you advise Mr. Brown to divorce his second wife and attempt reconciliation with his first wife?

	<u>44 and younger</u>	<u>45 and older</u>
Yes	12%	27%
No	66%	44%

4. Readmission: If Mr. Brown and his second wife had been disfellowshipped, can you envision a time when you might advise the church board to readmit them?

Yes	89%	89%
No	11%	11%

The ministers we surveyed who hold graduate degrees are less likely to view the remarried Mr. Brown as continually living in an adulterous relationship. Moreover, these better-educated ministers were far less likely to think that Mr. Brown should divorce his second spouse and seek reconciliation with his first wife. However, no statistically significant differences were found, relative to education, on the questions concerning disfellowshipping or readmitting Mr. Brown and his second spouse.

The possible interaction of age and level of

education suggests the importance of looking at the data for age while controlling for education and looking at the data for education while controlling for age. There are no significant differences in attitudes about these four factors of divorce and remarriage between younger (below 45) and older (45 and over) ministers when level of education is held constant. But examination of the data for education while controlling for age revealed a significant difference in attitudes about adultery and reconciliation (i.e., undergraduate or graduate). Among older ministers (45 and over)

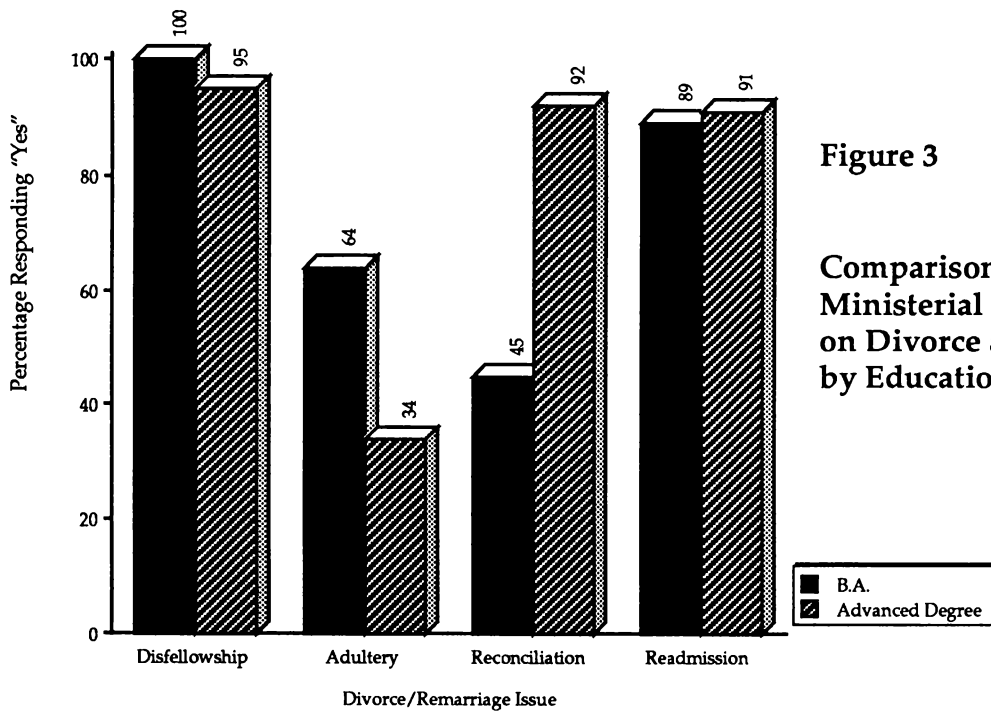


Figure 3
Comparison of 1984 Ministerial Attitudes on Divorce and Remarriage by Education

1. Disfellowship: Would you ordinarily advise the local congregation to disfellowship Mr. Brown and his second wife?

	<u>B.A. Degree</u>	<u>Advanced Degree</u>
Yes	100%	95%
No	0%	5%

2. Adultery: Would you consider Mr. Brown and his second wife to be living in adultery as long as they continued living together?

Yes	64%	34%
No	36%	66%

3. Reconciliation: Would you advise Mr. Brown to divorce his second wife and attempt reconciliation with his first wife?

	<u>B.A. Degree</u>	<u>Advanced Degree</u>
Yes	45%	8%
No	55%	92%

4. Readmission: If Mr. Brown and his second wife had been disfellowshipped, can you envision a time when you might advise the church board to readmit them?

Yes	89%	91%
No	11%	9%

68 percent of those with undergraduate degrees believe that Mr. Brown is living in adultery with his second wife while only 44 percent of those with graduate education believe he is. A similar pattern was found among younger ministers. Fifty-four percent of those with undergraduate degrees and only 28 percent of those with graduate degrees believe in the continual adultery of Mr. Brown.

