

# **Dignity and Worth**



Getting to the Mixed Economy

Produced by Dignity and Worth

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# Getting to the Mixed Economy

## *Introduction*

Have you ever been in the situation where you know where you want to get to, but cannot work out how? The British Methodist Church seems to find itself in exactly this position at the moment with regard to the issues and theology of marriage and relationships. The Methodist Conference of 2018, meeting in Nottingham at the end of June, was originally supposed to be debating and deciding on a new Statement on Marriage and Relationships, a significant theological document that would shape the Church's practice for the next two decades or more. However, the Group given the task of producing the draft has been beset by issues, and the sheer workload involved, and brought to the Conference only a brief report and a request for a delay.

Like so many in the Church, the members of *Dignity and Worth* are deeply disappointed by yet another delay which affects LGBTQ+ people more than anyone else. That's why some of our members brought Notices of Motion to the floor of the Conference<sup>1</sup> to ensure that a conversation was had, and to ask that proper proposals for same-sex marriage be brought for debate and decision to the Conference of 2019. The Task Group agreed to bring a separate report to next year's Conference which would include such proposals and that consultation and conversation around issues of marriage and relationships could begin in the Connexion immediately.

This further delay offers all of us in the Church a chance to reflect on discussion and debate around marriage and relationship that began in the Conference in the 1970s and led to major decisions being taken over 25 years ago. There has been a growing recognition over that time that, whilst fundamental disagreements persist over questions of sexuality and relationships, the main issue confronting the Church is one of living well with contradictory convictions. This is not something that needs another debate or a formal direction from the Conference. Part of what this short booklet seeks to do is offer some practical considerations for how living well together in the Church with profound disagreements might actually work in practice.

We have chosen the phrase *Mixed Economy* because it was coined by Archbishop Rowan Williams to describe the future of the Church that embraces the so-called 'inherited' and 'emerging' churches living together<sup>2</sup>. It therefore seeks to describe a vision of the Church as one that holds it challenging diversity as a gift from God.

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<sup>1</sup> The full text of the Notices of Motion are available on pages 10 to 12.

<sup>2</sup> see <http://freshexpressions.org.uk/guide-me/going-deep-1-the-mixed-economy/> and <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/2044/making-the-mixed-economy-work>

## *Acknowledging the Journey*

It is easy to get disheartened and frustrated by more delays, so taking account of the journey travelled up to now is worthwhile. Here is a brief outline of the decisions and discussions the British Methodist Conference has taken since the 1970s:

1979 – first report on Marriage and Sexuality discussed by Conference with reference to same-sex couples.

1992 - Conference agrees "A Methodist Statement on a Christian understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage" (this is still the current official position of the Methodist Church)

1993 – Conference debates the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the Church and passes the resolutions on Human Sexuality (part 9 of CPD). This includes beginning a *pilgrimage of faith*.

1998 - Conference report "Preparing for Marriage" - including 'recognising marriage as mutual between equals', restating the traditional adage of 'chastity before marriage, faithfulness within it', but recognising also that some Christians are unconvinced that the traditional adage adequately prepares human beings to grow in responsibility and moral discernment; Also recommends the inclusion of the current definition of marriage in Standing Orders. The word 'chaste' is also interpreted by some to mean celibate and by others to mean pure, and in terms of sex, to be with the person you are committed to. This allowed many to vote for the same words while having different convictions.

1998 – "A Lamp to my Feet and Light to my Path: The Nature of Authority and the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church" – a report prompted by the 1993 debate.

2005 – "Pilgrimage of Faith" report of a group set up ten years after the 1993 Conference to assess progress on the pilgrimage. This report concluded that the pilgrimage was yet to begin in some areas of the Connexion but that the 1993 resolutions should not be revisited.

2006 – "Living with Contradictory Convictions" report – outlining the disagreements in the Methodist Church and seeking ways of living together

2006 – "Pilgrimage of Faith" – second report on civil partnerships and services of blessing agreed that members and ministers could enter civil partnerships but that services of blessing on Methodist premises would not be permitted nor would the Church register to conduct civil partnerships.

2014 – Conference report of the Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships – agreed that nothing prevented Methodists (ordained or lay) entering same-sex marriages but that the Church would not 'opt into' the legislation to conduct them on Methodist premises. Guidelines on prayers and services for couple after same-sex marriages and civil partnerships were changed to allow them to be held on Methodist premises.

2016 - Marriage and Relationships Task Group report to Conference – recommended that the current 1992 Statement should be updated and a group be set up to assess whether the definition of marriage should be reviewed.

