

United in Love

An unofficial study guide to
God in Love Unites Us
the Report of the
Marriage & Relationships Task Group
to the Methodist Conference 2019

This Study Guide has been produced to help local Methodist groups and individuals engage with the Report, *God in Love Unites Us*.

We are most grateful to the members of the Task Group for their hard and careful work and pray that it bears much fruit.

This is, **in no way**, an official study guide and no member of the Task Group or the Connexional Team has been involved in its production.

Where the text of the Report itself is quoted is made clear throughout by the use of boxes.

We recommend that everyone reads the Report in its entirety - it can be downloaded from:

<https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/11629/conf-2019-10-marriage-and-relationships-task-group-2019.pdf>

How we can best live faithfully as Christians is what this report is all about, both within marriages, partnerships and families, and as fellow Methodists covenanted together. The Methodist Conference first seriously addressed some of these issues in 1979, forty years ago! A lot has happened since then and this report attempts to chart our next steps on the journey.

We recognise that many Methodists have been unaware of some of this work because it has mainly been discussed at the annual Conference. Despite many attempts to assist local Circuits and churches to hold conversations and discussions, the truth is that engagement has been patchy and so news of what seems like a major change in policy or theology is a bit of a shock. The Task Group lays out the reasons for its work in the Introduction.

The 2016 Conference set up a Marriage and Relationships Task Group to revisit and consider the definition of marriage (for example, in Standing Order 011A Clause (1)), and to prepare a new Statement of the judgement of the Conference on marriage and relationships. The 2018 Conference adopted Resolution 27A/2 which directed that, instead of a statement, the Task Group should bring a report on these matters which could include any proposed changes to Standing Orders, were the definition of marriage to change.

In reflecting on their task, the Task Group writes:

0.1.2 As part of our Pilgrimage of Faith, and even before that, the Methodist Church has reflected on these matters of human relating and produced several reports, including a Statement of our theology in 1992. As a Church, we have continued to work out what it means to treat one another as persons equally made in the image of God. We have focused chiefly on matters of divorce, gender equality and same-sex sexuality. We, the current Task Group, are building on all that work and expanding it.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

- It is likely to take two or more sessions to work through the material here. Participants should be clear about what is expected of them in terms of time commitment.
- We would encourage everyone involved in conversations to read the Report to ensure fruitful discussions.
- Facilitators should read and familiarise themselves with the whole Report and have one or two copies available to consult during the conversations.
- This Report raises important and sensitive questions and so it is essential to agree ground rules at the outset. The Model Statement below provides a useful framework to begin with.
- Encourage 'I' statements from participants - encourage people to talk for themselves and not for the presumed views of others.
- Remember to listen as well as speak. Show others that you are listening and respect what they are offering.
- It may be appropriate to set confidentiality boundaries to ensure that people feel safe to share their experience. As with all Church activities, Safeguarding rules apply and the facilitator should remind participants of the procedures around particular types of disclosure.
- Try to ensure that there is ongoing pastoral support available after the session(s) to help those who are troubled or distressed.
- Finally, remember to pray as you prepare to meet, during the meeting(s) and afterwards. Hold each person in prayer as an individual loved and valued by God.

Model Statement on Living with Contradictory Convictions

The Report made reference to the Model Statement produced by a previous Task Group and we have printed it below. In preparing to hold conversations, you may wish to spend some time reflecting together on this Statement and how it can help you.

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

Therefore, we resolve

- to engage with each other openly, honestly, prayerfully and graciously

- to treat each other with respect and dignity, recognising the sincerity of the faith of those who may see things differently

- to seek to learn from one another as we travel together as fellow pilgrims

- to renounce all language and behaviours that attempt to coerce others to change their views or beliefs

- to seek, as far as conscience allows, to preserve the fellowship of Christ's Church

- to unite under the authority of scripture as we seek to live as authentic Christian disciples in our own generation.

What’s in the Report?

The report is divided into a number of sections, dealing with different aspects of relationships. We have summarised them under titles all beginning with: ‘Being ...’

SECTION 1	BEING HUMAN	page 5
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SECTION 1 BEING HUMAN

As Methodists, we have emphasised the social aspect of holiness, that Christianity is not simply a private matter and that love is at the heart of creation. In contemporary society, a greater range of relationships are now acknowledged, some of which may have a sexual element. Friendship has taken on added significance. In all this, a desire to express commitment persists.

The Task Group acknowledges that the understandings of sex, sexuality and gender are rapidly changing and increasingly complex. For that reason, there is a glossary of terms in the Report that may be unfamiliar to some. This first section outlines the theology of sexuality that the Methodist Church has developed through various Reports to the Conference and describes the kinds of new thinking that are emerging in the Church and in wider society.

