

Waldensian Evangelical Church

(Union of Methodist and Waldensian Churches)

New Document: Families, Marriages, Couples and Parenthood

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1. Aim of the document

Protestantism invites to conceptualise each family, couple and parental relationship as a core of relationships organised around a vocation, the establishment of a lasting bond and around the covenant of grace grounded in God. New types of families are sometimes seen as questioning the so-called ‘traditional family’ but in fact they contribute to reflect on the divine call of believers. Conditions for *all* types of families to exist in a Christian framework are created. Since Reformed Churches understand marriage not as sacrament, they prefer not to refer to Christian marriage as such but to a covenant by which all forms of family communities are experienced in Christian ways.

The attempt is to expand our horizons encompassing a plurality of ways in which families can be organised, not just looking at the ‘traditional family’ based on marriage but encompassing other forms of lasting cohabitation, second marriages, parenthood covering on a range of conditions such as single parent families, fostering or social parenthood in the case of adoptive or reconstituted or blended families, caring for weak or not completely self-sufficient members, multi-generational families living under the same roof. Such forms are present in the society and in our Churches: it is a matter of recognising the actual situations we come across and enter communion in our ecclesiastical situations. This is even more so in times of globalisation when we encounter differences. Such an awareness has enabled the Waldensian Evangelical Church - Union of Methodist and Waldensian Churches (hereafter Waldensian Evangelical Church) to deal with actual everyday problems and challenges by welcoming, loving, forgiving and trusting.

The family based on marriage remains important and it is regulated by the document on marriage RO.M/1971, but it cannot be considered anymore a privileged or even the one and only form. Even the Italian Constitutional Court has long established that lasting forms of cohabitation between two persons, even if of the same sex. (...) “Accordingly, social groupings must be deemed to include all forms of simple or complex communities that are capable to permitting and favouring the free development of the person through relationships within a context that promotes a pluralistic model. This concept must also include homosexual unions understood as the stable cohabitation of two individuals of the same sex, who are granted the fundamental right to live out their situation as a couple freely and to obtain legal recognition thereof with the associated rights, duties, according to the time-scales, procedures and limits specified by law (English version by the Constitutional Court, Almirante-Criscuolo S2010138 page 24/32)”.

2. Continuity and change: document RO.M/1971

The document on marriage RO.M/1971, accepted by Methodists through a Global Integration Pact (PI/1975) following the formation of a United Church between Methodists and Waldensians, consists of four sections, which are still considered partly valid to date, in spite of the need to newly formulate them. Our call is to fulfil what is said within, in the light of the Gospel, as believers moved by their vocation to actually live their relationships.

First, the statement of a “Christian way to live the union” - according to an expression already used in the liturgy in 1880 – is still valid, regardless of the form of celebration, that believers “have as a

gift from God” (1 Corinthians 7,7) and which they fulfil in their life as a couple as “a particular expression of neighbour’s love and the Covenant of grace binding believers to their Lord” according to their “Christian vocation” (RO.M/1971, N° 8).

Second, marriage is constituted by the free consent of both spouses. It is defined as a public act, taking place during a worship service open to the public (RO.M/1971 , N° 12-15).

Third, the discipline and the pastoral care of interconfessional marriages has been surpassed by the Common Text (*Testo comune*)¹ and its Implementation (see point 3 further in the text).

Four, divorce and the second marriage of divorcees are further discussed in the Common Text where it reads that for the Waldensian Evangelical Church the couple gathers in the presence of God to witness the joining together as a lasting union where in principle “there is no likelihood of divorce” (RO.M/1971, N° 57). However, the existence of a conjugal crises can lead to irremediable breaking up, making it impossible to ask the couple to “desist from divorcing” (RO.M. /1971, N° 59) in the name of the Gospel. In fact, any coercion aimed at preserving cohabitation clashes with the believer’s free individual responsibility, thus falsely maintaining a union’s hallmarks experienced in a Christian way to experience marriage (affection, freedom, respect, solidarity, care, and a project of a social life). Second marriages are thus admitted, following forgiveness between former spouses who are part of the same congregation, in their brotherly communion within the Church (RO.M/1971, N° 60).

