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Divorce in the Unificationist Faith Community

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This study investigates the impact of divorce on members of the Unificationist faith community. It is the first study of its kind at the Unification Theological Seminary, now HJ International Graduate School for Peace and Public Leadership, and the only article, study, or book written by a Unificationist exclusively on the subject of divorce in this particular faith community, as far as the researcher is aware.^[1] Divorce has been a footnote at best amongst Unificationists. It is a taboo topic, and therefore overdue for examination.

According to the American Psychological Association, around 40-50% of first marriages in the U.S. end in divorce, with a further 60-70% of second marriages ending in divorce. This means that new members of this faith community moving forward have a high probability of being divorced or being a child impacted by divorce. If Unificationists can't dialogue about divorce, how can the Unificationist faith community hope to connect with this important demographic?

Through quantitative and qualitative measures, this study seeks to understand Unificationists' or their ex-spouses' reasons for divorce, and how they reconciled their faith with divorce. Participants in the study also provided insights on how they wished they would have been better supported by their community.

The results provide valuable new information regarding the impact of divorce on Unificationists' faith and how the community's culture surrounding divorce affected the retention of community members post-divorce. Recommendations are offered regarding the Unificationist faith community providing educational and emotional support to married individuals facing possible divorce, and to those getting divorced; as well as suggestions on how to reduce the number of divorces and, when a couple has decided to divorce, how the community could be more inclusive and supportive of divorced individuals and their families.

From my own experience with a broken Holy Marriage Blessing,^[2] and my husband's experience with a divorce after receiving the Blessing and having children, there aren't many Unificationist community members or faith leaders who are willing and able to support divorced individuals in our faith community. While both of us remain in this community, it's not difficult to see that both our local communities and national church could do much more to lessen the burden and strengthen the faith of those going through one of the most difficult times in a person's life.

Just under half of the participants in the study reported some judgment from church members regarding their divorce. Nearly a quarter of participants reported that some church members and friends stopped talking to them because of their divorce. However, half of participants were remarried and re-Blessed since their divorce. Over three-quarters of participants still identify as Unificationists, and over a third of participants said they were currently supported, embraced, and accepted by their community. Nearly three-quarters of participants said that their faith after divorce was deeper and more authentic. The vast majority of participants who were parents shared some form of negative impact on their children.

Divorce can be the death of faith and the end of that person's personal faith lineage. From my husband's and my experience, and after conducting this research, the main thing our community needs is a support system that embraces those who have gone through a divorce. A small group, for instance, of those who have gone through a similar experience could be the difference between someone who leaves the faith and someone who stays.

The Research Study

This is the first study of its kind at HJ International Graduate School for Peace and Public Leadership to look at the impact of divorce on Unificationists who had received the Holy Marriage Blessing. The Holy Marriage Blessing is the sacrament of the Unificationist faith in which a man and woman agree to an eternal marriage as part of God's lineage. Divorce, therefore, has a significant impact on the individuals and their faith, as well as on their Unificationist community.

The Marriage Blessing is not a legally binding agreement, but rather a religious one. Couples still need to complete the necessary steps in order to be legally married. The individuals in this study had received the Marriage Blessing together with their spouses and were legally married according to their country's laws. Therefore, they also had to obtain a legal divorce.

The focus of the study was to research the impact of divorce on the individuals, and the support or lack of support that they received from their faith community during and after going through divorce. Without data on the experiences of those who went through divorce, it is difficult, if not impossible, to support individuals in this challenging situation or to reduce the number of divorces in the future.

Researcher's Background

The researcher for this study is a female second-generation Unificationist^[3] who experienced a broken Blessing after being in that relationship for nine years. Her second husband had also divorced after 14 years of marriage. This subject is a highly personal one to the individuals involved, including the researcher, and a subject of much pain and stigma in the Unificationist faith community. Seeing the struggle, isolation, and alienation many have experienced post-divorce in this faith community has been troubling to the researcher for some time.

While the Marriage Blessing is intended to be an eternal commitment, the fact of the matter is that that commitment takes two people. Sometimes, one party chooses to break that commitment for various reasons. It is not the responsibility of community members or faith leaders to cast judgment, but rather to support and uplift those going through difficult times. Divorce is one of the most destructive periods in a person's life and can be the ruin of their personal faith and relationship with God.

Rev. Moon, the founder of the Unificationist faith, himself was divorced from his first wife. Did he hang his head in defeat? No. He built from the ashes of that marriage the future and community he wanted to see. It is the community's responsibility therefore to hear from those who have been divorced and learn how to best support them on their life and spiritual journey. It is upon that foundation that this research

was conducted, to give a voice to this unheard demographic so that transformation can happen in the Unificationist faith community in how they support those going through divorce and prepare couples for marriage.