In the forty years since 1979, a great deal of change has happened within and, much more significantly, beyond the Church. The equalizing of the age of consent, the advent of Civil Partnerships and Same-Sex Marriages, the introduction and then repeal of Section 28 and the Human Rights Act have all done much to change the lives of LGBTQ+ people living in Britain. In Ireland, the change has been even more dramatic.

The Methodist Church is always called upon to respond to changes in society and has done so graciously on the whole. The Church has seen LGBTQ+ members and ministers become more visible and take up positions of responsibility. Local Churches and Circuits have welcomed partners with the love and respect we have come to expect from the Methodist people. But, sad to say, there have also been – and continue to be – occasions where affirmation has not been offered and LGBTQ+ folk have borne the brunt of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic abuse, ridicule and even threats of violence from fellow Methodists.

A quarter of a century ago, at the 1993 Conference, tempers were high and the Church potentially came close to crisis. Since then, the temperature has cooled in many places and rhetoric has been replaced by dialogue and careful listening. Some friendships have grown and revealed a depth of fellowship that goes beyond mere agreement. We have come to recognise the things that hold us together within the one Connexion and to celebrate them, including that:



We continue to believe that God has been revealed in Jesus Christ, accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, and live in communion with God and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We cherish our place within Christ's Church recognising that it is Christ alone who chooses, calls and confirms us as members of His church, the body of Christ.

Whilst we may not all agree about everything, we recognise the importance of the truths which bind us together as well as the issues which currently divide us.

## *Work in progress*

The journey continues and contradictory convictions remain. Whilst there are some in the Church who believe that we can construct a cleverly-ambiguous set of words that can include and satisfy everyone, more of us are coming to the conclusion that we must accept our differences and try to live with them in a way that brings honour to the Gospel. If we are to find a way of continuing in fellowship together, it must enable us to continue in conversation about the things that divide us as well as bind us together. Our use of studied silence and avoidance may have been useful in the past, but now we need to speak and listen.

Out of conversations that have already occurred, a number of recurring issues and topics have emerged. We recognise that, in attempting to find a way forward, we need to attend to the complexity of the task that confronts us and to work on a number of areas at the same time.

### **Canon**

The way we interpret and live out Scripture remains key to a Methodist understanding of theology and ethics. Our conversations must resonate with the canon of Scripture, informing how we say things as well as what we say. Can progressives and conservatives find better ways to acknowledge their respective commitments to authentic Biblical interpretation and ways of engaging with Scripture that would move the conversation forward within the Church? Can, for instance, progressives acknowledge that they have taken the Biblical witness too lightly at times, and not sought to struggle enough with texts that are difficult? Can conservatives also acknowledge that they have not struggled enough with difficult texts that have condemned others?



### **Conscience**

This might possibly be a better word to use in the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral than 'experience'. It is that inner witness of the Spirit that compels our actions in Christian love. We recognise that often conscience has been used by those in the Church who wish to refrain from some action or ritual – pacifists or those opposed to the remarriage of divorced people. A fuller understanding of Christian conscience must also embrace the idea of being compelled into action by theological conviction. For some of us, that means being allowed, in conscience, to marry people of the same sex, whilst not compelling others to do likewise.

Of course, conscience cannot have the final say and must be tested by Scripture and the wisdom of tradition as well as reason, but it also cannot be ignored. Part of the genius of early Methodism was the way it allowed conscience to play a part in Christian life, witness and worship, placing testimony at the heart of the Class meeting. We need to find better ways to listen to the voice of conscience and discern the movement of the Spirit.

## Connexion



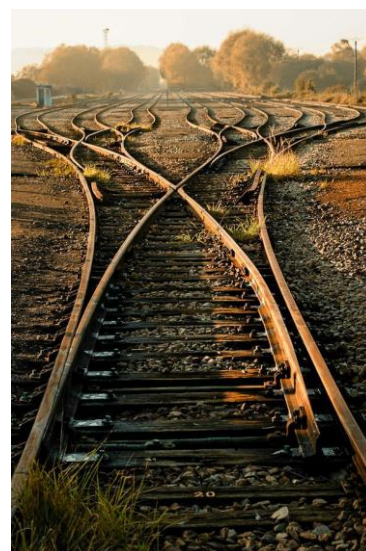
Conversations over the past decade and more have revealed a deep love and affection for the connexional nature of our Church held by Methodist people of all theological perspectives. As we strive to remain connected, how do we embrace the diversity of theology and practice that does not undermine our unity? Is our current model of connexionalism too rigid and uniform and therefore not fit for purpose in an increasingly diverse, and diverging, Church?