3. Interconfessional and mixed marriages

For over forty years the text RO.M/1971 has been the compass on the subject, a basis for other public positions, such as the Agreements², the 1997 Common Text for Pastoral Guidance in marriages between Roman Catholics and Waldensians or Methodists (*Testo comune per un indirizzo pastorale dei matrimoni tra cattolici e valdesi o metodisti*) and the 2000 Implementation Text. In the meantime society had changed and churches had opened to a new and different understanding of interconfessional unions so that the 1997 document even stated “on the other hand, the different notion of marriage as a sacrament or not, cannot hinder an interconfessional couple from living their union in a Christian way, in their common faith for the Lord, in love and hope, in joint prayer and in the constant listening to the Divine word – Ecumenical word in all ways. Each spouse will maintain a live and loyal relationship with their congregation and will try, where possible, to share moments of prayer and Biblical reading in their spouse’s church” (Common Text, 1.9 and 2.1).

¹ The Common Text (*Testo comune per un indirizzo pastorale dei matrimoni tra cattolici e valdesi o metodisti*) in Italy was signed in Rome on June the 16th 1997 by Gianni Rostan, the former Moderator of the Waldensian Board, and Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the former President of the Episcopal Conference of Italy (CEI). It is a bilateral agreement on mixed or interconfessional marriages agreed by the Waldensian Church and the CEI– the first document of its kind and so far the only one. The document was the result of an exchange, which lasted from 1989 to 1993, between the two committees appointed respectively by the Waldensian Synod and the CEI presidency. In the year 2000 it was followed by a text (*Testo applicativo*) implementing the pastoral guidance of the Common Text.

² Agreements between the representatives of the various faiths and denominations and the Italian State TN- In Italian: *Intese*),

4. Evolutions following RO.M/1971

For theological reasons, RO.M/1971 did not allow for a blessing unless registration followed: a blessing of a non-existent act is meaningless; there are also ethical reasons, given that generally an exclusively religious marriage was a choice of convenience which often took place in secret.

The Synod of the Methodist and Waldensian Churches, while refusing the term ‘marriage of conscience’, given the changed legal framework, takes into account the many reasons leading to the choice of living together and opts to accompany the couple over time, being aware of the wide range of unpredictable and thus non-plannable reasons in life.

According to current legal developments, same-sex marriages are not allowed but only civil unions are and given that marriage is not sacrament for Protestants, it is stated that all registered unions according to the Italian Law (currently Law 76/2016 aka Cirinnà Law) can apply for a blessing of their union. This is a change to what established by document 83/SI/2010.

Nuptial liturgies are different but they share the statement of “the intention to live their union according to the Gospel and asking the congregation of believers to sustain their will through prayers and solidarity, announcing the Gospel of grace, praising the Lord and interceding for them as they recall their common undertaking to bear witness in the world” (RO.M/1971, N18).

5. International social and cultural changes

Social and cultural changes, scientific and theological research have led to the need to adapt language and become more inclusive with regards to all types of families. The inclusion of same-sex relationships in the congregations indicates that homosexual and transsexual people are welcome in the Methodists and Waldensian Churches. Ending a cultural discrimination which lasted centuries, they have been able to set out on a path which leads to the acknowledgement of their love and mutual understanding with the request for a blessing of their union, accepted by the Synod of the Methodists and Waldensian Churches (83/SI/2010). New developments in national legislation referred to in point 4 indicate the need for formalisation even in the case of same-sex couples.

Such changes are crosscutting, resulting from cultural and anthropological changes: recently, the Waldensian Church in Rio de la Plata, as well as other sister Churches in European and non-European countries, such as CEVAA- the Community of Mission Churches – have dealt with such implications posing the question: how are we to bear witness of God’s love in our time and how can we mutually listen to each other in our families and congregations and communities?

6. Depth and breadth of socio-cultural changes

The existence of a range of family types is not an entirely new notion in our continent: European history is littered with several family organisation models. What is new is the degree of freedom

people enjoy in 'setting up a family' and/or the time of life for developing these choices: marriages are no longer on the threshold of life, during youth, but possibly resulting from the desire for cohabitation before marriage or the establishment of a new couple, even after divorce or separation, with new forms of parenthood.