Current Divorce Trends

According to the National Institutes of Health, the United States has the sixth highest divorce rate in the world, with an estimated 45% before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Marriage and divorce rates dropped from 2009 to 2019. The national average divorce rate in the U.S. in 2020 was 2.3 per 1,000 people, as the Centers for Disease Control reported. That is almost 64% lower than the average of 3.6 per 1,000 people in 2010.^[4] However, even as the divorce rate in America reached a 50-year low, the marriage rate also reached an all-time low at the same time.^[5]

Usually, second or third marriages in the United States have a higher divorce rate: 60% of second marriages and about 73% of third marriages end in divorce. Couples going through their first divorce are around the age of 30. Married couples between the ages of 20 to 25 are 60% likely to get a divorce. Women file for divorce more than men. 69% of women vs. 31% of men file for divorce. Surveys show that such disparity results from women's high and later unmet expectations of emotional support from men. The average length of marriage in the United States is 8.2 years.^[6]

What Unificationist Scripture Says about Divorce

It is important to understand what Unificationist scripture says on the subject of divorce and to understand the theological basis and teachings of those going through this experience. The word "divorce" is mentioned 32 times in the *Cheon Seong Gyeong*, one of the core Unificationist holy texts that offers quotes from Rev. and Mrs. Moon on various subjects. Rev. Moon also spoke on divorce in other talks and public events, and some of them are quoted below.

Rev. Moon himself was divorced from his first wife before marrying Hak Ja Ha Moon. Below is a quote about his personal experience with and thoughts on divorce. The fact that Rev. Moon was divorced is relevant to this study, because his position on divorce could be argued to have had a significant influence on the members of the Unificationist faith community's opinion on the matter.

Within my family, there are children from two different mothers. When I lost my first wife through divorce, I had to go through a wilderness course. I lost everything. In a way, now the entire world is experiencing the same thing through the breakdown of families. The world has completely lost God's true love family center. It has lost God's value system.^[7]

Blessed couples don't divorce

Today Eastern and Western people fight, and even if they do get together, they divorce after a short time. In contrast, our Blessed Families are living together well after ten years, twenty years, or however long.^[8]

No one wants to divorce

Ask your original mind: Should you divorce your spouse? Ask your children whether they want you to divorce. What about your parents? Ask them if they would like you to divorce. Nobody wants to go through divorce. The one who is pursuing a divorce will feel sad, but if he doesn't realize the seriousness of the issue, he will go ahead and sign the paper.^[9]^[17]

Divorce is a world of hell

In this world, parents do not have absolute unity. They are inclined to struggle and fight with one another and even think about divorce. Is such a world heaven or hell? Do you imagine that your two eyes desire to divorce? These eyes always have harmony and unity one with another. They follow each other. Do you think that your left nostril desires to divorce your right nostril? They always work in harmony with each other. Your upper and lower lips always operate in oneness and remain eternally together. Do you think that your right ear will decide not to hear anymore and let the left ear do it all? Actually, our five senses do not have any concept of divorce. However, our body's desire is the problem. Our bodily desire demands that our mind follow.^[10]

Failure to cultivate love

Why do you think the problem of divorce could come up between people who love each other? Considering the fact that those who have divorced or who want to divorce all once had a love relationship transcending life and death, there is something wrong. There can be many reasons for divorce, but it ultimately signifies that something has changed – something between two people. It happens because they fail to maintain and cultivate their love. Love itself does not change, but people's hearts change.^[11]

Loving from a humanistic perspective

When a husband and wife love each other, each should love their spouse as a representative of God. When they love each other from a humanistic perspective, the shortcomings on both sides will come out, and this may eventually lead to their divorce.^[12]

Let's say that you were attracted to a man because he was handsome. Then suppose he was crippled in an accident a week after you married, and that led you to seek a divorce. This would not be true love but false love.^[13]

People should love their spouse as God's representative. If they love each other from a humanistic viewpoint, their shortcomings will be revealed and eventually they might even seek a divorce.^[14]

Impact on children

When parents divorce, this is like cutting their children in half with a knife. The public law of the universe does not allow this. Parents who violate this will receive punishment and be followed by misfortune wherever they go, unable to find happiness.^[15]

When children have grown up in the tradition of love, do you think they could be indifferent if their parents wanted a divorce? Absolutely not. The children would all insist, "I am your child. I am the one with whom you are combined. For me, you have to make whatever negotiation is necessary, and you have to be great parents for me. I need you." We must make young people and parents awaken to the fact that because of their children, parents have no right to divorce.^[16]

Divorce is not an option

Can the young men and women in the Unification Church divorce? They can never divorce. You should not think of getting a divorce and running away, but instead, train yourself to go out on the same boat.^[17]

Divorce is the destruction of true love

When two partners attain oneness, it is impossible to separate them. If separation occurred, true love would be destroyed. Therefore, in true love, there can be no concept of divorce. When a man feels love, the feeling arises not from him but from a woman. Likewise, the fire of love is kindled in the heart of a woman not by herself alone but by her husband; that is to say, their love belongs to each other.^[18]

Sanctity of family

The divorce rate of around fifty percent is completely obliterating the sanctity of the family.^[19]

You cannot abandon your siblings. You cannot abandon your mother. You cannot abandon anyone in your family. Therefore, the word “divorce” cannot exist. A husband represents the father and older brother, so a wife cannot abandon her husband any more than she can abandon her father and older brother. You have to love the world with such love. When you see a man who is the same age as your father, you should love him as your father, and when you see a woman the same age as your mother, you should love her as your mother.^[20]

Following the path of faith

Unification Church members are not without value. We are not a simple group that believes we can go to heaven just by going to a Sunday service with the Bible under our arm or by giving a few pennies in donations. That is for simple folk. That is not for people as intense as us. Once we believe in something, we do it till the end. Placing our life on the line, even if our spouse grabs us to prevent us from following, we are so intense. We follow the path of faith, even if there is the risk of it leading to divorce.^[21]

Method

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, this study sought to understand Unificationists’ reasons for divorce, how they reconciled their faith with divorce, and how the Unificationist faith community can better support those going through a divorce.