An understanding of Connexion that stifles creativity, prevents Christian conscience or denies justice cannot be Spirit-led and must be resisted.

## Context

Venture FX pioneers, Fresh Expressions, and those engaged in the practice of mission overseas have taught us the necessity of context. We struggle as a denomination with buildings, processes and worship formed in a different era for a culture not our own. As the context for mission and ministry has changed rapidly, we have struggled to keep up, or actively resisted responding.

Being caught up in the mission of the incarnational God means choosing to allow the context to shape us to some extent. We know that attitudes to sex, gender and relationships have changed enormously in the last fifty years and many now see the Church as the bastion of 'family values' that have long since died. As we seek to re-engage with the multiple contexts in which we are called to serve, we must be open to what the Spirit is doing and saying in the world around us.



## Confidence

There is still a great deal of fear and anxiety across the Connexion that causes people to avoid tackling potentially controversial subjects in Church. We must pay attention to the very real sense of fear that many still feel: of each other, of further abuse or rejection, of the consequences of the decisions of Conference, of potential and actual changes.

It is only in real fellowship that confidence can be built up, so we must ask how we embody Christian love to each other in such a way that fear is driven out?

## *Choices we face*

If we take seriously that the Methodist Church continues to have, as members, those who hold opposing (and non-converging) views, then we are left with three options:

1. **Uncomfortable fudge** – this is, more or less where we are now, with rules that are vague or unenforced. There is an uneasiness at raising the matter at the local level, and most people who are directly affected (progressive and conservative) are unhappy with the status quo for one reason or another.
2. **Winner takes all** – one side or the other goes for broke in the sense that they seek to clarify the position of the church without any conscience clauses or nuance, inevitably leading to resignations or departures.
3. **Mixed Economy** – where we acknowledge our contradictory (and non-converging) convictions and try to find a *modus operandi* with which we can all live in good conscience, and continue to be in dialogue.

In many ways, we have always known that these were the options on the table, and have chosen option 1 by default rather than intention. Whilst there are some conservatives and progressives who believe that option 2 is the final destination, most of us acknowledge that there is not the appetite for a fight. In which case, we are left with option 3.

For *Dignity and Worth*, the choice would be option 3 and we now need to find as painless and smooth a way to get there as we are able.



## *The Mixed Economy*

The Mixed Economy Model would involve some risk, some restraint on both sides, and a good dose of trust and mutual respect. It would not try to argue people out of their position and would try to ensure that no one's conscience is violated. It leaves open the possibility of people changing their position, but also seeks to honour those who disagree with the majority in any one context. We suggest there should be a Connexional Monitoring Group (CMG) made up of members of the Presidency and reflective of the range of theological perspectives present in the Church to monitor how this mixed economy is operating. It might work something like this:

1. We suggest Local Church Councils should be allowed to register to solemnize same-sex marriages and/or civil partnerships. In doing so, it would be clear that those members who do not wish to participate would have their views honoured. It might be that local churches in a Circuit would agree that one should be registered where there is greatest support.
2. In making their decision, a Local Church Council must be sure that there is a minister or lay person willing and able to serve as the Authorised Person. Again, ideally, this would be a conversation within the Circuit Leadership Team to ensure that all colleagues are fully consulted.
3. Where a Church Council wants to seek registration but the presbyter in pastoral charge is opposed, pastoral conversations to find a solution agreeable to all would be advised. Where resolution is not possible at a local level, advice and support may be sought from the Connexional Monitoring Group.
4. All requests for same-sex marriages and/or civil partnerships would be reported to the Connexional Monitoring Group. This Group would report annually to the Conference and discern whether further theological work is needed in the light of evolving practice.
5. During an initial period of say 5 years, the Conference could agree a moratorium on discussion of substantive issues regarding marriage and relationships to prevent any group from short-circuiting the process.

We suggest that after this initial period (which could be longer or shorter) the Conference reviews the arrangements, takes the advice of the CMG as to the way forward. The Conference might decide to have a further trial period or to make longer term decisions. The details could be worked out once the general principles are established.

The Mixed Economy is only possible if the Conference opts into the relevant legislation in each jurisdiction. The Conference would also need to take appropriate action with regard to standing orders to enable the Mixed Economy.

