

The Case for **Change**



Dignity and Worth 

The case for change

The Methodist Church is a big family which varies throughout the country. We're more diverse overall than many of our individual congregations are on their own. This diversity is about gender, culture, age, ethnicity and other things that go to make up who we all are. It's always been important for Methodists to feel that we're part of this greater whole and we call that being in connexion with one another. We talk about the importance of connexionalism. That's our embodiment of the biblical principle that there are many parts, but one body.

In this broad family, there are LGBT+ Methodists. That means Methodists who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or whose sexuality or gender identity takes another term (hence the +). There are LGBT+ Methodists who are church stewards, local preachers, Sunday school teachers, flower arrangers, youth leaders, musicians, ministers, caretakers and much more. There are probably LGBT+ Methodists in your circuit. Some are life-long Methodists, others have come to Methodism later in life and perhaps discovered faith in Jesus Christ in the fellowship of a Methodist Church. Methodists also have LGBT+ family, friends, colleagues and neighbours.

Methodists have long believed that God's grace is for everyone. The word 'all' is very important to us and we can find it in lots of the hymns and songs we love to sing. Charles Wesley wrote "For all my Lord was crucified, for all, for all, my Saviour died." In a more modern song, we often sing "All are welcome in this place." Many of us are rightly proud of our welcoming tradition and the open doors of our churches to all who would come in.

The Christian Church's history with LGBT+ people has often been one of rejection, discrimination and abuse. The presence and participation of LGBT+ Christians in Church life and ministry has often been denied, leading many to believe that they will not be welcomed by the church if they admit to their identity. It is important to acknowledge this history and the hurt and even abuse that some have faced at the hands of other Christians. When our rules, statements or practices say that LGBT+ relationships are not acceptable or are less valuable than those with people of different sex, we cause harm. This also harms how our church is viewed by LGBT+ people and wider society, and hinders the proclamation of the message that God's grace is for everyone.

As we seek to proclaim the message of God's love to everyone, Dignity and Worth believes that we need to work harder so that LGBT+ people are fully welcomed, recognised and included in our churches.

But what about the Bible?

Methodists are all committed to the Bible. The Deed of Union (our foundation document) says that the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures is the supreme rule of faith and practice.



We hear the Bible read week by week in church and we take time to study it in the week too, on our own or in groups. We know that we need to interpret scripture carefully and faithfully, seeking to discover the meaning a passage had in its original situation as well as trying to understand what God is saying to us through it today. This is very easy with some passages and very difficult with others.

Family relationships, cultural expectations and sexual practices have changed a lot since the times when the books of the Bible were written. Some of the words the Bible uses to talk about sexual activity are difficult to translate and it's hard to know exactly what they're referring to. This makes the passages that are often cited about same sex relationships some of the most contentious to interpret. Often our divisions in the Church arise because of our different interpretations.

We want to recognise that we are all committed to being faithful to the Bible even when we interpret it differently. The way we interpret and live out Scripture remains key to a Methodist understanding of theology and ethics. Our conversations must resonate with Scripture, informing *how* we say things as well as *what* we say. Can we find better ways to acknowledge our commitment to authentic Biblical interpretation and ways of engaging with Scripture that would move the conversation forward within the Church? Can we acknowledge that sometimes we take the Bible too lightly, and don't struggle enough with texts that are difficult? Can we acknowledge that sometimes we are too ready to use the Bible to condemn others?

Within the Methodist Church, some of us hold to a Biblical interpretation that allows same sex relationships, while others have an interpretation that does not. Can we live together with our differences, recognising that we are all seeking to be faithful to the divine revelation that the Scriptures give us?

Hasn't the Methodist Church talked about this before?



The Methodist Church has been talking about these questions for a long time. In our society, homosexuality has been decriminalised, the age of consent equalised and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity outlawed. The Conference first considered a report about marriage and sexuality in 1979 and in 1993 it passed the resolutions that still represent our official position today.

We've come back to the question several times since. Since 2013 in England and Wales and 2014 in Scotland, it has been possible legally for same sex couples to get married. While we continue to journey together with our different interpretations of scripture and different views, this gives us a specific question to answer about whether we can allow any of our ministers to conduct same-sex marriages or any of our churches to host them. The 2019 Conference considered a report about this and began to make decisions on it. It will be for the 2020 Conference to make final decisions.