Participants were also asked about how they wished they would have been better supported by the Unificationist faith community, both in terms of education and emotional support, to either still feel connected to the community post-divorce and/or prevent the divorce in the first place.

Participants

Participants were recruited to participate in the study through personal invitation by the researcher, and through private Unificationist Facebook groups asking if those who had been divorced would be willing to participate in a research study on divorce in the Unificationist faith community. Participants were assured that their privacy would be protected at every stage of the study.

Data was collected from 34 individuals who received the Holy Marriage Blessing but subsequently divorced at some point.

Procedure

Most participants completed an individual one-hour video-recorded interview over Zoom about their divorce. Three participants opted for an audio-only interview either via Zoom or in person. They received no compensation for participating in this interview. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

All study procedures were approved by a special UTS faculty committee. The researcher completed OHRP (Office for Human Research Participants) certification for working with human subjects. The Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) is a government agency that provides leadership in the protection of the rights, welfare, and well-being of human subjects involved in research conducted or supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). OHRP is part of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health in the Office of the Secretary of HHS.^[22]

Results

The interviews consisted of 32 questions (see Appendix A). The first 14 questions were demographic in nature, such as age, gender, education level, and so forth; the rest asked for details about their divorce experience, including questions relating to their situation before, during, and after the actual divorce.

Some interview questions were multiple choice or quantitative. Most of the interview questions were open-ended, qualitative questions. An analysis of the open-ended questions for common themes was conducted.

Demographics

The majority, 91.2%, of the participants resided in the United States; three participants were based outside the U.S. The sample included 20 women and 14 men. Of these, three men and three women had been married to each other; information was not available on the former spouses of the other 29 individuals.

The sample also included 18 first-generation Unificationists and 16 second-generation Unificationists.

At the time of the study, the participants were 53.9 years old on average, ranging from 33 to 78 years old. The majority of participants had at least a four-year degree, with 41.2% having a bachelor’s degree, 23.5% with a master’s degree, and 8.8% with a doctorate or post-doctoral.

The vast majority of participants (97.1%) had at least one child. The majority of participants received the Marriage Blessing for the first time when they were between 21 and 29 years old, with a range from 18 years old to 39 years old. The average number of years of marriage for participants was 18.86 years. Five of the participants were still finalizing their divorce. The sample was 82.4% Caucasian, 20.6% Asian, 5.9% Black or African-American, 5.9% Hispanic or Latino, and 5.9% Native American or Alaska Native.

More than three-fourths of the participants (76.5%) still identified as Unificationists, with the second highest percentage (17.6%) being “spiritual,” followed by Christian (8.8%), and two participants identified equally as Unificationist and another religion (Buddhist and Hindu). Only one participant identified as agnostic, while another participant identified as having no religious beliefs.

Exactly half (50%) of the participants remarried, and all of those who remarried received the Marriage Blessing again with their new spouse. Only one participant identified as being “in a relationship,” and 32% of participants were single.

Responses to Interview Questions

The participants responded to the interview questions with honesty and offered valuable insights into their experiences. The results for the 17 questions are summarized below, followed by additional comments offered by participants.

1. Parents’ relationship

The participants were asked what their parents’ relationship was like when they were growing up to offer some context to their perceptions

and experiences with marriage, relationships, and divorce.

Many participants gave an overall positive opinion of their parents' relationship, with words like loving/loved each other/deeply in love (20.5%), partnership (14.7%), good (11.8%), good communication (11.8%), affectionate (8.8%), never fought (5.9%), friendly (2.9%), harmonious (2.9%), strong (2.9%), romantic (2.9%), enjoyed each other's company (2.9%). Over a quarter of participants categorized their parents' relationship as having stability, using words like committed (23.5%) and faithful (8.8%). Only 14.7% of participants characterized their parents' relationship as "normal."

A handful of participants' parents divorced (14.7%), while only one participant's parents separated but didn't divorce.

Some of the negative descriptors the participants reported about their parents' relationship included argumentative (23.5%), not affectionate (14.7%), high-conflict (8.8%), difficult (8.8%), not loving (5.9%), poor communication (5.9%), dysfunctional (2.9%), unstable (5.9%), not affectionate (14.7%), fighting (2.9%), not great (2.9%), unhappy (2.9%), tense (2.9%), and not easy (2.9%). Substance abuse (11.8%) and infidelity (5.9%) were a small minority of reported issues in their parents' relationship. A religious factor in their parents' relationship was reported by 20.6% of participants. One participant stated that their parents had religious differences, but that they had a "very nice relationship."

2. Length of separation

The majority of participants (82.4%) reported being separated from their spouse for a period of time before getting divorced. 29.4% were separated for several years, 17.6% for one year, 14.7% for 18 months, and 8.8% for a few months; only one participant was separated for a couple of years, and only two participants said they were separated multiple times over the years. Six participants (17.6%) were never separated prior to their divorce. Participants identified several factors to the separation and length of separation: emotional separation (while living in the same house); physical separation required to file divorce; one partner preferred to move out; felt unsafe; work or religious mission.