The Report begins with three affirmations, that all human beings are:

- made in God's image
- made to relate to God
- made to relate to others

It adds a more complex affirmation about our humanity namely that:

we are made to relate as sexual beings

The Report recognises that the language in use to describe sexual relating is constantly evolving. *Dignity and Worth* recognises that this can make it difficult to hold open and honest conversations without offending some sensibilities. We want to urge people to take the risk and to be ready to apologise and forgive, recognising that we are all still on a journey of understanding.

Three terms, in particular, are highlighted for reflection: sex, gender, and sexuality.

SEX & GENDER

1.5.2 In previous decades, the dominant way of speaking of sex and gender was in simple binary terms, that is of male and female, men and women. This was accompanied by the assumption that everyone should fall into these categories and express their sexuality as heterosexual/mixed-sex. This connects with the way the term “sex” is commonly used to mean mixed-sex intercourse.

The Report acknowledges that things are more complex than previously indicated. Whilst the vast majority are born male or female, there is a small proportion born with both sexual characteristics or atypical ones and may be described as intersex and understanding of intersex people is growing. For an increasing number of people, the sexual characteristics they are assigned at birth does not match the gender identity they feel most comfortable with. Hence the idea that sex and gender are binary is now open to questioning.

SEXUALITY

Often when we have spoken about sexuality, it has meant a person's orientation. Now, it is seen as also including sexual feelings, preference and sexual activity. There are a wide range of sexualities now identified and spoken about and some need some explanation. The majority of people still find themselves to be heterosexual in sexual orientation, this is not the case for everyone.

In reflecting on all this, the Task Group reaffirmed the Methodist Church's understanding of every human being as an equal person before God and of 'infinite value' to God, loved and cherished. Since the Church first started talking about matters of sexuality, there has also been substantial progress in the application of a theology of equality and the work of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee (EDI) is testament to that. The report

also acknowledges that LGBTQI+ people have not always been treated equally in the Church, despite these intentions. This section of the Report ends up affirming that human beings are made for relationships of love which are often expressed sexually.

1.5.7 We have all been made to be in relationship, and we have all been made as sexual beings in a diversity of ways. When we are grounded in the love of God and reflect that love we are all being authentically human. The hope that we might grow and flourish through committed loving relationships, including for most people specifically sexual relationships, is a widely shared human hope. The question then is how can we as Methodist people enable God's generous gift of relating and of being sexual beings to be better celebrated by everyone?

FOR REFLECTION:

- The Report introduces some of the latest thinking on matters of sex, gender and sexuality, which can appear confusing. Take time to read pages 67-78, including the Glossary, and address some of the questions it raises for you as a group.
- “While most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours – including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex” - share with the group what you were taught about your gender. How have attitudes changed within your family?
- There is little in the Report about being a single person. How does singleness fit into these ideas about relationships? How are single people included in your local congregation?
- How can we as Methodist people enable God's generous gift of relating and of being sexual beings to be better celebrated by everyone?

SECTION 2 BEING IN RELATIONSHIP

The purposes of good relating

2.1.1 God has made everything and loves everything that is made, showing that love by calling the creation 'good'. The Bible tells of how God invites human beings to accept that love and return it. We are to return that love by praising God and caring for all that God has made: "the earth and those who live in it". This gives us our core purpose as human beings.

This section of the report outlines some of the ways in which God invites human beings into relationship. It talks about the ways that the Bible speaks about our relationships with God, including:

- Co-stewards - of creation
- Co-workers & Companions
- Community - of those 'who love, worship and serve God'.
- Co-creators - 'in procreation, and also when we use our bodies and minds, our skills and imaginations ...'.
- Co-heirs - of the Kingdom

2.1.8 From the Bible we can therefore see that **God's good purposes for relationships include bringing about:**

- **care for creation;**
- **the flourishing of the person, community and Kingdom;**
- **procreation (but not essentially so); and**
- **nurture.**

Wherever we see these purposes at work in relationships we can look to celebrate the presence of God.

FOR REFLECTION

- Take some time to consider what each of the designations might mean for you and your community today. The Report offers some passages of Scripture you might wish to reflect with.
- Paragraph 2.1.8 lays out God's good purposes - how much do they reflect your own experience? Is this a sufficient description or are there other things missing?

The qualities of good relating

The Report points to the person and work of Jesus as the starting point for revealing God's intentions to Christians. It outlines how Jesus both adopted some of the cultural practices of his day and also challenged others in terms of family and relationships.

2.2.2 In essence Jesus shows us that God's way of relating involves self-giving love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness. It leads to a commitment to seek the flourishing of others; to hunger and thirst to see things put right in the world; and to look actively for the coming of God's kingdom. It embodies the values that we find not only in the Gospels but also:

- underlie the prescriptions of the Biblical Law;
- are pointed to by the Old Testament prophets;
- are incorporated into the dynamics of love in 1 Corinthians 13; and
- are encapsulated in the fruit of the Holy Spirit described in Galatians 5:22-23.