What change is Dignity and Worth asking for?



Our vision is for a Methodist Church that embraces its differences and disagreements and finds positive ways to live together in true Christian fellowship. Some Methodists feel strongly called by God to hold same sex marriages in their churches and to do everything they can to recognise and support the LGBT+ members and allies in their congregations. Others feel that their conscience and their reading of scripture mean it would be wrong for them to allow same sex marriages, even while they would want to welcome everyone because they are made in God's image and in need of a relationship with Jesus Christ. People believe these things because they have journeyed with the questions, studied the scriptures and sought God in prayer. We don't believe that people's opinions have been formed lightly and we don't expect that everyone is ever going to agree on all of this. We want to have a Church where we can live together and remain in fellowship with those with whom we don't agree.

What we suggest is that we have a 'mixed economy' where we acknowledge our contradictory convictions, not expecting that we will eventually all agree. We then try to find a way we can all live in good conscience, and continue to be in dialogue and relationship. This would involve changes to our rules to enable ministers and churches that feel called to hold same sex marriages to do that. Meanwhile others would be under no expectation or obligation to do so. It would be for each minister and Church Council in their conscience, with prayer and the

study of scripture, to discern the right way forward for them. We believe this is in keeping with our Methodist tradition, where as John Wesley said we can love alike, even when we don't think alike.

The statement that was included in the 2016 Conference report on living with contradictory convictions sets out for us what the spirit of this should be like.

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

Since *The Case for Change* was first produced, the Conference has debated the report *God in love unites us*. You can download the report and resources from <https://bit.ly/2IFJXvO>. The Conference's decisions are closely aligned with what we set out above. We encourage everyone to read and study the report and the connexional resources that go with it. You can also download a study guide from the Dignity and Worth website. A key point to grasp is the way the proposed new Standing Order on marriage would allow us to recognise the different understandings we hold in the Methodist Church:

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. Within the Methodist Church this is understood in two ways: that marriage can only be between a man and a woman; that marriage can be between any two people. The Methodist Church affirms both understandings and makes provision in its Standing Orders for them.

Would my church have to change?

It is important to say that only churches who wish to conduct same-sex marriages would have to make changes from the current position. If the Methodist Church adopted the mixed economy, we expect that some churches might want to move to

being able to hold same sex marriages straightaway. Others might begin a conversation, considering what the way forward should be for them. Some churches will feel that it wouldn't be right and they should carry on as they are. Already today, our churches vary widely and make decisions on all sorts of things that are right for them in their situation and to fulfil the mission God is calling them to. This would be another aspect of that freedom that is ours in God's service.

Isn't that like "mutual flourishing" and "double integrity" in the Church of England?



In order to pass the vote to ordain women as priests in 1992 the Church of England had to provide some conscience provision for Anglicans who could not accept this. It's important to remember that if this had not been done, the vote would probably have failed. Many women would have missed the opportunity to be Church of England priests and people would have missed out on their ministry.

However, the structures the Church of England used to provide this conscience provision create a complete structure of alternative oversight. Parishes can 'opt out' of accepting the

priestly ministry of women by asking for a different Bishop. This creates a very clear dividing line in the Church of England.

By contrast, in the Methodist Church, we know there will be different views on same sex marriage in each church and in each circuit. We will need to learn to live as a mixed economy at every level and we will not be creating different structures or clear dividing lines. We will still be together in the same circuits, districts and connexion. Our key task is not to separate according to our views but to learn to live together even though we disagree.

How can I support this?

There are different ways you can get involved.

You could encourage conversation in your church. There are different resources available from our website. Perhaps you could suggest a house group conversation, or a special service or an item on the agenda in a Church Council or General Church Meeting. Just having a chat with other people in your church would be a great start.

If you share Dignity and Worth's vision, we would be very pleased to have you as a member. You can join by going to www.dignityandworth.org.uk/join or by filling in an application form from one of our leaflets.

Find out who the representatives at Conference are from your District. Have a conversation with one or more of them about your views and what you hope for in the Methodist Church in these questions.

Pray about it. Pray that God's will be done in our churches and mission and in the decisions of the Conference. You might like to use the 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.**



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