

Where there is love ...

a study session on same-sex relationships

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In this session, we will be exploring some of the practicalities of responding well to a request for prayers or a service from a same-sex couple¹. The Guidelines on services for same-sex couples are outlined below.

It is intended that this conversation or group discussion take place well before such a request is made. This avoids any individuals becoming an item on the Church Council agenda (and hence a 'problem' to be solved) or a way of coercing others to accept a situation against their conscience for fear of offence. Whilst it is hoped that the conversation can avoid becoming personalised, it is also important to remember that we are talking about real live human beings.

Practicalities

Story 1 – Pete and Graham

Pete and Graham have lived together for 10 years in a village in your Circuit. They have two dogs and are well known in the village. Following the recent changes in the law, they have decided to get married. They are planning on holding the ceremony at a nearby hotel and although they do not attend church, wonder if a service in the village's Methodist Chapel might be possible.

Story 2 – Elaine and Gill

Elaine has been attending your Church since she was born and was received into membership in her teens. A couple of years ago, she met Gill and they fell in love. As a result of their relationship, Gill also began to attend your Church and has become very much part of the church community. They have now decided that they would like to register a civil partnership. It seems natural to them also to have a service in church and they ask if this might be possible.

Story 3 – Kevin & Phil (and Marion & George)

Marion has been a member of your congregation for all of her 67 years. Marion and her husband George have two children now in their thirties, Kate and Kevin. The children grew up in the church but now live away. Kate is married and has two children of her own. She visits regularly and comes to church with Marion whenever she is in town (George doesn't attend church). Four years ago, Kevin told his parents that he was gay and living with another man, Phil. George forbade Kevin to ever set foot in their house again and has broken contact. Marion loves Kevin and talks to her son often by phone, especially when her husband is away. At church, although people often ask after Kevin, she has told only a few people about the situation. Marion has recently approached the minister to say that Kevin and Phil have recently adopted a little girl and want her baptized in your church.

¹ Finding language that is universally acceptable, describes what is intended and avoids offence is almost impossible. The term 'homosexual' was first coined in the 19th century to refer to a psychiatric disorder LGBT people were said to suffer from. This was eventually removed in the late 20th century. 'Gay' often only includes men but LGBTQI does not easily roll off the tongue. For the avoidance of confusion, we have used the term same-sex and opposite-sex couple as a description and not, in any way, as a judgement.

Take each scenario in turn and try to answer the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of the event? What are the couple trying to express about their relationship and about God?
2. What logistical and other practicalities need to be thought of in relation to the event?
3. What response would you and your Church make to each? Is it the same or different?
4. How does your response deal with:
 - a. The peace and unity of the local Church?
 - b. The theology of relationships and marriage currently held by the Methodist Church?
 - c. The tradition(s) of the Church through the ages and the interpretation of Scripture?
 - d. The desires of the couple in holding an event?
 - e. The church's mission in the community?
 - f. The position of your church in relation to the whole church of Jesus Christ throughout the world?

Services and Prayers

For many in the Church, it is hard to discuss the possibility of a service without knowing what it might look like. The liturgical material included is designed to offer a framework for discussion of appropriate forms of prayers for same-sex couples.

1. Read the material thoroughly and see what your initial thoughts and feelings about it are. Share these, as far as you are able, with the rest of the group.
2. Look at the [specific] biblical texts suggested in the material. What does each text say in the context of relationships? Are these texts appropriate? Try to share thoughts with others.
3. What are the similarities and differences with the Services for Marriage? What do these mean for a theology of relationships?
4. If some/all of this service were to be used in your local church, can you think about what the reaction might be? In using this material, what would your church be saying:
 - about marriage and relationships?
 - about the interpretation of Scripture and the tradition(s) of the Church through the ages?
 - about your local church and the Methodist Church as a whole?
 - about God?

THE GUIDELINES FOR RESPONDING TO REQUESTS BY SAME SEX COUPLE FOR PRAYERS OR SERVICES

The Guidelines below were approved by the 2014 Conference. They were proposed so that, when requests for prayers or services are made by same sex couples, including those whose relationship has been recognised in a civil ceremony (of civil partnership or marriage), individuals and Local Churches may be assisted in responding well and in accordance with Conference decisions. This includes the consideration of the use of local Methodist premises in appropriate circumstances for public thanksgivings.

The Methodist Church recognises that its members hold contradictory convictions regarding issues of human sexuality and the forms of relationship intended by God. The demands of the Gospel commit us to making pilgrimage together grounded in mutual respect and a spirit of understanding and love. In all this we continue to affirm our need of grace and our willingness to admit our limitations.

In providing guidelines the Conference acknowledges the help required by Local Churches and individual ministers and lay persons to respond well to enquiries and requests for prayers or services from same sex couples, including those whose relationship has been recognised in a civil ceremony. The pastoral conversation with the couple resulting from such an enquiry should be conducted in an atmosphere of welcome and with care and sensitivity. Any conversation about the current understanding of the Methodist Church with regard to marriage and relationships should be based on the previous decisions of the Conference in order that the pastoral response offered is consonant with these understandings. Knowledge is therefore presumed of the following Methodist Conference documents and decisions:

The relevant Standing Orders, principally S.O. 11A

The 1992 Conference Statement on A Christian Understanding of the Family, the Single Person and Marriage

The 1993 Conference Resolutions on Human Sexuality (CPD Book VII, Part 11)

The Pilgrimage of Faith Reports 2005 and 2006

Christian Preparation for Marriage: Methodist Church Policy and Guidelines (CPD Book VII, Part 8)

Guidelines for Inter-Faith Marriages (CPD Book VII, Part 9)

These documents and decisions together govern the practice of the Methodist Church and no decision of local church bodies or officers, ministers or lay persons regarding relationships or sexuality should contravene them. It is the responsibility of each presbyter, in conjunction with the Church Council, to ensure that this discipline is upheld in the life of the Local Church in order to preserve and advance its mission and unity.

Whilst it is expected that any response be respectful and welcoming, no local church body, minister or lay person is required to act in any way contrary to the demands of conscience. The Conference trusts that at all times all those responsible will seek to act together with integrity and in good faith.

Given the sensitivity of these matters, these guidelines are offered in a spirit of support and mutual care. They are intended to reduce the possibility of hurt or distress that may be caused by rejection or misunderstanding, and to preserve the unity of the Local Church, in order that the Church may remain faithful to the Gospel mission to which it is called.