## *Conclusion*

*Dignity and Worth* supports the idea of the Mixed Economy model as a pragmatic solution for a 'problem' that cannot be 'fixed' by a single report. It plays to Methodism's strengths as a movement whose theology is shaped in mission and praxis. It recognises the differences that currently exist whilst not signing the Church up to an arrangement that is set in stone. It allows local churches, members and ministers to respond to their mission contexts with flexibility and in good conscience. And, perhaps most importantly of all, it allows the Church to live with itself, whilst getting on with the business of spreading Scriptural Holiness.

### *A Dignity and Worth prayer:*

God is the maker of all and it is in God  
that we and all people find our true dignity and worth.

We celebrate God's radical diversity  
woven into the rich tapestry of creation.  
We will work and worship together  
with those who are like us and those who are not.  
We seek the strength never to be silent in the face of injustice.  
We will make space for others, even when it costs us much.

We join in God's mission seeking a life  
of flourishing and faithfulness,  
wrestling with scripture and ever-open  
to the Gospel's message of unending love.  
We rejoice in our Methodist tradition of  
transformation, justice and social holiness.

May we take just a step on this road today.  
May we offer an open hand to each of our neighbours.  
May we be a people of courage.

God of all, may it be so in our days.  
God of justice, work through our lives.  
God of love, transform our church and our world. **Amen.**

*There is no fear in love  
But perfect love casts out fear.*

1 John 4:18

## ***Methodist Conference 2018***

The debates in the Methodist Conference in 2018 were grace-filled and though we did not all agree our care and love for each other as Methodist people was deeply apparent. To help with understanding and to resource conversations over this coming year and beyond we are reprinting here the texts of the motions that members of *Dignity and Worth* moved in Conference. These motions contributed to the creation of significant momentum in seeking change in the Methodist Church so that we can move forward together.

### ***Notice of Motion 112***

This notice of motion gave the Conference the option of immediately starting a process to implement a Mixed Economy. The District Chairs and Warden of the Methodist Diaconal Order collectively moved that it 'be not put' meaning that the Conference expressed no view on it. It gives an example of what the rules governing a Mixed Economy might look like and may therefore be a helpful discussion resource.

### **Notice of Motion 2018/112: Marriage and Relationships**

The Conference expresses its thanks to the Marriage and Relationships Task Group for the care they have taken to reach this point. It is deeply disappointing that a draft statement could not be brought to the Conference this year as directed. The Conference recognises that the emerging theology of marriage and relationships does need full and careful consideration but that such consideration will not, in itself, address the specific question of whether some Methodist Churches could be venues for solemnising same-sex marriages and whether any Methodist ministers, members or probationers could officiate at such services.

The Conference believes that the missional imperative of this question, and the need to give a clear message of continued affirmation and love to LGBT+ members of the Methodist Church, require that this question be clearly answered before 2020 or 2021. It is already five years since legislation to allow Same-Sex Marriages was passed in England and Wales and legislation in Scotland was passed the following year. The Conference is aware that there are some ministers, members and probationers and churches who would gladly participate in the solemnisation of same-sex marriages as well as those who would not feel able in conscience to do so. The Conference believes we must try to honour the consciences of all in this area. This could be done by allowing those ministers and churches who feel so called by God to solemnise same-sex marriages, whilst protecting the right of those who do not wish to do so to refrain.

In the report "27. Marriage and relationships task group: Interim report" therefore:

Renumber existing resolution 27/2 as resolution 27/7

Add new resolutions as follows:

27/2. The Conference resolves that the solemnisation of same-sex marriages may occur on Methodist premises and may be conducted by Methodist ministers, probationers or members authorised to conduct marriages. Accordingly, as the relevant governing authority of the Methodist Church, the Conference gives consent for the purposes of the Marriage Act 1949 as amended by the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 and authorises the managing trustees or other relevant trustee body of Methodist premises to register those premises for the solemnisation

of same-sex marriages or to take such other steps (if any) as may legally be required to enable the solemnisation of such marriages to take place on those premises.

27/3. The Conference resolves, for the purposes of the Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977 as amended by the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014, that Methodist ministers, probationers or members may be nominated by the Methodist Church in Scotland to the Registrar General in Scotland to be registered to solemnise same sex marriage.

27/4. The Conference resolves, as the relevant governing authority of the Methodist Church, that Methodist managing trustees of premises shared with other denominations may consent to the registration of such premises for the solemnisation of same-sex marriage.

27/5. The Conference amends Standing Order 011A as follows:

**011A Marriage.**

(1) The Methodist Church believes that marriage is a gift of God and that it is God's intention that a marriage should be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman. The Methodist Church welcomes everyone, whether or not a member, who enquires about an intended marriage in any of its places of worship.