3. Who initiated the divorce

Over half of the spouses of participants filed for divorce (64.7%), 50% women and 50% men. 29.4% of participants filed for divorce, 80% women and 20% men. Two participants stated that the divorce filing was mutual. Filing the divorce did not necessarily mean that the participant initiated the divorce. It simply means that they were the ones to start the official divorce paperwork. One participant said that they filed for divorce but at the request or invitation for divorce by their spouse.

4. Reasons for divorce

Nearly half of the participants (47.1%) reported infidelity or an extramarital affair as the main contributing factor for divorce. The other most commonly reported major contributors were mental health issues (29.4%), religious differences (26.5%), lack of commitment (20.6%), poor communication (20.6%), incompatibility (17.6%), financial problems (14.7%), psychological or emotional abuse (14.7%), and porn addiction (11.8%).

Less reported factors included homosexuality (8.8%), too much conflict or arguing (8.8%), getting married too young (8.8%), substance abuse (5.9%), domestic violence (5.9%), lack of support from family (5.9%), cultural differences (5.9%), sexual issues (5.9%), little or no premarital education (2.9%), and disagreement about when to start a family (2.9%).

5. Child custody arrangements

Of the participants in this study who had minor children (under 18 years old) at the time of the divorce, ten participants (45.5%) had joint custody of their children with their ex-spouse. Another nine participants (40.9%) had full custody of their children, eight of whom were women (88.8%). Only one male participant had full custody of his children. Two participants' ex-partners had full custody, with the participants (both male) allowed visitation. One participant, a male, had minor custody of his three children, with visitation rights for half of the school holidays.

Even though there are no laws that officially favor mothers in custody cases, as of 2023, 79.9% of custodial parents in the United States are mothers.^[23]

6. Self-perception post-divorce

Participants were asked to report how they saw themselves during and right after having gone through a divorce. Participants almost universally reported having some period of growth after the divorce was put on the table. Most participants went through a time of self-reflection and re-evaluation of what mattered to them. A number (17.6%) also reported feeling relief or freedom right after the divorce was on the table.

When the divorce was in process and being finalized, most participants expressed feeling a variety of negative emotions, such as anger (14.7%), guilt (11.8%), feeling like a failure (14.7%), pain (14.7%), or hurt (11.8%).

7. Self-perception now

In contrast to the difficult aftermath of divorce, many participants reported being in a more positive state of mind after some time to heal and reflect. For those who had finalized their divorce, most reported feeling at peace, or at least having moved on in their life and being in a better place mentally and spiritually than they were immediately at the time or right after the divorce. "Happy" was a sentiment shared by 41.2% of participants and 20.6% of participants reported being "grateful." 17.6% of participants say they "grew a lot." A handful of participants (17.6%) had gained more spiritual insight through their divorce. Only one participant still expressed regret, and only one other participant expressed still feeling sorry.

8. Are participants still struggling with their divorce?

Only a small percentage (17.6%) of participants reported that they were still struggling to some degree with their divorce, five women and one man. The reasons shared for still struggling were not receiving child support, emotional triggers, fear of commitment, ex-spouse moving on quickly with someone else, grieving for their marriage, grieving for the future they wanted, ex-spouse not open to co-parenting, ex-spouse being difficult, no sense of closure, the pain of being betrayed sexually, financial difficulties, and the divorce still being painful.

The other 82.4% of participants expressed no struggle at all presently. Of those who reported not struggling, a couple of participants did express a caveat that they regretted any negative impact the divorce had on their children.

9. Positive outcomes

While there were various positive outcomes of their divorce reported by participants, the most common among them was that they were happily remarried (41.2%), had a stronger personal faith (23.5%), had a stronger relationship with God (20.6%), a better relationship with their children (20.6%), and were creating the life they wanted (20.6%). 14.7% of participants said they were "happier."

Several answers indicate that the majority of participants saw significant growth in themselves and liked who they had become post-divorce.

Several factors were reported in the realm of self-development: personal growth (11.8%); more real and honest (11.8%); more self-awareness (17.6%); found my identity (11.8%); more self-conviction (5.9%); made me a better person (8.8%). Feeling “hopeful for the future” was a sentiment shared by several participants who were not re-married or in a long-term relationship. It also brought greater empathy and connection for some participants (8.8%) with other people.

10. Church community's perception of you during the divorce

One major point of the study was to see how the divorce impacted participants' connection to the Unificationist faith community. They were asked how they would say other people in their church community perceived them during the divorce. 38.2% of participants reported having felt no judgment at all from church members during their divorce, 29.4% felt some judgment, 14.7% definitely felt judgment, and 14.7% didn't know. That means that a little under half (44.1%) of the participants received at least some judgment because of their divorce.

Over a quarter of participants (26.5%) said that their church community was supportive overall and 23.5% said that those who knew them well were supportive. About a third of participants (31.2%) said that they were treated the same as before, that their community was kind, sympathetic, welcoming, knew they had done their best, and didn't express any negativity towards them. Only 8.8% of participants reported receiving some judgment, but mostly support and sympathy.