These marks of the love of Jesus we call 'Christ-like', 'holy', or simply 'good' relating for short.

The Report recognises that modern concepts such as EQUALITY and MUTUALITY, important for a Methodist understanding of relationships, are not easily read back into the Gospels. However, Biblical reflection has led the Church to embrace these and other qualities, especially that women and men, differently abled people, people of different ethnic backgrounds and sexualities are equal in worth.

2.2.5 As we learn how to respect all as equal persons and to behave in an authentically Christian way, the Task Group **recommends that the Conference affirms the following summary understanding of the principles or qualities of good relating:**

- All significant relationships should be built on self-giving love, commitment, fidelity, loyalty, honesty, mutual respect, equality and the desire for the mutual flourishing of the people involved.
- It is through that self-giving, rather than through self-seeking, that the self flourishes and begins to experience life in all its fullness (although it needs to be recognised that the universal Church's historic emphasis on self-sacrifice has often been misunderstood and misused [eg by abusive partners] in a way that is destructive of the well-being of the ones abused [often women]).

FOR REFLECTION:

- How would you describe becoming 'Christ-like' from your own experience? How has this happened in your relationships?
- What is your reaction (and the group's, if applicable) to the summary of qualities given above? If you can, share your experiences of trying to live out those qualities in your relationships.

The patterns and practices of good relating

There are some indications in the Bible of what good relating entails. There is a movement in Scripture towards monogamy for instance. Part of the New Testament's thinking about relationships was also coloured by a belief that the Second Coming and the end of the world were imminent - hence the advice to remain single.

Advice on relationships has been given throughout Church history for a variety of reasons. The Report highlights the work of one important guide to the Christian life from 1650: *Holy Living* by Jeremy Taylor. It was influential for about two centuries, being held in high regard by John Wesley (who abridged and published it in Volume 9 of *A Christian Library*) and went through 30 editions. In it, Taylor commends marital affection but in moderation, saying the married couple should be “restrained and temperate in the use of their lawful pleasures”. In the light of today's understandings of sex, this seems far removed.

Good sexual relating

The Task Group point to the gift of WISDOM and the spiritual fruit, SELF-CONTROL as helpful tools for discernment in finding ways of good sexual relating. Two key terms that need to be engaged with in the area of sexual relating: **Chastity and Fidelity.**

It relates CHASTITY to PURITY and puts in the context of HOLINESS, set aside for God's use, focussed on self-giving.

It relates FIDELITY to FAITH, in the New Testament sense of ENTRUSTING oneself to another without reserve. [see paragraphs 2.4.2-2.4.4]

These in turn inform practices such as monogamy, the commitment of time and resources to the relationship and whether the sexual relationship is exclusive. Wisdom and self-control help to manage these things.

2.4.7 To bring together and summarise some of the points we have been making, sexuality and sexual intimacy are part of God's gracious ordering of things, and are also capable of being affected by our sinfulness. What matters is whether we use them for God, and for God's purposes, or for our own selfish ends. This moves the emphasis, from a Christian perspective, from a narrow concern with particular sexual acts or focus on the outcome of sex in procreation, to a wider recognition that sexual intimacy is an important element in the way that couples relate to each other; that the ways in which that intimacy is expressed can vary greatly (and may or may not include sexual intercourse); and that sexual expression is best directed towards enhancing the relationship between a committed couple and thus enabling their good relating to one another. Then in turn the couple can offer a stronger contribution to community and the care of creation, thus fulfilling God's good purposes for relating.

FOR REFLECTION:

- How do you respond to these interpretations of CHASTITY and FIDELITY and their basis at the heart of good relationships?

The Report goes on to discuss how people relate in our contemporary society and how attitudes to sex have changed and continue to change. It urges Methodists to recognise the lived realities of people's relationships if we are not to be accused of hypocrisy. In pastoral ministry, we need to be able to offer discernment and insights in a sensitive way to enable people to see patterns of good relationships.

In the light of these realities, the Report discusses Cohabitation and how people of all ages are now opting for living together, at least for a period of time. It also highlights how the number of weddings in the Methodist Church has steadily decreased in recent years.

2.6.4 To this end, **we recommend that the Conference affirms the following summary understanding of cohabitation:**

- The Church recognises that the love of God is present within the love of human beings who are drawn to each other, and who enter freely into some form of life-enhancing committed relationship with each other, whether that be through informal cohabitation or a more formal commitment entered into publicly.
- As a Church we wish to celebrate that the love of God is present in these circumstances, even if that grace is not responded to or even discerned by the people concerned.
- The Church has an important calling, therefore, to point to the presence of God's love within such relationships, and to encourage people to respond to it in the renewing and deepening (by whatever means) of their commitment.