Social, scientific and legal changes are also intertwined with a greater gender equality, female independence and emancipation, as proven by the new Italian 1975 Family Law, the introduction of contraception, the new legislation on voluntary abortion, fast track divorce and many other innovations in family law, with innovative interpretations of the Constitution and new legislation being introduced.

7. Implications for gender relations

Protestant thought sees only 'just relationships' between men and women as a contribution to the doctrine of Creation. Every time people are unable to develop a equal relationships, and sometimes resort to violence, this generates the chaos of Evil in the Creation. Families generate moral values in our society: where intimacy and strong emotional bonds are present – coming to terms with them - criteria based on respect and attention to the other are developed and extended throughout the society at large.

How families are established or which form they take, is not what determines its value: rather, good, deep and fair relationships determine its worth. This also means acknowledging that there is not a monopoly by the Church on the definition of marriage and gender roles, unlike what prevailed till a few decades ago. Hopefully churches will be open to critical thinking on gender behaviour and education based on stereotypes.

Men are not often encouraged to discuss family and social roles with the aim of harmonising change, a quest that women have had in redefining gender roles, so they may be mutual, fair and equal, in an attempt to experience relationships in freedom, responsibility and desire.

The thinking of the homosexual movements has expanded the horizons where we position binary reflexions on gender relations, raising major questions on the normative role of marriage in relation to other unions. The processing and metabolizing of 'just relationships' seem to have laid the foundations for a new way of thinking the relationship between human beings and God.

8. Multi-tiered Thinking

As many of its sister Churches, the Waldensian Evangelical Church has begun to reconceptualise life as a couple, parental relations and the family community: remarks have been organised along four lines, after documents for discussion were submitted to the Synod of Methodist and Waldensian Churches and discussed by local congregations in previous years.

9. Biblical Thinking

The message of the Gospel of brotherly love, peace, justice and inclusion enables us to interpret the Holy Scriptures that do not uphold one model of communion of life. The *Sola Scriptura* is one of the tenets of the Protestant Reformation, although there are several methods of interpreting the Biblical text because “Scripture is alive”. In other words, Scriptures offer many resources, never opting for single univocal interpretations, with a host of interpreters according to how the text was received in the community of readers. The world of the text is always awaiting further interpretations to be completed through the sounds it evokes leading from the letter to the Word. Our understanding of the Scripture as the word of God depends on encounters: God comes closer and reaches us, allowing us to discern Him/Her in human words.

Conjugal and family life is meaningful for believers and for society, despite the Bible not spelling out any one formula for every time and every place: families are particular historical aggregations which range from the Patriarchs’ polygamous families to the early Christian monogamous ones.

A couple is the result of God’s good Creation, with two partners made for each other, joined in the bond of love, experienced in the Faith of the Lord, nurtured by the gift of mutual love, it enjoys the pleasure of closeness, with respect and trust. Such a union is the joyful response (Gen. 2,23) and makes communication stable in the fullness of conjugal love and in a completely mutual relationship, in either partner’s solidarity revealing its dialogical nature and in the space of communion.

The homosexual relations the Bible condemns have nothing in common with same-sex relationships based on love, as it is commonly recognised in our modern societies, fully lived in reciprocity and freedom, sustained by God’s promise, as recognised by the document of the 4th joint session of the General Assembly of the Baptist Christian Evangelical Union and the Synod of Methodist and Waldensian Churches (2007).

Polygamy, as described in Bible stories, has become a contemporary issue in encountering people from other cultures and religions. In their post-colonial path, African Protestant Churches – and as a result, migrants from those areas coming to Italy – promote monogamy but do not impose it along the lines of a ceremony that respects legal pluralism and the jurisprudence of those countries. The Methodist and Presbyterian Church of Ghana consider customary marriage as an important part of the promise between the two betrothed. The Methodist Church of Ghana calls upon God’s Blessing on the couple in view of the recognition of the Christian concept of marriage and the commitment to live accordingly. The Blessing of the Lord can be invoked both for the customary marriage and for the registered marriage (when not taking place in the church during a service).

What holds under the various circumstances is the call to love one another as contained in the Bible as ‘God is love’ (1 John 4,8) trusting long-lasting relationships sustained by God’s love (Mark 10, 9 and Matthew 19,6). Love nourishes and nurtures neighbours’ relationships, in the couple and in the family, while being open to the community as human experience shows us. We are called to practice the love of neighbour to uphold justice, not to be bound to a specific type of relationship.