Eight participants stated that they “didn't know” because they weren't involved in a church community because of distance or by choice, so they didn't have contact with church members at the time of their divorce. Only one participant avoided church altogether because of assumed judgment from their community. Another participant said that no one said anything negative to them directly, but that they could “feel their disapproval in the air.” Yet another reported more “self-stigma” than any stigma from their community.

Some participants expressed that community members “didn't know what to say” (17.6%), that they were “shocked” (11.8%), or that the divorce “made them uncomfortable” (14.7%). Only 5.9% of participants said that church members wanted to know what had happened. Several participants (11.8%) said that they received unsolicited advice on how to repair their marriage from church members.

There were a few less-than-positive perceptions expressed by participants. They reported being treated differently (2.9%), feeling stigmatized (2.9%), and disappointment from church members (2.9%). Only one participant reported receiving judgment from church leadership when they wanted to get re-Blessed, e.g., receive the Marriage Blessing with a new spouse.

Nearly a quarter of participants (23.6%) reported that some church members and friends stopped talking to them. A couple of participants' ex-spouses spread negative rumors about them to friends and church members, and they received judgment based on that. Some participants said that community members assumed they were at fault for the divorce (5.9%), that community members told them they were a bad person (5.9%), or that everyone stopped talking to them (2.9%).

11. Church community's perception of you now, post-divorce

More than two-thirds of participants (67.6%) were still involved in the Unificationist faith community, and 14.7% were somewhat involved. Only 17.6% were no longer involved at all. Almost a third of participants (32.4%) said that they currently felt supported, embraced, and accepted by their community.

Of those participants who were still involved, they reported that their community treated them the same as before they were divorced (23.5%), that they were perceived as respected members of the community (11.8%), perceived very positively (14.7%), and people had expressed being happy for them being re-Blessed (20.6%). Over a fifth of participants (20.6%) said that their community was inspired by their journey.

Several participants admitted that many people in their current community don't know that they were divorced (11.8%). Only 5.9% of participants said they didn't currently know how community members perceived them. One participant even reported feeling closer to community members after their divorce.

12. Parents' perception of your divorce

Participants were asked what their parents thought about them getting divorced. Over a third of participants (35.5%) expressed that their parents were supportive and 26.5% that their parents wanted them to be happy. About a third (35.5%) of the participants' parents (one or both) were deceased at the time of their divorce. 11.8% of participants shared that their parents were disapproving but supportive, while only two participants said they were disapproving, and another that they weren't supportive. They expressed that their parents felt sad (11.8%), disappointed (5.9%), heartbroken (11.8%), and surprised (8.8%).

Only a handful of participants (8.8%) said their parents still hoped they and their ex-spouse would work things out. Three participants said that their parents blamed themselves for the divorce.

13. Children's perception of your divorce

Participants who had children at the time of the divorce were asked how their children thought and felt about their parents getting divorced. Almost half of the participants said that their children found the divorce painful or difficult (41.4%). Nearly a quarter of children (24.1%) felt “angry.” 17.2% said that their children expressed disappointment that their parents weren't getting back together.

The vast majority of participants who were parents shared some form of negative impact on their children (72.1%), describing their children as angry (24.1%), traumatized (6.9%), hurt (6.9%), conflicted (6.9%), suicidal (3.4%), heartbroken (3.4%), having mental health issues (3.4%), feeling lack of love (3.4%), nothing positive (3.4%), abandoned (3.4%), like they lost out (3.4%), and surviving (3.4%). Some 27.6% of parents said that their children were healing from the divorce. 10.3% of participants' children were supportive of their divorce or their parents having moved on with a new spouse.

A very small percentage of parents reported that their children gained anything positive from the divorce. Few children were reported as happy (3.4%), relieved (6.9%), understanding (3.4%); or thinking the divorce was for the best (3.4%). Only two participants who were parents reported that their children were “doing okay” (6.9%). About 14% of parents said that their children didn't know any different because they were so young when the divorce happened.

As for the relationship between themselves and their children, 20.7% of participants who were parents said that their children blamed them for the divorce. Only one participant shared that their children blamed their ex-spouse. 13.7% of parents said that their children didn't understand about the divorce or had never asked them about it. 6.9% of parents had a strained relationship with their children. Almost a quarter of the children (24.1%) found divorce hard to talk about.

14. Faith before divorce

In order to gauge the impact of divorce on participants' faith, they were asked what their faith looked like for them before divorce. Nearly a third (32.4%) of participants said that they had a close relationship with God and that their faith was strong, solid, clear, or disciplined (26.5%) before divorce. Nearly as many participants (29.4%) described their faith as doctrinal or rigid pre-divorce, while 17.6% said it was idealistic, blind and immature. Only 17.6% of participants expressed their faith as not very strong, while another 23.5% described faith as unconditional and living for the sake of others.

15. Faith after divorce

Compared to their faith before divorce, nearly three-quarters of participants (73.5%) said that their faith after divorce was deeper and more authentic. A quarter of participants (26.5%) questioned their beliefs at some point. A third (35.3%) of participants described their faith as being deeper, stronger, or growing, as well as having a closer relationship with God. Another 38.2% said their faith was more personal, authentic, or real. A further 23.5% called their faith less dogmatic or broader.