FOR REFLECTION:

- You might want to begin by sharing your own experiences of cohabitation in your family or friendship group. How has that informed your own understanding of the issues?
- The understanding given above is a major step for the Church in recognising the value of relationships other than marriage - are you comfortable with that change or would you like it to say something different?
- How might your local Church help 'to point to the presence of God's love within such relationships' in practical ways?

Civil Partnerships

The UK Government has announced that it intends to introduce civil partnerships for mixed-sex couples. This means that, in future, there will be options under UK law for both same-sex and mixed-sex couples to enter either a civil partnership or a marriage. The Task Group is recommending that the Church affirms those who enter Civil Partnerships, whether mixed-sex or same-sex, and offers services of blessing. It may also be that mixed-sex couples would want to move towards marriage as a result.

LGBTQI+ people

The Report recognises the deep hurt and frustration faced by LGBTQI+ Methodists now and in the past. It also celebrates the way that LGBTQI+ Methodists have found God through loving relationships and have kept faith with the Methodist Church in spite of the treatment they have received.

2.8.2 The Task Group commends the use in Methodist churches of the EDI toolkit and in particular modules 7.1 Sexual-orientation and 7.2 Welcoming Same-Sex Couples and their families.

Moving towards marriage

The Task Group believes that our theology leads us to want to value and support all committed faithful loving relationships (within the law of the land) and to look for all to bear the marks that we can see in the love of Jesus. We believe that the Bible and Christian tradition, as explored above, provide rich resources for the understanding of, and flourishing of, intimate, sexual relationships in our contemporary context. In particular, reflecting in this way offers the possibility that might lead to that particularly deepening and intensifying form of relating that we know as marriage.

FOR REFLECTION:

- How do you think the Methodist Church (and your local congregation) should respond to the idea of offering services to mixed-sex couples in civil partnerships?
- You may wish to reflect on the experiences outlined above and ask how your local Church has welcomed LGBTQI+ people.
- Discuss how far you agree with the statement about our theology in the box above. What reservations, if any, do you have? It might be good to record those reservations to reflect on in the light of the rest of the Report.

SECTION 3 BEING MARRIED

This section relates to Section 3 and 4 in the Report and looks at how marriage has been understood by the Methodist Church and the British State. It shows how beliefs and practices have evolved over the course of time and how, in the light of this, the Methodist Church should respond. It also deals with objections to extending marriage to couples of the same sex.

Our developing theology of marriage

3.1.1 In Christian understanding and practice, marriage is a distinct and particular form of a relationship through which two people may experience, explore and express God's gracious love. The committing of a couple to each other, within God's ordering of creation as it is described in the Genesis narrative, is what we have later come to call 'marriage'. This plays an important part in enabling the partners, the society of which they are part, and the human race to flourish according to God's purposes.

The Methodist Church has always treated marriage as a very important relationship, and has sometimes called it:

- A VOCATION
- A CALLING
- A GIFT OF GOD

Above all, marriage is a relationship in **which grace may and should be known abundantly**. This means that the nature of marriage is sacramental, even though in Methodist understanding the marriage ceremony is not a sacrament.

[from para 3.1.6]

The Table reproduced from the Report shows how the various Methodist denominations adapted the Marriage Service to reflect their theologies.

Date	Source	Details
1846	Wesleyan Methodists	deleted the second purpose (remedy for sin) and removed the explicit reference to procreation in the first (perhaps owing to a reluctance to talk explicitly about sex)
1890	Primitive Methodists	stated that the two purposes of marriage were: mutual society, help and comfort; and “that children might enjoy the blessings and privileges of family life”
1903	Bible Christians	purposes in both were given as: comfort and help, and enabling families to be trained up in obedience, love, wisdom and piety
1913	United Methodist Church	
1936	Book of Offices	following Methodist Union in Great Britain in 1932, the new service book repeated the above purposes in the same order but provided an alternative form of words that removed the reference to children
1975	Methodist Service Book	set out the purposes of marriage as: fulfilment in mutual companionship and care; the foundation of true family life through growing and deepening love; and the continuance of the human race when the marriage is ‘blessed with the gift of children’

1999	Methodist Worship Book	stated that the purposes are: to “experience life-long unity of heart, body and mind, comfort and companionship, enrichment and encouragement, tenderness and trust”; and to “enable people to grow towards maturity, so that children may be nurtured, family life strengthened, and human society enriched”
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In showing how Methodist practice has evolved, it reveals that the emphasis has moved from procreation to companionship, something important to note in current discussions.

