

Grey Divorce and the Role of the Church: Building Recovery Spaces for Older Couples

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Grey Divorce, Old Age, Family Dynamics, Divorce, Role of the Church

Received : 15, March

Revised : 29, March

Accepted: 25, April

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of grey divorce, which is divorce that occurs in elderly couples (50 years and above), is increasingly prominent in modern society, including in the Christian community. Divorce in the golden age is often not caused by major conflicts, but by the loss of emotional connection, relational boredom, and the search for a more personal meaning in life. This phenomenon has psychological, social, and spiritual impacts not only for the divorced couples, but also for adult children and the family structure as a whole. From a Christian faith perspective, the church can be present as an agent of recovery and not just as a guardian of norms. With a theological-pastoral approach, this study emphasizes the importance of the church providing a safe and loving space for elderly couples experiencing marital crisis. Through pastoral counseling services, supportive elderly communities, and teachings that emphasize the values of loyalty and unconditional love, the church can play a significant role in restoring relationships, building new hope, and strengthening the meaning of marriage in the light of Christ's love.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage in the Christian faith tradition is seen as a sacred covenant between two individuals united by God (Genesis 2:24; Mark 10:9). This bond is not only legal or social, but is a real manifestation of love, loyalty, and sacrifice as Christ loves His church (Ephesians 5:25). However, in the reality of modern life, marriage is increasingly faced with complex challenges including in old age and in recent decades the phenomenon of divorce among elderly couples or what is known as gray divorce has shown a significant increase in various parts of the world. The stereotype that has been attached so far that elderly couples tend to maintain a marriage relationship for the sake of family stability or social norms, the reality now shows that many individuals aged 50 years and over choose to end marriages that have lasted decades. This phenomenon is interesting to study because it has become a global issue, considering that old age is often associated with retirement, life reflection, and the need for emotional stability.

Based on research by Ellis Lindani in 2010, the divorce rate for people aged 50 and over in Indonesia was 600,000. The majority of people (78%) agree that divorce is morally acceptable, 18% say that divorce is morally wrong, and 3% say that divorce can happen depending on the conditions. Society also agrees that divorce is inevitable and even morally acceptable. This can happen because it sees that divorce cannot be allowed as long as it harms one of the parties. Divorce occurs because there are underlying causes, be it a long-standing case that has not been resolved or a new case caused by one of the partners who no longer maintains the condition of their household. Apart from that, infidelity and infidelity are often used as reasons for divorce. Therefore, if ethics speaks about the good and bad of a person's actions, then in making a decision, divorce is something that can be accepted. So that the church as the body of Christ has a very important role not only as a religious institution, but also a recovery community called to express God's love and forgiveness.

The researcher's goal is to raise the urgency of church ministry in responding to grey divorce, and to offer a theological and pastoral approach in building a safe, loving, and relevant healing space for elderly couples facing marital crisis. By using a qualitative psychology approach, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of relational changes in the final stages of life, as well as its implications for psychosocial support and more targeted interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grey divorce first reported in 1980, then labeled in 2004 by the American Association of Retired Persons. It was not until 2007 that the term was popularized and reviewed again by Deirdre Bair's 2007 book *Calling It Quits* which contains interviews with gray divorcees. This condition was experienced by Microsoft founders Bill Gates and Melinda French Gates. The two decided to divorce in 2021 after 27 years of marriage. From domestic celebrities, Lydia Kandao and Jamal Mirdad have been married for 29 years. They were married in 1986, and ended it in 2013. Dewi Yull and Sahetapy divorced after 23 years of living together. The two married in 1981 and separated in 2004. From a family psychology perspective, grey divorce challenges traditional understandings of

household stability in old age, especially in the context of Indonesian culture which is steeped in family values and strong social norms regarding marriage.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative and descriptive research methods. Descriptive research methods are research methods to describe ongoing phenomena with the aim of presenting a complete picture, as well as exploration and clarification related to a phenomenon and social reality. In the process of compiling, researchers use library methods as data collection instruments. Researchers obtain information related to the Grey Divorce phenomenon through various sources such as blogs, news and articles. After the data is collected, researchers elaborate and systematically organize the data.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Marriage is a masterpiece of God's idea, because God is the one who made it happen when He created humans. Freddy Manurung stated that; marriage is an institution that has long been determined by God when He created the universe. Marriage is when a pair of people commit to marry and what is expected from the marriage is happiness. Marriage is the most basic and influential unit of society in the world. Given this, it is necessary to consider the biblical basis for marriage and divorce. No married couple wants their marriage to fail. Everyone hopes that their marriage will always be colored by love, happiness and loyalty and will last "until death do us part". The principles of Christian faith regarding marriage are monogamy (one partner), loyalty and indissolubility, often faced with a different reality, namely the reasons that make the couple end it with divorce.