A small percentage (17.6%) described their faith as still the same or unaffected. 20.6% qualified their faith as still believing in God. 11.8% of participants said that their faith was different or changing. Three participants shared that they were still figuring it out. Only two participants said they were either not spiritual or agnostic.

16. Support received during divorce

Participants were asked to describe the kind of support they received during the divorce. Over half of participants (64.7%) said that they received little to no support from the church. About a third of participants (29.4%) reported that some church members were supportive on a one-on-one basis. 17.6% said that their church community was supportive. Most support came from family (47.1%) and friends (47.1%). Just under a quarter of participants found counseling and therapy helpful (23.5%). Only four participants participated in support groups (5.9%) or small groups (5.9%).

17. Support you wish you would have received

Participants were then asked what type of support they wished they would have received. Most responded in relation to the church. Over a third of participants (34.4%) expressed that they would have wanted their pastor, leader, or community members to have reached out to them asking how they were doing. A little over a fifth of participants (21.9%) would have appreciated church-based divorce resources, as well as a church divorce support group. Some 28.2% would have liked more preventative education and support early on in their marriage when they were struggling and advice on what to do in unhealthy marriages. More listening with empathy was a sentiment shared by 12.5%.

Additional participant comments

Appreciation

Several participants expressed gratitude for being able to share their story. Others hoped that the church would evolve to be more accepting of divorced individuals and would look at this important topic.

“I hope your study helps lots of people and that divorce is not this unspoken stigma.”

“I do feel like when church people use the word ‘divorce’ I am sensitive to it. They fail to understand how God works. Churches have to draw between where you should end the marriage and when you should work it out. The problem is that only God can help you with that...I have counseled people to just find that God within to guide you, otherwise you won't feel good about the steps you take.”

“Our church doesn't know how to deal with divorce. Deeper than that, the church doesn't know how to be present with the underlying ills of our society that are very real...Our church community has only attempted to insulate ourselves from those issues instead of trying to solve them...The divorce rate is more than fifty percent for the people joining [in the future]. That's their life experience.”

Divorce support

Several participants shared how the church, in general, does a poor job of supporting people who are struggling and have unique family situations, causing an exodus from people who don't fit the “ideal.”

“If you really want to show people that you're a true Unification Church member, you won't turn your back on people. If you're not ready to be there to hold them, you will lose people.”

“Church members and leaders need to be more understanding and supportive of divorcees in the church.”

Some younger participants who were born into the church wanted to express that they never felt forced into staying in this religious community or getting married to their ex-spouse. However, they noted that the church could be more embracing and nonjudgmental of those of them who decided to go a different path.

“We can't get to a better place here on being able to talk about [divorce] and respond to this, or even rationalize about good or bad, if we don't know how to even dialogue about. We certainly can't get there by sticking our head in the sand.”

“[Young people's] holiness should not depend on their marriage status.”

Marriage support

One participant said that the teaching of loving unconditionally is good in theory, but that an unconditional marriage doesn't work. Some participants shared how the church needs to be careful about how it educates young people before they are married, especially practical support and resources when they are struggling, not just vague advice or an invitation to pray more. Also, education on how to be a loving, supportive, healthy partner in marriage, including being clear on their faith and relationship with God is a good foundation.

“You have to begin with who you are with God now, before who you are with God with another person.”

“Allow the space in the community for people to be young adults, unattached, and identify their core, their sense of self, their life course, and have it be genuinely for their own fulfillment instead of the fulfillment of a mission.”

One participant expressed that couples and individuals should be encouraged to seek support from their community when they are struggling in their marriage and that the pastor/leader/community should be open to such scenarios and support them.

“Along the way, since then, I've learned about community life. There are no islands in our world. We need to be in each other's lives. Being aware of each other intimately, especially in the West, we don't do that. From being divorced until now, you've got to go there. You've got to be completely open. There is no other way to do it successfully.”

Matching process

Some also expressed that although the church's guidance around the matching process^[24] had made huge strides in the past decade, there was still room for improvement around taking people's concerns seriously and knowing what was an obvious red flag during a process. People should feel heard and not dismissed for any and all concerns.

“There were red flags from the beginning but I didn’t have the problem to say ‘I don’t like that.’ The root of the problem is that he and I should never have gotten together.”

Quite a number of people expressed that they were glad that there was no longer the practice of matching people the day before they are married; that there was time to get to know one another and ask questions to see if you’re a good match. A few participants encouraged not pushing young people to get married early.

“I understand that fear that they’ll have sex before [marriage], but I would be more fearful of them not being able to realize a healthy marriage.”

“Instead of pushing so hard to be attached to somebody in your late teens and early 20s, it would be really lovely if the focus was on mind-body unity before you’re married. There’s so much fear involved.”

Also, the type of education for young people should be different than what their parents experienced. Witnessing healthy marriages with good communication is a large factor in how to be in a successful marriage, as well.

“The glue that stuck our parents together was faith and True Parents, rather than healthy tools for communicating. So, when second-generation Unificationists don’t have this diehard ‘I will not give up because of True Parents’ there needs to be that cement that keeps our marriage together. Education has to start a lot earlier, not just at 21 and you’re ready to get matched.”

Comments of participants who are parents

Of the participants who are parents, several expressed regret for the negative impact the divorce had on their children, some of whom were struggling emotionally, financially, and with long-term relationships of their own.