Divine grace and human frailty

The Task Group used this section to talk about marriages that have been abusive and unjust, based on patriarchal thinking or culture, used to coerce or control one partner. For this reason, the Methodist Church has not opposed divorce, nor has it forbidden divorcees the opportunity to start afresh. It calls on all of us to recognise that all relationships are human and therefore reveal our weaknesses as well as our strengths. It also suggests some liturgical material be produced to help people move through divorce.

3.2.7 ... While marriage is a particular kind of relationship about which the Scriptures reveal something of God’s vision, as the people of God we are constantly reviewing and updating our expression and practice of that vision. The theology of marriage and the practice of marriage both as a ceremony and as a relationship has changed and can continue to change as we come to understand more about the God of grace who loves us and leads us into greater truth and love

3.3.1 Marriage is a **social institution identifiable beyond the Methodist Church's understanding and experience of it.**

For the Methodist Church, its own understanding of marriage from a Christian perspective is not contradicted by, and does not itself contradict, that of the state, but adds something special to it.

Widening the practice of marriage

4.1 The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 legalised same-sex marriage in England and Wales starting from March 2014. Despite the fall in the numbers of mixed sex couples entering into marriage, there have been significant numbers of same sex couples seeking to take up the opportunity to get married. As a Church, we have declared that all people are equally valued by God. Now we must address the question of whether it should be possible for same-sex couples to marry in the Methodist Church

The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014 legalised same-sex marriage in Scotland from December 2014. Same-sex marriage has not, however, been legalised in Northern Ireland. There are a variety of provisions in the non-UK jurisdictions of the Channel Islands, Isle of Man, Gibraltar and Malta. [footnote]

The Methodist Conference resolved in 2006 that “there is no reason per se within our discipline to prevent anyone within the Church, ordained or lay, from entering into, or remaining within a civil partnership. However, the 1993 Resolutions [sc. on Human Sexuality] do still apply”. The same should presumably apply in due course to mixed-sex civil partnerships. With regard to same sex marriages, the Conference resolved in 2014 that the

same provisions as applied to those registering civil partnerships “should also extend to those entering into legally contracted same sex marriages”.

The Report notes that the Methodist Church has always ‘accepted and affirmed those who solemnise [marriages] in a civic ceremony rather than a Church.’ However, previous Conferences have refused to ‘officially’ bless civil partnerships or same-sex marriages in the same way. In 2014, the Conference allowed services and prayers for same-sex couples to take place on Methodist premises and made it a part of the formal guidance.

“The Conference... 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.”

Since 2010, religious groups and churches could apply to legally conduct Civil Partnerships on their premises and, since 2013, for same-sex marriages. No Methodist Church has done so and the Methodist Conference has not given its consent.

The Report summarises the current position as one where “the Church is content for Methodists (whether lay or ordained) to enter the legal institutions of same-sex civil partnership and same-sex marriage, but does not see them as falling within the Methodist Church’s understanding of marriage.”

The report goes on to lay out the case against changing our current practice, on the basis of: **NATURE, MORALITY & SCRIPTURE.**

4.3.9 A basic reason often given for this opposition is that anything other than a sexual relationship between a man and a woman is said to be not **natural**.

The Report suggests that the argument from nature is not as strong as previously thought. Homosexuality is increasingly found among other species. From a Biblical point of view, whilst Paul argues from nature in Romans 1, he also, in 1 Corinthians 11:14 says that it is not natural for a man to have long hair. Is he using natural to mean ‘normal’ or ‘acceptable’?

4.3.10 It is also sometimes said that for marriage to be other than between one man and one woman is not **moral**. Morality can be seen as a set of standards for good or bad behaviour and character that are adopted by a person or society, ostensibly to promote welfare. For Christians, those standards are outworkings of God’s holy nature.

The Report suggests that, for Jesus and Paul, the emphasis in sexual relations “is entirely on the quality of the relationship, and in particular that it should be a covenant of total sexual fidelity and indissoluble union”. It therefore suggests that it can be argued that it is no less moral to see that fulfilled in same-sex relationships as in mixed-sex ones.

FOR REFLECTION:

- For most of its life, the Methodist Church has accepted the State’s definition of marriage as its own. Only recently has this changed. You may want to reflect on who ‘owns’ marriage, or who has the power to define it. How does that affect our theology?
- The Task Group also considered the idea of ‘decoupling’ the legal and religious aspects of marriage, i.e. everyone gets legally married by a Registrar and then comes to church for a religious service. It decided against, but how would you feel about that idea?
- How compelling do you find these arguments, either for or against? Are they primary in your own attitudes to same-sex relationships? Perhaps you can share some of your thoughts with a group or a friend.

SCRIPTURE

Rightly, the Task Group gives prime importance to the understanding of Scripture in the task of theological reflection. It highlights the seven texts seen as explicitly referencing same-sex relationships. Although they are not in the Report itself, we have added a Conservative interpretation of each of these texts for discussion.