The language of the Covenant is at the centre of the Scriptures: it is the promise for loving neighbours, both at the personal and the community level, it is the lymph of marriage, cohabitation and love relationships with the gift of love and a full life received day after day. The parable of the Alliance between God and His/Her people (Hosea 2,16-19) and the marriage as sign of Christ and the Church's union (Ephesians 5,31-32), as it is written in the Common Text, is a word pronounced by the Bible on marriage but it is not exclusive to this type of union, however deep it may be.

Given the above premises, the love of neighbour in a couple, through its faithfulness and duration, with the possibility of having children, is enriched by opening out into society and to the Church. Families play an important albeit *not exclusive role* "in building cohesion and development, in promoting the person and their dignity. As a cell of the Christian community, families retain the task of bearing witness as a living example of relationships based on communion, the love of Christ and for His Church (see Ephesians 5,21 and following) and to be the first Evangelisers of the new generations" as the Common Text states.

10. Theological Thinking

The Common Text states that men and women, in their diversity and reciprocity, are invited to communicate, encounter and entertain dialogue, overcoming loneliness (Genesis 2,19). Men and women are so similar to make real and deep communion possible, and so different to enrich each other without losing their own self in each other.

The statements whereby human beings are divided in male and female, a tenet for humankind, was a key programmatic value in 21st century theologies. Such theologies are more aware of gender and post colonial critiques and believe that, albeit different interpretations, the verses of Genesis 1,27 and following, refer to a difference between the *two* genders - male and female – as being based on reciprocity, that is to say on diversity (Genesis 2,18 and 2,23) rather than on sexual difference *per se*. The fact that sexual difference refers to two sexes is widespread in society, while diversity can also exist between people of the same sex.

When asked, "who is my mother who are my brothers?" (Matthew 12,48 and Mark 3,33), Jesus answered indicating His disciples and those who follow the will of God. This indicates that in Jesus's eyes reciprocity could be more important than kin (Matthew 10,37).

In other terms, sexual difference as expressed in Genesis 1 and 2 does not consider the difference between men and women as absolute, but expresses the relational nature of a human being in a deep and profound manner. Genesis 1,26 does not establish a gender essentialism, nor does it force us to experience intimacy only in heterosexual relations, but shows us that we have been created since the beginning in relation to others-than self. Such a relationship means we define ourselves by interconnection, by proximity or distance, creating core families, considered by the Church as equal in dignity, aware that God's love is able to generate long-lasting love.

At a time when couple relationships seem to penalise the weaker subjects, theology suggests relationships based on love when justice, respect and curiosity for the other are priorities, while considering the desire to grow together, open to change and to be questioned. Love relationships where justice prevails offer an adequate answer to God who is converted by His/Her creature as

happened after the flood (Genesis, 8) opting in a clear cut manner for Jesus Christ as a respectful and non violent path.

11. Legal Thinking

Families are subjected to the legal provisions of civil society, which outlines the legal framework. When enacted, such provisions may harm the dignity of the person, a principle which the Waldensian Evangelical Church abides by, consistently referring to the Gospel. The Bible and the Italian Constitution have to be interpreted establishing a programmatic value given to reciprocity, thus shifting attention to welcoming, love and education on the various types of families.

The provisions that most bear weight in this field are the laws which are already listed in point 6 of the present document: the 1967 Law on Adoption, sees the right of the child to have a family at the centre and not vice versa; the 1970 Divorce Law, whereby the previously prevailing interest of keeping the group together is replaced by the right of an individual to decide of their destiny; and lastly the 1975 Family Law which establishes consensus and cooperation among its members as the basis for family unity, at last establishing formal and substantial parity.

As often happens, law-makers ruled on changes which were already underway in society, as was also the case for the 1978 Abortion Law or the 2016 Civil Union Law.

The shift is from a family seen as an institution, where roles corresponded to the *status*, to a family of equals, where the choice of the union is based on a covenant, and on the ability of its members to renew their relationship through consent in daily decisions. This is the new framework where out-of-wedlock children have acquired full dignity, as well as second marriages and de-facto couples who live together by choice and not only out of need.