“As a parent, it’s hard to watch your child struggle and there’s nothing you can do.”

Some parents also expressed how the church could be more supportive and embracing of single-parent families.

“If you’re supporting an ideal family, you have to include in that a divorced family. It doesn’t ever enter the discussion groups. The kids are still third generation;^[25] they still have their whole future ahead of them; so if the church doesn’t lend support to the parents in that situation, then there’s almost zero [children] who will stick with this faith.”

Growth, not failure

A few participants shared that they could see how the divorce helped them grow their character and faith, deepening their relationship with God, themselves, and their community.

“That’s why the divorce wasn’t a lasting failure in my life. It was a terrible, horrible lesson to learn on the way. Taking responsibility doesn’t mean being crushed by the mistake, but doing it right the next time.”

“I feel gratitude whatever comes. My divorce doesn’t diminish but expands. There is joy beyond divorce. You have true compassion by seeing the darkness of the world. I see that enlightened people suffer the most.”

“I’m very open to God’s plan and whatever he has to offer to me.”

“The divorce was hard, but I learned a lot. I’m not angry at what happened or at my ex-husband. I think it was a life experience that I can learn from and grow...now I have the tools to be a healthier person and parent...Being divorced doesn’t define who I am.”

Position on divorce

Even though they went through divorce, a number of participants stated that they don’t encourage other couples to divorce.

“I hope that nobody has to experience what I did.”

“A lot can be done to prevent divorce in our community. I think oftentimes these kinds of things can be prevented with the right tools, with the right support.”

“Going through the divorce was like having your heart ripped out multiple times. I wouldn’t recommend getting a divorce if you don’t have to.”

“I hope it can help other couples to not have to go through what we went through. That families remain intact, and that God’s plan for the family and each individual can be realized.”

Others recommended that divorce should be an option in the Unificationist faith community for some cases.

“I would also say that the way we view divorce is that it’s not an option. That’s a mistake. It’s a valid option for someone who’s doing things that are unacceptable for a marriage, or is not willing to want to make a marriage functional.”

“People who haven’t been through divorce are potentially afraid of it because they look at it too simplistically. They feel like divorce is always bad, maybe, and therefore don’t know how to reconcile the fact that people get divorced, maybe even people they love. In a way, our language about divorce is too simplistic. In the same way Eskimos have 100 different ways to talk about snow, I think there are 100 different ways you could talk about divorce. Do you call a forced divorce the same thing as a superficial Hollywood divorce? Why would you call that the same thing, or treat it the same, or be afraid of those things the same? In the same way, a divorce where someone is being abused by their spouse is not the same as other types of divorce.”

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study included not having an equal number of male and female participants. The sample size was also small, with only 34 participants in the study. The sample was taken from only across North America and parts of Europe. There were no participants currently residing in Africa or Asia. The sample could also have included an equal number of first and second-generation Unificationists. Of the people asked, there were more men who declined to participate than women. A better incentive or a different way of asking men to participate might have made it more likely that they would have agreed to be part of the study.

In addition, there were an overwhelming number of participants who remain positive about the Unificationist faith community. More

participants who are currently not involved or are negative about the community would have made for a more balanced study.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study revealed a number of important points regarding how Unificationists and their community view divorce. They provide new insights into how the Unificationist faith community can better support individuals getting divorced and potentially prevent divorces in the first place.

The most commonly reported major contributing factors to divorce were infidelity, homosexuality, loss of faith, emotional immaturity, emotional abuse, mental health issues, poor communication, physical abuse, cultural differences, incompatibility, and financial issues. About half of the participants took equal responsibility, or at least a nuanced approach, for why the divorce happened, rather than only blaming their partners.

Couples receiving the Marriage Blessing (with either or both the husband and/or wife based in North America) in recent years have been asked to sign an “Intentional Year” commitment form (appendix B), stating that they will seek counseling and support for one year before deciding to end their relationship, in an attempt to prevent divorce. While this study did not look at the effectiveness of that initiative, it is recommended that more be done than simply signing a form of intention.

Recommendations from participants for the improvement of what the Blessing and Family Ministry^[26] could provide, and general Unificationist community support for couples and families going through divorce, included the following:

- encouragement to seek counseling;
- a more honest discussion about what to do in an unhealthy relationship or what causes conflict in a marriage (e.g. mental health issues, financial abuse, infidelity);
- a divorce ministry that provides practical divorce resources and faith-based resources;
- a divorce support group (locally or nationally);
- pastors and community members calling and checking in with individuals going through divorce to offer support;
- periodic check-ins from family and church members on how the relationship is going and really listening to the issues with empathy;
- public discourse about divorce and broken Blessings to destigmatize that demographic;
- education after receiving the Blessing on how to overcome challenges; and
- better questions in the engagement, i.e., matching, process to assess someone’s character and motivation.

The perceived stigma connected to divorce was as strong or stronger than actual judgment from community members, and a major contributing factor to some community members who divorced distancing themselves from their church community. Those who stayed connected to the Unificationist faith community had a strong perception of their personal faith and relationship with God, and/or a strong support system within their faith community.