Conservative	Progressive
<i>Genesis 19:1-29 and Judges 19:1-30</i>	
<p>A close look at the text makes it clear that homosexuality was in fact involved.</p> <p>Jude in the New Testament points to the sexual immorality of Sodom and Gomorrah. (Jude 7)</p> <p>What happened at Sodom is clearly meant to be a cautionary tale. Jude makes it clear that their ungodliness involved sexual immorality. It was the homosexual nature of their desires, and not just the violent expression of them, that is highlighted in the New Testament.</p>	<p>These are about violent rape intended to subjugate and humiliate foreigners or strangers in a way that breaches God’s law of love and hospitality.</p> <p>Ezekiel 16:49 seems to confirm this: ‘Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.’</p> <p>It is in the context of a discussion about hospitality that Jesus is reported in Matthew 10:11-15 as referring to Sodom and Gomorrah</p>
<i>Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13</i>	
<p>God’s prohibition always has positive intentions. While no longer under the Law, Christians see the Law as a moral compass with principles for holy living. The Bible doesn’t have middle ground on same-sex relationships, monogamous or not. God reserves</p>	<p>Part of the Holiness Codes, which define the religious, civic and cultural identity of the people of God (‘Israel’), done through separation: from Gentiles, other gender, types of seeds, etc. What criteria is employed to say that some laws still apply and</p>

sex for marriage between a man and woman, because sex is a unique foundation of intimacy. When sex is only seen as a benefit for individuals rather than a foundation of social structures, it becomes selfish and manipulative.	others do not. Is holiness achieved through separation?
<i>1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10</i>	
The two words used for same-sex relations here are in the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, suggesting that Paul is linking back to those two passages. For Paul, the sexual sins which Leviticus prohibits remain forbidden for New Testament Christians. Their use indicates that Paul is addressing both the active and passive partners in homosexual sex.	It is hard to establish exactly the meaning of the words used. The most commonly visible forms of same-sex acts at the time were prostitution and pederasty. It would be difficult to use these texts to condemn same-sex relationships today.
<i>Romans 1:26-27</i>	
Paul, who was quite familiar with biblical and secular views of sexual orientation, says that having sex with someone of the same gender is a sin. The word that Paul uses for “natural” is not referring to what is natural to a specific person, but rather what is natural in light of God's intent for the sexual design of humanity. Ultimately, the passage serves as an introduction to verses 28-32, where Paul lists many other general sins that	It is a passage about idolatry, aimed at showing that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Is Paul thinking of ritual prostitution and excessive sexual acts? Is he assuming that everyone is born heterosexual and so, to choose same-sex relations is a violation of nature?

ultimately show our need for the Gospel.	
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It goes on to highlight other key texts which it suggests offer a different perspective on relationships:

- **Psalm 139** sings of God's intimate knowledge of and love for each person, who is 'fearfully and wonderfully made' in every part.
- **Isaiah 56:3-5** states that those who are deemed 'sexually other' and who will not enjoy the Old Testament blessing of progeny (called 'eunuchs' in the text) will be given an equivalent blessing by God, because God loves them.
- **Acts 8:26-39** shows how, so far as God is concerned, the sexual status of an Ethiopian eunuch does not exclude him or make a barrier to his inclusion in the community of the followers of the risen Christ.
- **Acts 10** describes how Peter learns that God's declaration about who and what is clean and included in God's people is not defined by human boundaries, or even human understanding of God's law.
- **Matthew 22:34-40** and parallels in **Mark 12:28-34** and **Luke 10:25-28** show Jesus bringing all the laws and prophetic teaching in the Old Testament under the overriding principles of love for God and love for neighbour.

In highlighting these groups of texts, the Task Group is trying to be representative of views present in the Church gleaned from attention to the Bible. It is aware that the Conference has not mandated official ways of interpreting Scripture, so different interpretations are allowed, even when, as in this case, they lead to contradictory convictions.

The Report also addresses the issue of procreation and affirms that this cannot be the basis to refuse marriage to any couple, mixed-sex or same-sex.

Genesis 2:22-24

Companionship	Procreation
Those who interpret the reason for a man 'leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife' as being a response to God's statement in Genesis 2:18 that it is not good for a human being to be alone, would tend to a 'companionship' view of marriage.	Those who interpret those verses as a response to the statement in Genesis 1:28 to "be fruitful and multiply" would tend to see the purpose of marriage as being procreation.

The Task Group endorses the 'companionship' model of marriage that the Methodist Church has developed over the years and argues that this can be applied to same-sex committed loving relationships as well as to mixed-sex relationships.