There is a contradiction in terms of divorce between the marriage law and the provisions of Christian religious law. Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 1 of 1974 concerning marriage which was promulgated by the government on January 2, 1974, articles 39, 40, 41 regulate and allow for divorce, one of the reasons for divorce as stated in article 19 of Government Regulation Number 9 of 1975 is that there are continuous disputes, quarrels between husband and wife, and there is no hope of living in harmony again in the household. However, in principle, in the provisions of church law as written in the Book of Matthew 19:5-6 "And He said: For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate.", 1 Corinthians 7:39 "A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. If her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone who he wills, as long as the person is a believer", Romans 7:2 "For a wife is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But when the husband dies, she is free from the law that bound her to him", Genesis 2:24 which states that a man who is united to his wife becomes one flesh and what God has joined together, no man may separate.

Factors Causing Grey Divorce in the Christian Community

The journey from the beginning of marriage to entering old age cannot be separated from conflict. In a household, conflicts that often occur often cause

disputes between the two and change the atmosphere of the household which was originally harmonious, into disharmony with quarrels and what was originally mutual affection, then changes into mutual hatred, which can result in divorce. Grey divorce is not always caused by major conflicts. In fact, many couples experience emotional alienation after decades together. When the children have grown up and are no longer the main focus, elderly couples often feel like two strangers under one roof. A study conducted by Bernat Sitorus and Putra Ignatius Sinuansa Sidauruk said that divorce will not occur if awareness of responsibility is fulfilled and the person who divorces means they are not close enough to God.

A study conducted by Nur Salimiah stated that divorce could occur in a household relationship, because maintaining harmony between husband and wife is not an easy thing. The factors that cause Grey Divorce to occur are:

First, loss of communication and connection, leading to emotional alienation. After children grow up and leave home, many couples lose the "external ties" that have kept them together. Children leaving home can create major changes in a relationship, sometimes resulting in what is commonly called "Empty Nest Syndrome." When children leave, some couples find that they have drifted apart and no longer have common interests or a strong connection. The focus of life changes, the couple realizes that their relationship has long lost emotional and spiritual closeness and has there is no more agreement in opinion.

Second, Lack of meaning and shared purpose after the active period ends, resulting in an identity crisis. Entering retirement, changes in self-identity often occur. If couples do not have new shared goals, this can create emptiness and a sense of emptiness in the relationship. In the Christian context, the lack of shared spiritual formation can also worsen this situation.

Third, Disappointments that accumulate over the years without resolution, resulting in an accumulation of unresolved conflicts. Infidelity, domestic violence, even minor conflicts that are ignored for years can become bitter roots (Hebrews 12:15) that slowly destroy the foundation of a relationship. The inability to resolve problems in a healthy and open manner can lead to boredom and emotional distance.

Fourth, the modern view that emphasizes personal happiness over long-term commitment. Today's culture tends to emphasize individual happiness and "freedom to choose again." These values sometimes creep into church communities unnoticed, replacing the values of faithfulness and sacrifice taught in Scripture (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Fifth, Lack of Church Assistance. Many churches focus more on young family ministry and do not provide special space or programs for elderly couples. When elderly couples experience difficulties, they do not know where to turn for help. The lack of pastoral counseling and supportive senior communities makes couples feel alone.

In a Christian context, this is ironic because marriage is considered a sacred bond that reflects the relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31-32). But the reality is that even couples who are active in the church are not immune to these relationship breakdowns.

The Impact of Grey Divorce on Family and Faith

Divorce at an advanced age not only affects the couple directly involved, but also has far-reaching consequences for the family structure and spiritual dynamics around it. There are many consequences that the person must bear when he or she chooses to divorce. In the context of Christian faith, grey divorce touches many layers of life, from relationships between family members to experiencing God's grace and faithfulness. The impacts on family and faith include:

First, For couples who experience divorce at an older age, the impact can be loneliness and loss of identity. After decades of living together, divorce can leave a huge emotional void. Loneliness causes stress, anxiety and depression. Many individuals lose the role that has been their life identity, such as husband or wife. The Lord Jesus reminded us of the Bible's teachings on the institution of marriage. The law of marriage must be in line with God's purpose in establishing marriage. Marriage is established to create a new unity, of two individuals and no rules are made to divorce that unity. So the guilt of their spiritual failure is experienced because they actually realize that in the Christian faith, marriage is considered a sacred covenant (Malachi 2:14). Divorce can cause deep guilt, even disrupting personal relationships with God because they feel they have "failed" to keep the sacred promise before God.