Unquestionably, Italian legislation still privileges families based on marriage, even at a constitutional level. However, the Church has a prophetic duty to look beyond the law-makers' choices, following the message of the Gospel.

The importance of the covenant and of consensus also in education has highlighted the need to legally protect the historically weaker subjects of the family, such as women and minors.

This also implies that no family community is worthy of care unless it is based on the respect for the personality of its members. Mutual respect for the rights to one's personality enable us to see the rights to fertility, and not just reproduction under a new light. This is also true for the duration of a family union: moral assistance, material assistance, cohabitation, collaboration and faithfulness. Being the family a place where one's personality is expressed, it cannot allow for fundamental rights deprivation, such as the right to one's privacy, the use of one's body, social and emotional relations, freedom of speech and freedom of association. Last but not least, freedom of religion.

What has been said so far from a legal point of view implies the need to overcome formalism, assessing a family according to the model it has chosen, rather considering the actual basis of mutual solidarity among its members. The provisions on same-sex parenthood are consistent with this approach, even when third-party gestation happens abroad, or when adopting the child of the partner (so called step-child adoption) or when adopting children recognised as one's own abroad,

according to the principles of the Italian Constitution and the international treaties Italy has undersigned. Furthermore, it is important to point out that one of the most important legal developments since the new Family Law, is the introduction of so called ‘protection orders’ (*ordini di protezione*) that a magistrate is authorized to issue in the event of abusive family relations, whatever form they may take.

12. Liturgical Thinking

The interest for a liturgical renewal speaks of the ability that Protestants have in debating their tradition in the light of the Gospel and of social changes. Liturgies are the locus of believers’ creativity and expression of the maturity of the Faith in specific historical contexts: during worship, they can experience the new relationships being created in Christ.

Consistently with the fact that according to the Bible marriage is not a sacrament, the Waldensian Evangelical Church does not only rely only on one liturgy in order to celebrate the union between two partners. By invoking the Blessing of the Lord on the life that the two spouses have freely and voluntarily decided to spend together, the Waldensian Evangelical Church has adopted several liturgies approved by the Synod of the Methodists and Waldensian Churches (see www.chiesavaldese.org) which take on the multiple forms of unions recognised by the Italian State. Please see the articles on mixed and inter-confessional marriages in the Common Text.

Based on this multiplicity, and thanks to international requests, the invitation is to consider marriages, civil unions and cohabitations without discriminations, acknowledging equal dignity to the project of a lasting bond of love between two people. Liturgical pluralism is a hallmark of the Waldensian Evangelical Church and is not limited to the present debate.

13. The Blessing of Couples

The Synod of the Methodist and Waldensian Churches underscores the fact that, thanks to the Agreement with the Italian State, while heterosexual couples can marry in Church with same legal effects of a registered marriage. However, in the case of civil unions there is only a Municipal Registry Office celebration – in fact the law terms it a constitution (*costituzione*) and refuses to use the term celebration. Given this situation, in 2015 the Synod of the Methodists and Waldensian Churches approved several liturgies for the Blessing of same sex couples, if and when at least one of the two partners is a member of the Protestant community.

Blessings do not belong to us, but cross and enlighten our lives. They are not a guarantee but a promise by the Lord in the context of faith. We affirm the Grace of God and the unconditional acceptance of life choices made by human beings.

14. Responsible Parenthood

The end of one legitimate family model appears even clearer in parenthood. In the past fifty years, both biological out-of-wedlock and adoptive parenthood are considered equally dignified as recognised legitimate parenthood.

Possibilities enabled by reproductive technologies and parental projects spread throughout society in recent decades lead us to compare new perspectives: 1) the possibility that a child may be conceived or delivered with the predetermined intention of single parenthood; 2) the possibility of a child having two same-sex parents; 3) the possibility that a child may have more than two parents.

Such cases already exist and raise ethical issues which do not fall into the remit of the present document.

One has to distinguish between the legitimate desire of becoming parents and the ways in which this can be implemented in families, at times unfortunately marred by violent and selfish relationships. Parenthood has to be defined in each family according to the actual relationships. We warn against idolatrous and selfish behaviour and the risks of commodification of women's bodies, while appealing to people's sense of responsibility.