4.3.20 Consequently, we believe that, in awe and humility, the Methodist Church needs to recognise that it is being called by God to take the next steps in the development of its understanding of relationships and marriage. Those steps include enabling people of the same sex to commit themselves to each other in Christian marriage services. There is a strong case that, if marriage is what the Methodist Church says it is, and is as wonderful as it says it is, this Church cannot remain true to the God of justice and love by continuing to deny it to those same-sex couples who desire it so deeply.

FOR REFLECTION:

- You and your group may wish to devote some time to engaging with these and other texts and sharing your understandings of the use of Scripture in your Christian discipleship and decision-making.

Next Steps for the Methodist Church

In section 5 of the Report, the Task Group lays out its recommendations for change.

5.1 Guidance on the understanding of marriage

5.1.2 In the light of what is said in earlier sections of this report about the developing Methodist theology and practice of marriage, the Task Group recommends that the following *Guidance on the Understanding of Marriage* appear in the Guidance section of CPD.

G1 The Methodist Church welcomes everyone, whether or not a member, who enquires about an intended marriage in any of its places of worship. It looks for an openness to God in them, not necessarily a developed understanding of the Christian faith.

G2 Legally, marriage is a contractual relationship entered into by two people who make solemn vows and commitments to each other, without either the nature of the marriage or the nature of the commitments being further defined under the law of the land. In the understanding of the Methodist Church, marriage encompasses that but is also deeper and richer. The Methodist Church believes that marriage is a covenant relationship between two people, within God's covenant of love with them. Through it, they may experience, explore and express God's gracious love.

G3 The Methodist Church believes that marriage is an exclusive relationship, freely entered into with a life-long intention of uniting two people in body, heart, mind and soul in ways that are appropriate to each partner. In it, God's Spirit enables both partners to know the security of love and care, bringing to each other comfort and companionship, enrichment and encouragement, tenderness and trust.

Through such marriage children may be nurtured, family life strengthened, and human society enriched.

G4 The Methodist Church recognises that amongst its members different views are held about the interpretation of the Bible and Christian tradition as to whether those being married may be any two people, or may only be a woman and a man. The Methodist Church has decided to respect and make practical provisions for both positions.

G5 A marriage service or a service of blessing of a marriage that has been previously solemnised may only be conducted in a Methodist place of worship when it can be shown that the requirements of the legislation in the appropriate jurisdiction have been met.

G6 Where there is a desire to use places of worship for marriage services or for services of blessing for a marriage previously solemnised, the managing trustees of those premises should actively consider whether they wish to do so solely for marriages of mixed-sex couples, or for marriages of same-sex couples as well as mixed-sex couples. The managing trustees should reconsider the question of the use of the place of worship for such services every five years or sooner

G7 Where the managing trustees wish to use a place of worship for marriage services, and the legislation of the relevant jurisdiction requires church buildings or personnel to be registered or authorised for the solemnisation of marriages, the managing trustees should take the relevant steps to comply.

FOR REFLECTION:

- As a group, spend some time going through these recommendations for guidance and reflecting on how they match your own understandings.

5.2 Amended Standing Order concerning Marriage

The Task Group recommends that the Standing Order concerning marriage be amended to read as follows:

011A Marriage

(1) The Methodist Church believes that marriage is given by God to be a particular channel of God’s grace, and that it is in accord with God’s purposes when a marriage is a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of two people who freely enter it.

(2) The Methodist Church welcomes everyone, whether or not a member, who enquires about an intended marriage in any of its places of worship.

FOR REFLECTION:

- How does this statement of the Church’s belief match your own?
- How would you and others feel if this became the official position of the Methodist Church?

5.3 Respect for differing convictions

The Task Group is aware of how its recommendations might be received and offers suggestions for honouring differing convictions and consciences within the Connexion. Using our rules on remarrying divorcees as the basis for a model for honouring contradictory convictions, the Task Group is recommending dealing with issues of ‘conscience’ in the following manner.

5.3.4 In no circumstances would a minister or other authorised officiant be forced to conduct a same-sex marriage, but they would be required to refer any couple who requested one to a colleague who could.

5.3.7 Local Churches would therefore have the option whether to register as an authorised building for both types of marriage, or just one of them. But the Task Group believes that the unity of connexionalism should be maintained as far as possible by seeking to parallel the provisions that apply to ministers, and to require churches that choose not to register their premises for same-sex marriages to refer any couple seeking one to the nearest church that will.

Proposed New Standing Order

011B Divorce, Remarriage, Same-sex Marriage and Respect for Conscience

- 1) Divorce in a court of the land, and matters of sex or gender, do not of themselves prevent a person being married in any Methodist place of worship.
- 2) 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, officer or member to officiate at or participate in the marriage of a particular couple, should it be contrary to the dictates of his or her conscience to do so.
- 3) A minister, probationer or member who is duly 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. A couple who seek to be married in Methodist premises that are not appropriately registered for such purposes shall be referred to the persons responsible for the conduct of marriages at ones that are so registered, preferably in the same Circuit.
- 4) The Methodist Church opposes discrimination on the basis of sexuality, gender or race. Accordingly, if a couple is seeking to

be married in a Methodist place of worship no objection to the performance by a particular minister, probationer or member of any duty in respect of their proposed marriage shall be entertained on such a ground. No minister, probationer or member shall perform the relevant duty or duties in place of the other person concerned or otherwise assist the couple to make the objection effective.