Second, It causes emotional confusion for children and grandchildren. Adult children are often unprepared for their parents' divorce. Even though they have their own families, parental divorce can be traumatic and affect the way they view marriage and form a distorted picture of marital fidelity. Grandchildren who see their grandparents divorce may lose a role model of lifelong love. This can affect their perception of fidelity and commitment in long-term relationships.

Third, the church community may experience a dilemma in responding to grey divorce, especially if the divorcing spouse is an active member or spiritual leader. This situation can cause turmoil and questions about the power of Christ's love in maintaining the marriage bond.

Many churches do not have a system or ministry that specifically responds to and supports older couples experiencing marital crisis emotionally and spiritually. As a result, they feel isolated, even distancing themselves from the church for fear of being judged or misunderstood. Gray divorce cannot be viewed as just a "personal matter," but as a calling for the church to be present as the body of Christ – comforting the grieving, healing the broken, and bringing new hope through unconditional love.

Several things can be done to prevent divorce, including:

First, Prioritize God's will. For the Triune God, marriage is such a noble and holy thing that He Himself does not want any separation (divorce) between husband and wife. Even Jesus Himself said very firmly in the Gospel of Mark 10:5 that; "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses wrote a certificate of divorce." If you pay attention to Jesus' sentence, you will find the word "hardness" because of stubbornness or hardness of heart and human selfishness, divorce occurs, they only care about momentary decisions that can ultimately

harm themselves and others. Therefore, the author suggests that couples must first carry out what is God's will both before and after marriage. Married couples do not expect their marriage to fail, they want a family that is always accompanied by love, happiness, loyalty, and sincerity "until death do them part". Moreover, in the understanding of Christianity, marriage is monogamy (one partner), "fidelity" (loyalty) and "indissolubility" (indissolubility).

Second, (Husband and Wife) must have mutual humility. Humility is one of the requirements to repair a problematic relationship, because humility is part of adjusting human will to God's will. A church figure named Nikitas Stithatos wrote that humility will enable someone to have the mystery of spiritual knowledge about God, he said; "If through humility and prayer you have been initiated into the spiritual knowledge of God, this means that you are known by God and enriched by Him with an authentic knowledge of His supernatural mysteries. He further emphasized that humility is the highest virtue, humility will help someone to be free from arrogance. Lydia Caesera Saragi, et al. wrote that humility is a way for humans to see what God's purpose is because human life is an altar before God. Boyman Aspirasi Zebua said that someone who has humility means that the person truly focuses himself on God's commands, he always humbles himself before God, carries out all of God's mandates, loves and always relies on God. Thus, humility helps a person not to become an arrogant person, instead it enables humans to appreciate and respect God, and this is what will ultimately also help humans to be able to appreciate their partners.

Third, Marrying because of love. Loving is an attitude of love or an action that someone does to God and also to humans. Loving is an action of someone to do an attitude of love both to God and to humans. The standard of love is agape love, which is sincere and selfless love.

The Role of the Church as a Space for Healing

Marriage in a Christian family is a noble thing that is given by God. Marriage must be carried out in harmony, one heart, agreement, full of affection, trust in one another and fully rely on the grace of God. In household life, it must not be carried out or entered into carelessly, damaged due to lack of wisdom, blasphemed or defiled; but it should be respected and upheld with fear of God and remembering God's intention in marriage. With this foundation, Christian families can avoid divorce.

In the Bible, there are several verses that discuss divorce and provide insight into the importance of maintaining the sanctity of marriage. The following are several verses that explicitly prohibit or oppose divorce, among others in the Old Testament: Malachi 2:16 "For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel and those who cover themselves with violence like with clothing, says the Lord of hosts. So take care of yourselves and do not betray." In the New Testament, among others, in the gospel of Matthew 5:31-32: "It has also been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you, everyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Matthew 19:3-9: "Then the Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, saying, 'Is it

lawful for a man to divorce his wife for every cause?' Jesus answered, 'Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female? And He said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man put apart.' They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command that a man should give a certificate of divorce and put away his wife?' Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it was not so. But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery.' Mark 10:2-12: "Then the Pharisees came and, testing him, asked him, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' But he said to them, 'What did Moses command you?' They said to him, 'Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce.' Then Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart, he wrote this commandment to you. For from the beginning of creation God made them male and female; for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. Thus they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate.' When they were home, the disciples asked Jesus about this. Then He said to them: 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if the wife divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.'" 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 "To those who are married, I am not I, but the Lord commanded that a wife should not divorce her husband. And if she divorces, she must continue to live without her husband or reconcile with her husband. And a husband may not divorce his wife." It is clear that in Christianity divorce is not permitted.