15. A Caring Community

In the light of what has been said so far, it is not a matter of questioning marriage, but rather of including other forms of unions and for the community to recognise, accompany and support them. Not only when adults experience difficulties, crises, separations or divorces, but also when younger members need special care. Under difficult circumstances they often become the weakest link. This also applies to transitions from one family configuration to another in the so-called 'reconstituted families'. The fragmentation of the core family and the multitude of forms can make it more difficult for local churches to identify and welcome the weaker members, also because of the process of secularization. One has to consider that many people live alone but they can find ways and means to express the love of neighbour in their social and community lives, fully aware that there are other ways of living in communion as well as or beyond the family.

A Christian community knows how speak the words that resurrect relationships, experimenting the power of life which makes its members feel welcomed by God's Love, through a path of spiritual accompaniment and infinite opportunities to encounter one another. Such words allow life to flow once more, in order to defuse lethal divisions while favouring an authentic company based on solidarity, respect and trust in reconciliation. Throughout family crises and transitions due to separations, deaths or divorces – situations which at times can lead people to become more distant from the community of faith – it is important for believers to know that they can always return, that the community will accompany them along this path. The community remains a place where they are welcome and a place of fraternity in God's love, where one is called to mutually accept one another (Romans 15,7).

Every facet of one's emotional and relational life is an opportunity to see one's vocation on view of the Kingdom that will transform and redeem us. The existing range of families does not exempt us from the need to define what a family is in this day and age. The centre of our thinking is the hope

that all families, whatever form they may take on, are open to the transcendence and to the social features of the love of neighbour, both in the church and in society.

The Common Text deals delicate aspects of the religious education of children in interconfessional marriages: such aspects are also important for believers who share a faith or- as often happens in the context of increasing secularization – when one of the parents is agnostic (*Common Text*, N°24). It may also be difficult to find an agreement on children education in the context of the different families, for instance when divorce is followed by a second marriage. One has to be aware of the secularization and religious pluralism the children might grow up in, and help them to compare the various visions of the world, offering attention and a listening environment.

The community of believers cares for its members as ‘one body’ (1 Corinthians 12, 19-20). According to the Waldensian Church “since parents are the only people responsible to God for the commitments they undertake with God for their children, they are the ones who decide about christening and the Christian education of the children born from an interconfessional marriage”. In this case too, the Waldensian Church does not require a formal promise but ‘supports parents and comforts them as they fulfil their duties’ (RO.M/1971 N° 31) and recalls the personal responsibility of the believer who ‘bears witness of their faith to their spouse and children’ (RO.M/1971, N° 32), even in the case of new families which may form.

In the preparation to the wedding and throughout the pastoral accompaniment, such decisions will have to be made so as to present a Christian education to children from a very young age. Since the responsibility falls on the two parents, they can be supported by the communities they belong to or by their respective Churches in the case of an interconfessional marriage. In this case the Christian education will be imparted “following an ecumenical spirit which mainly consists of presenting the work of God, as witnessed by the Word of the Bible, having its living centre in Christ which is and remains the point of reference of each person’s Faith. In fact we are baptized and belong to Him, in life and death, being part of His body (1 Corinthians, 12)” (*Common Text*, N° 2,4).

When accompanying individuals and couples towards their personal vocation and in bearing evangelical witness whereby very different men and women, with their own histories, education and prospects, exchanging in dialogue. In this context, the community has to be reconceptualised so that the often forgotten emotional and communicative facets may be retraced. There is a need for Churches to have a more comprehensive approach based on projects, developing new perspectives inspired anew by the word of God. First and foremost, we need to find fellows of humanity in our brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to discover what makes us alike, in spite of the diversity and uniqueness of the relationships we experience in the Glory of God.

Mutual recognition of the gifts is paramount so that the Church may live of charisma, in mutual service, enlarging the place of the tent (Isaiah 54,2), giving everyone the chance to freely give themselves. In the attempt to watch over a calm and steady spiritual and numerical growth of our congregations, welcoming new members and allowing to be surprised again and again by the Lord and His/Her ways that are not our ways (Isaiah, 55, 6-13).