What Does Widening the Door Mean?

A decade ago, Oxford sociologist of religion Bryan Wilson predicted that Seventh-day Adventism would continue to move from being a sect toward being a denomination. In Wilson's words this process would likely include "increased tolerance of other movements, attenuation of distinctive commitment, diminished emphasis on boundaries and boundary-maintaining devices."¹² Among the factors continuing to influence this development, Wilson

listed Adventism's high regard for education, even advanced education, and the increasing development of a professionally educated ministry. Our study tends to confirm Wilson's predictions.

To the extent that sectarian boundaries have been maintained in the past through strict standards concerning divorce and remarriage and the exclusion from membership of former members now in second marriages, those sectarian boundaries appear to be eroding. Our data indicate that the groups of Adventist ministers we questioned are now less likely to consider second marriages to be adulterous and less likely to call for the dissolution of such marriages than they were in 1973. This is particularly true for ministers who are younger and more highly educated.

We do not wish to speculate as to whether or not such trends might also be observed in other segments of the Adventist ministry throughout North America or the rest of the world. Nor do we offer, at this point, an evaluation of the trends that we think we have observed. These observed trends may be viewed as evidence of moral decay. On the other hand, they may be regarded as the gracious fruit of denominational maturity.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For an historical account of Seventh-day Adventists' treatment of divorce and remarriage, see Gerald Winslow, "Divorce, Remarriage, and Adultery," *Spectrum* 7:2, 1975, pp. 2-11. cf. Gerald Winslow, "Seventh-day Adventists and Divorce," unpublished M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 1968.

2. Joseph Bates, "Business Proceedings of the Michigan State Conference," *Review and Herald*, 20 (October 14, 1862), p. 157.

3. *Ibid.*

4. For an example of one such admonition from an early leader, see George I. Butler, "Marriage and Divorce," *Review and Herald*, 60 (December 18, 1883), pp. 785-786.

5. A report of the denomination's action establishing a six-point policy on divorce and remarriage is in "Divorce," *Review and Herald*, 119 (December 3, 1942), p. 10. Earlier statements were published by the denomination, but they simply called for the church to uphold its standards, to

disfellowship offenders, and, in the case of ministers who committed adultery, to not only disfellowship them but also bar them from ever again serving as ministers. See *Manual for Ministers* (Washington, D.C.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1925), p. 8; and *Church Manual* (Washington, D.C.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1932), pp. 175-176.

6. In this summary of the traditional position, all of the expressions in quotation marks are taken directly from the 1942 statement of the denomination's official position.

7. The change was led by A.V. Olson, a vice-president of the General Conference. In his 1949 paper on the subject, Olson argued that adultery breaks the marriage union. Thus, he claimed, it is inconsistent to say that only one of the parties is free to remarry. He asked rhetorically, "Does a chain that is broken still bind?" He then outlined what he thought would be the steps for readmitting erring members who had been disfellowshipped for divorce and remarriage.

When the denomination's policy was revised in 1950, Olson's work was plainly in evidence. See A.V. Olson, "The Divorce Question," an unpublished paper presented on April 5, 1949, to a meeting of the General Conference officers and North American union presidents.

8. This revised policy first appeared as "Divorce and Remarriage in Relation to Church Membership," *Review and Herald*, 127 (July 23, 1950), pp. 228-229. Subsequently, the policy has been incorporated in various editions of the *Church Manual*, and it remains substantially unchanged to the present.

9. See for example, Roy O. Williams and Marguerite S. Williams, *God's Seventh Commandment: The Right and No-right to Remarry*, 7th ed. (Sedona, Arizona: The Pronto Press, 1977). This work first appeared in 1952 as a response to the General Conference's change of policy in 1950. The work went through many editions, revisions, and supplements. It was distributed widely by the authors to Adventist ministers, teachers, and ministerial students during the 1960s and 1970s. The authors are now both deceased; no

one seems to be carrying on their work with equal fervor.

10. For an accessible discussion of the church/sect typology see Bryan Wilson, *Religion in a Sociological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), chapt. 4.

11. The survey design assumes that the data will reflect changes in clergy groups. Anonymous questionnaires make it impossible to match pairs of data for those individuals who responded to both surveys.

One minor adjustment was made in the data. The 1973 mailing list did not include as large a number of names and addresses of retired ministers as were part of the 1984 mailing. Because age may be an important factor in explaining significant changes, a percentage of the retired ministers' responses were deleted randomly from the 1984 data set in order to bring their percentage in the 1984 and 1973 data sets to comparable levels prior to analysis. Readers who wish fuller documentation than appears here may write to the authors.

12. Bryan Wilson, "Sect or Denomination: Can Adventism Maintain Its Identity?" *Spectrum*, 7:1, 1975, p. 41.