FOR REFLECTION:

- How do you feel about the idea of ‘conscience’ clauses for ministers and congregations in this matter? Are there limits to conscience in terms of Christian action?
- Churches and ministers that oppose same-sex marriage will still have to refer couples to people who are not opposed - is that a reasonable request?
- Reflect on whether your local Church is ‘ready’ to register (if applicable) and, if not, what would make you ready?
- In what ways can the Methodist Church as a whole ensure it gives a consistent and positive message to LGBTQI+ people, whatever local Trustees and ministers decide to do about same-sex marriages?

CONCLUSIONS

Printed in full from the Report

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?” John Wesley
(Sermon XXXIV, Catholic Spirit)

As a Task Group, we answer John Wesley’s challenge to be “of one heart, though we are not of one opinion” with his own words: “Without all doubt, we may.” We invite you, the Methodist people, to receive this report with that same spirit, using it as a map for our continuing Pilgrimage of Faith. In this, we seek to encourage all Methodists to love each other, despite holding differing opinions in matters of relationships and sexuality.

We began this report by acknowledging the vast array of relationships around us today. We then considered how we might all better understand relationships, and sexual relationships in particular. We noted how God has made us as sexual beings, in a way that we now understand to be much more complex and diverse than had been previously thought; and that God made us to relate to one another. We then reflected upon how those relationships might be more (and less) in accord with God’s purposes, and how they might (and might not) bear the marks of Jesus’ example. Beyond that, we looked at what patterns and practices might help these relationships to grow and flourish. Finally, we indicated steps that our Church might take to support good relating, and what further work needs to be done.

At the conclusion of our reflections, we have identified three key themes that run through our work. We offer them now as suggestions for how the Methodist people may wish to continue with this work. In summary, we propose the following aims.

- **Be open and positive about sexuality and relationships.** We hope to enable the Methodist Church to speak openly, positively, and joyfully as well as wisely about relationships and sexuality as one

aspect of God's gracious goodness and of who God has made us to be.

- **Value all relationships of grace.** We invite the Methodist Church to value all committed faithful loving relationships that bear the marks that we can see in the love of Jesus, and are within the law of the land. We encourage the Church actively to offer greater dignity, inclusion and restoration in the community of God's new creation to those who cohabit, are single, or are developing relationships, irrespective of sexuality and gender.
- **Widen and justify the understanding of marriage as being between two persons.** We offer to the Methodist Church a theological reflection on marriage as a particular form of 'gospel' relationship between two persons, and propose that we take steps to enable same-sex couples to get married in the Methodist Church. At the same time, we recognise that not everyone will agree with this and so we ask that the Church seek to protect the differing convictions of those who do not agree.

The Methodist Church has worked hard over twenty-five years to enable us as a body of Christians to live with contradictory convictions about these and other matters. The call is to continue in that way. To quote John Wesley again, in describing the character of a Methodist: "As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think".

We recognise that, as followers of Jesus, we are called to love one another, and so to express gospel values in relating to each other as members of the household of God. The same self-giving love we see in Jesus is the mark we are to bear with regard to each other. This is of course costly. It takes real grace, especially on the part of those who do not share any majority opinion. It is important to honour and respect that grace at work.

In this, we all require the help of the Holy Spirit to bring us to the maturity that enables us to practise such love and grace even when we differ greatly in our understanding and opinions. But we have been promised such help. We are a body of people formed by the Holy Spirit. We each have a share in the gifts and graces the Spirit brings. Together, we have all that we need to continue to figure out how we might be a diverse body of people. As we do so, we will have something very important to offer a world that is constantly in divisive conflict.

As a Task Group, we realise that we have had the privilege of working together over the past three years on these matters. Most people reading this report will not have had anything like that opportunity. We urge you to take what time you can to reflect on these matters prayerfully, and to engage with others in as open an attitude as possible. Our time as a group has helped us to grow in our understanding of these issues and of the different viewpoints that are held about them. Yet, we recognise that we still have a great deal to learn. This report marks the fruit of our labours to this point. We offer it in the hope and the prayer that it will enable all of us to learn and grow, and to commit ourselves as a Church to continuing to do so. Going forward together, in the words of a recent hymn, may we remember that we are all:

Summoned by the God who made us
rich in our diversity,
gathered in the name of Jesus,
richer still in unity.