***(1A) Some Methodists believe that God also gives the gift of marriage to same-sex couples, intending their marriage to be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit.***

(2) Divorce does not of itself prevent a person being married in any Methodist place of worship.

***(2A) Subject to the provisions of clause (2B) below, a minister, probationer or member who is authorised to conduct marriages may officiate at a same-sex marriage.***

***(2B) A same-sex marriage may only be solemnised on Methodist premises if the managing trustees so permit (where applicable) and all other relevant legal requirements have been satisfied.***

(3) Under no circumstances does the Conference require any person authorised to conduct marriages who is subject to the discipline of the Church as a minister, probationer or member to officiate at the marriage of a particular couple should it be contrary to the dictates of his or her conscience to do so.

(4) A minister, probationer or member who is authorised to conduct marriages but who for reasons of conscience will never officiate at the marriages of couples in particular circumstances shall refer such couples to an authorised colleague who is not so prevented, ***except that, whilst all couples seeking marriage should expect a respectful and welcoming response, there is no obligation to make a referral in the case of same-sex couples.***

27/6. The Conference directs that Resolutions 27/2, 27/3, 27/4 and 27/5 be treated as provisional legislation under Standing Order 122.

### *Notice of Motion 203*

In this Notice of Motion, which was passed by the Conference, the Conference confirmed that it wanted a Mixed Economy to be included in the report the task group brings to the Conference in 2019. The Notice of Motion also allowed the Conference to confirm that services of prayer and thanksgiving for same-sex couples are allowed on Methodist premises. This was already the case but *Dignity and Worth* were aware of several cases of Methodists being told they could not hold these services. We hope this puts the matter beyond doubt.



### **Notice of Motion 2018/203: 'Direction of travel'**

The Conference acknowledges the disappointment of many Methodists – LGBT+ and others – that no draft updated statement on marriage and relationships could be brought this year. It recognises that this continues to be a source of frustration and pain to people in different parts of the Church, and will be seen as a further rejection of their relationships.

It has become clear over the last twenty-five years of debate, discussion and consultation that the Methodist people hold contradictory convictions over the theology of marriage and relationships and that no one position holds the confidence of the vast majority. The Conference re-affirms its previous decisions which seek to allow people of significant different perspectives to remain together in fellowship in the one Body of Christ.

Given the difficulties that the current Task Group has faced, the Conference now wishes to offer guidance about the direction of travel it seeks for the Methodist Church. The Conference, therefore,

- i) reiterates the Guidance on Requests for Services in Book VII Part 10 of CPD and affirms that this allows for Local Churches to allow their premises to be used to conduct public thanksgivings for same-sex couples who have solemnised a civil marriage or partnership, presided over by an appropriate minister, probationer or member.
- ii) directs the Task Group to ensure that proposals are brought before the Conference including a way forward that is consistent with the existing commitment to live with contradictory convictions, namely enabling:
  - a) People with contradictory convictions to continue in fellowship and dialogue together;
  - b) Those who feel called by God to solemnise same sex marriages to do so;
  - c) Protection for ministers, probationers, members and churches prevented by conscience from participation in such services;
  - d) The Conference to receive reports on emerging practice which will inform ongoing theological reflection.

### *Notice of Motion 204*

This Notice of Motion sought to ensure that the work the Conference had asked for in 2016 on the inclusion of trans and intersex people in the life of the church was given a higher priority and that trans people would be intentionally included in the doing of the work.

#### **Notice of Motion 204/2018: Trans stakeholder group**

The Conference of 2016 directed the Methodist Council 'to ensure that work be progressed to identify the key issues for the Methodist Church to consider in order to ensure that people who are intersex or transgender are included in the life of the Church.'

The Conference recognises the vital importance of the work and that it is done well and resourced appropriately. It further notes the ongoing work on a relevant module of the EDI Toolkit in this area. Whilst there are possible implications for marriage and relationships, it is a distinctive piece of work that should be treated as such. It therefore directs:

- That the EDI trans stakeholder group be expanded by the Methodist Council, not later than its October 2018 meeting, so that it has members who identify as transgender, as well as others with relevant knowledge and expertise of transgender identity and gender diversity:
- That this group shall work with the EDI Committee to:
  - (i) Complete the EDI Toolkit module;
  - (ii) Bring a full report to the Conference, not later than 2021.
- That the particular focus of this work shall be the consideration of pastoral good practice to ensure the welfare of trans, intersex and non-binary people, the pastoral and liturgical issues relating to transition, the use of appropriate language in CPD and other connexional documents, and theological reflection on the unique contribution trans and intersex people can and do make to the life of the Church.