In this case, the church as the body of Christ is called to not only be a place of worship, but also a safe space for restoring relationships and healing inner wounds. In facing the reality of gray divorce, the church is challenged to be present actively and lovingly not only to prevent divorce, but also to accompany and restore those who are hurt. The roles that the church can play are:

First, Prevention Through Long-Term Marriage Guidance. God does not expect divorce to happen in a family. Therefore, if we refer to Christian ethics where the Bible is the highest guideline, then divorce is not allowed. The church often focuses on fostering new marriages, but ignores elderly couples. In fact, retirement and "empty nest" (children who are independent) are vulnerable phases of relationships. The church can design special seminars for elderly couples that discuss communication, the meaning of living together in old age, and reconciliation of past wounds, Spiritual retreats for elderly couples to renew commitment and deepen spiritual closeness together and form a community of elderly couples (Komsel Lansia) which is a place to support each other and share life. The church needs to provide marriage guidance not only at the beginning, but also in the middle and end of life's journey. Elderly guidance must focus on reorienting the meaning of life after retirement, emotional and spiritual communication between elderly couples and shared spirituality in old age.

Second, Recovery Through Pastoral Counseling. Pastoral counseling is an important form of service, especially in accompanying those who experience

emotional stress due to divorce. The benefits of pastoral counseling are building fellowship in love, restoring human self-image, fostering faith and placing oneself in relation to God and others. With counseling, couples can ventilate, by opening their emotions as a catharsis to the emotional pressures faced. Marriage counseling and family counseling have differences, experts usually distinguish them. The difference between the two lies in the emphasis of each type in relation to the people involved in the counseling process. Nonjudgmental counseling can be a bridge to inner healing. God's Word that can be used to establish a new identity and hope is found in Isaiah 43:18-19: "He says, 'Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; it is already springing up; do you not yet know it? Yes, I am making a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.'" Churches can train leaders and pastors to be sensitive and ready to respond and handle grey divorce cases with love and understanding by providing counseling services based on love, empathy, and biblical principles. Pastoral counselors need to help individuals overcome emotional wounds and guilt, find their identity in Christ, and build new communities that are supportive and hopeful.

Third, Be an Inclusive and Loving Community. Older couples who are going through a divorce often feel ashamed, isolated, or have no place in the church, so the church needs to affirm that God's love does not change even when people fail in relationships (Psalm 34:19; "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." Romans 8:38-39; "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Church ministry should create an atmosphere of acceptance, not judgment, by having special recovery groups for widows, widowers, and those going through divorce. The church should be a place where people going through divorce still feel accepted. They are not 'failures', but people who are still loved by God and can experience total restoration through the power of the Holy Spirit (Psalm 34:19).

Fourth, Model Love and Reconciliation. Jesus himself modeled the restoration of relationships through radical forgiveness and love (John 8:1-11). A church that lives out this love will be a home for weary and wounded souls. Patterns of openness, forgiveness, and reflection on the cross of Christ will help couples practice love in their homes. "The church is not called to be a museum for the righteous, but a hospital for the wounded." A classic phrase that reminds us that Christ's love must be real, especially to those who are broken in their relationships.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Grey divorce is a phenomenon that requires special attention from the church, especially in serving elderly couples. The cause of this divorce is often not due to major conflict, but rather the accumulation of feelings of alienation and loss of emotional connection over the years. The impact touches various aspects including emotional, social, and spiritual aspects for couples, families, and church communities. The church as the body of Christ must play an active

role in building a space for recovery through relationship building, pastoral counseling, and loving acceptance. Some suggestions given include:

First, the Church needs to develop long-term relationship development programs that focus specifically on older couples.

Second, special training is needed for counselors and church leaders to understand the dynamics of relationships in old age so they can provide maximum assistance to couples.

Third, the church community should be a safe and inclusive space for those who are experiencing or have experienced divorce.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

further research on grey divorce in the Indonesian context is needed to design a more contextual pastoral approach.

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