The Unificationist faith community in North America and Europe could do a much better job of being inclusive of divorced individuals and families. First, I suggest that the church develop a divorce support ministry to address the specific practical and spiritual needs of community members going through a divorce, including legal and financial resources, pastoral training on how to mentor community members going through a divorce, advice on ending a marriage with dignity and respect, clear steps to getting re-Blessed in the future, and a list of counseling services.

Second, there should be unambiguous language in Blessing education that in the situation of divorce, there is a clear path forward and a support system in place. That language should clearly state that the divorced family is still a Blessed family. These suggestions are not exhaustive, but rather a start for where community resources could be focused for this specific demographic.

There could also be a greater emphasis on reaching out to community members and their children who are going through a divorce, both from the local pastor and/or community members. A simple phone call periodically and an offer of support, both practical and emotional, would go a long way to making community members feel loved and not alone. The isolation and outright or perceived judgment from church members is a major contributing factor to either the individuals who are divorced or their children not continuing to be part of the Unificationist faith community.

Pastoral training in premarital counseling and divorce counseling is highly recommended for all existing pastors and future pastors. Also offering small groups for newlyweds to help them build relationships so that there is already a foundation of trust and communication built with a mentor when troubles arise in a relationship.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Current marital status
4. If you did get re-married, did you get re-Blessed?
5. Religion
6. Unificationist generation
7. Number of children
8. Education level
9. Race or Ethnicity
10. Your current location
11. What was the date of your Blessing?
12. How old were you when you got Blessed?
13. What was the date of your legal marriage?
14. What was the date of your divorce? (if finalized)
15. What was your parents’ relationship like when you were growing up?
16. Were you separated from your spouse for a period of time before getting divorced? If so, for how long?
17. Who initiated the divorce?
18. What was the reason you gave to the courts or were given by the courts for the divorce?
19. If children were involved in the divorce, what was the custody arrangement? (If no children were/are involved, write “N/A.”)
20. What do you perceive as the reasons why the divorce happened?
21. How do you see yourself now after having gone through a divorce?
22. Is your divorce still something that you are struggling with?
23. Did something positive come out of the divorce?
24. How would you say other people in your church community perceived you during and after the divorce?
25. If you are still involved in the Unificationist community, how would you say community members perceive you now?
26. What do you think your parents think and feel about you getting divorced? (if applicable)

27. What do you think your children think and feel about you getting divorced? (if applicable)
28. What did faith look like for you before divorce?
29. What does faith look like for you after divorce?
30. What kind of support did you receive during the divorce? Was it from your church community, family, friends, colleagues, etc.?
31. What type of support do you wish you would have received?
32. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B: Intentional Year Commitment Form^[27]

Notes

- [1] This study was supported by HJI faculty members Dr. Drissa Kone, thesis advisor, and Dr. Thomas Ward, who oversaw compliance with the Office for Human Research Protection Standards.
- [2] The Holy Marriage Blessing Ceremony is the main sacrament of the Unificationist faith. A couple dedicates their marriage and future family to God alongside their peers and community for the sake of world peace. A “broken Blessing” means that someone received the Holy Marriage Blessing along with their spouse but later dissolved that relationship.
- [3] A second-generation Unificationist is someone who was born into the Unificationist faith.
- [4] Excluding data from California, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, and Minnesota, states that were not included in the CDC study. “48 Divorce Statistics in the U.S. Including Divorce Rate, Race, & Marriage Length,” <https://divorce.com/blog/divorce-statistics/> Accessed May 1, 2023.
- [5] “The U.S. Divorce Rate Has Hit a 50-Year Low,” <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-us-divorce-rate-has-hit-a-50-year-low>. Accessed on April 28, 2023.
- [6] “48 Divorce Statistics in the U.S. Including Divorce Rate, Race, & Marriage Length,” <https://divorce.com/blog/divorce-statistics/> Accessed May 1, 2023.
- [7] Sun Myung Moon, *The Life and Mission of Jesus Christ* (New York: HSA Publications, 2001), p. 64.
- [8] Sun Myung Moon, *Cheon Seong Gyeong* (Korea: FFWPU, 2006), p. 239.
- [9] Moon, *The Life and Mission of Jesus Christ*, p. 63.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Moon, *Cheon Seong Gyeong*, p. 357
- [12] Ibid., p. 359.
- [13] Ibid., p. 386.
- [14] Ibid., p. 482.
- [15] Ibid., p. 350.
- [16] Ibid., p. 373.
- [17] Ibid., p. 1834.
- [18] Ibid., p. 2143.
- [19] Ibid., p. 2154.
- [20] Ibid., p. 1509.
- [21] Ibid., p. 893.
- [22] “Office for Human Research Protections,” <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/index.html#:~:text=OHRP%20is%20part%20of%20the,in%20biomedical%20and%20behavioral%20research>. Accessed on May 17, 2023.
- [23] “Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2017” <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-269.pdf>. Accessed on May 17, 2023.
- [24] An intentional, family-guided process where two single Unificationists get to know each other with the intention of finding a marriage partner.
- [25] “Third-generation” refers to third-generation Unificationists, meaning that their grandparents joined the Unificationist faith community, and that their parents were born into the faith.
- [26] The Blessing and Family Ministry of the Unificationist faith community involves supporting singles to receive the Marriage Blessing and supporting couples and families to embody the values of the Unificationist faith.
- [27] www.bfmeducation.org.