

A close-up photograph of two gold wedding rings resting on an open book. The word "Love" is clearly visible on the page beneath the rings. The image is framed by a purple border with white and red swooshing lines.

For use alongside the full Conference Report and Connexional Study Guide. Includes a summary of the report and resolutions, and extended biblical resources for personal study and reflection.

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Foreword

As a Church we are considering resolutions about marriage and relationships. These proposals may challenge or affirm our beliefs and go to the heart of our understandings about love and relationships.

Through this booklet, we want **all** within the District to be able to explore how they approach what is before us. The circuit forums, and this and other resources, are not there for us to journey to a pre-set destination; they are there to help us explore how we feel and think, as individuals and as a Church, about relationships. Through this exploration we are invited to understand the views of others as well as our own. Whichever position we come from, whatever beliefs we hold, we are part of the body of Christ and believe in the God of love embodied in the person of Christ.

It is hoped that this additional guide will help your understanding of the proposed resolutions, and of your own and others' views, whether these are affirmed, better articulated, or sometimes challenged. It is hoped that you will then be able to come to the forums enabled to reflect on and share your beliefs about marriage and relationships within the Methodist Church.

Engaging in these reflections and conversations will not necessarily change your own or others' views, but they may help all of our understandings, and ability to exist well together within Christ's Church.

Revd Dr James Tebbutt
Chair of the Cumbria District of the Methodist Church

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Introduction

About this booklet

- It is a supplement to the Conference Report *God in Love Unites Us* and the *Connexional Study Guide*. Please use them together. There should be copies in each church, or find them online at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/marriage-and-relationships-2019/> .
- It is intended for personal or shared study and reflection, particularly in advance of forum conversations.
- Its aim is not to promote any particular view, but to enable each of us to reflect on why we hold the views we do. Please forgive us if we have missed that mark in any way.

About the process

- Conference 2019 passed provisional resolutions which means that they have sent them to the synods before a final decision is made at the next conference (2020).
- To inform the spring synod voting, the Cumbria District has decided to hold a series of forums within each circuit.
- Each forum will be run by two district facilitators and will be an opportunity to listen and to share.
- The forums will culminate with an exercise to record the views of those present at the forum, which will be fed back to synod.

Outline of report

This outline is extracted from the text of the *God in Love Unites Us* Connexional Study Guide.

Introduction

The report affirms (0.1) that God makes human beings to enjoy life in all its fullness and this means that we live in relationships with others. However, Christians have interpreted what that means in different ways, and the Methodist Church has been on a pilgrimage for many years. The current report and ancillary papers (available at www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19) are offered as part of that discernment.

The report then sets out why these questions matter (0.2), how the Task Group engaged with them (0.3) and what the content of the report is (0.4).

Section 1

The report reflects that, since as human beings we are made in the image of God (1.1), in order to understand what it means to be human, we therefore need to begin by understanding what God is like.

The report then discusses how we relate to God (1.2), how we relate to each other (1.3), and how we are made to relate as sexual beings (1.4).

The report explores the diversity of sexuality (1.5) as a core aspect of what it means to be a human created in love by God.

Section 2

This section of the report acknowledges the purposes of good relating (2.1), offering the reminder that God has made everything, loves everything that is made and invites human beings to accept that love and return it. This gives us our core purpose as human beings, which we work out in worshipping and serving God in a variety of ways. The report then goes on to discuss the qualities of good relating (2.2), offering the thought that all significant relationships should be built on self-giving love, commitment, fidelity, loyalty, honesty, mutual respect, equality and the desire for the flourishing of the people involved. It proposes principles of good relating (2.2.5) for the Conference to affirm.

The report then sets out (2.3) the patterns and practices of good relating and how these support the purposes and qualities of good relating.

The report then offers additional reflections (2.4) on good sexual relating, drawing on some insights from Scripture and some contemporary theological developments.

It explores key concepts such as chastity and fidelity as things that are positive rather than negative, and for everyone rather than just a few. Following this, it explores the change in attitudes towards contemporary sexual relating (2.5), cohabitation (2.6), civil partnerships (2.7), LGBTQI+ relating (2.8) and moving towards marriage (2.9).

Section 3

Section 3 The report starts by exploring the developing theology of marriage (3.1). It then goes on to look at divine grace and human frailty (3.2), marriage as a social and legal institution (3.3), and resources that could be offered to support marriage (3.4).

Section 4

The report looks at (4.1) the question posed by the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, and (4.2) who can register a civil partnership or be married in law. It further looks at who may register a civil partnership, or be married under the discipline of the Methodist Church (4.3).

Section 5

This section of the report starts by discussing the guidance in the Methodist Church's *Constitutional Practice and Discipline* ('CPD') on the understanding of marriage (5.1), and following that offers the amended Standing Order concerning marriage (5.2). The report acknowledges the respect for differing convictions (5.3) that has already been affirmed through provision made in the Standing Orders for differing views.

Conclusion

The report concludes with an invitation for the Methodist people to continue to explore these issues, giving consideration to the three key themes which run through the report, namely:

- Be open and positive about sexuality and relationships.
- Value all relationships of grace.
- Widen and justify the understanding of marriage as being between two persons.

Thinking about relationships and marriage

Although much of the current conversation has been prompted by the need to think about how the church understands same sex relationships, this question sits within a much wider picture of human relating and the nature of God.

The Methodist Church has a history of discerning the movement of God's Spirit and then working out the theological implications later. Lived experiences of divorce, cohabitation, singleness, domestic violence and many other examples of human relating, seen in the light of God's grace, have shaped the church's thinking and actions.

The *God in Love Unites Us* report encourages us to think about the qualities of relating that are important for healthy relationships to grow. These qualities flow out of our experience of relationship with God.

Why do questions about relationships matter to **you**? Are there particular experiences for you or those close to you that you have in mind when thinking about how the Church works out its theology?

What do you most value about the way God relates to human beings?
What qualities do you seek to live out in your human relationships?

Many different types of relationship are important in human society, however marriage has had deep significance in many different times and cultures. Even so, over time there have been

changes in the nuances of our understanding of what marriage is, even within the history of the United Kingdom.

Historically, marriage contracts were particularly important for wealthy families, to create alliances and control the transfer of property. The choice of marriage partner, particularly for a woman, would be made by her father or legal guardian, rather than for romantic love. Until 1870, marriage removed a woman's right to own property, as all her money and property automatically belonged to her husband.

The legal requirement for the start of a marriage to be marked by a formal ceremony conducted in a church, by a priest in the presence of witnesses, was only introduced a little over 250 years ago. In 1836 the state made provision for civil marriage and marriage in non-Anglican churches.

Until 1925, adultery was the only grounds for divorce, and before 1853 each divorce required a Private Act of Parliament.

What makes a marriage, a marriage? Is it:

- legal registration?
- building?
- clergy?
- sexual union?
- intention?
- qualities of relationship?
- God? (How?)

Or something else?

When does a marriage cease to be a marriage? Why?

Have changes to the understanding of marriage been an improvement?
How many different examples of marriage can you think of in the Bible?
What do we mean if we say 'biblical marriage'? Why?
What makes a marriage 'Christian'?

Scripture and sexuality

Much of the debate about equal marriage and the Church centres on differing interpretations of scripture. These resources focus on the passages discussed in the report in 4.3.11 - 4.3.13. There are many others that could be explored.

There are only 7 passages in the Bible that can be said to refer directly to same-sex sexual activity. This guide outlines below some examples of the different ways they are interpreted (but, NB!, is not intended to promote any particular interpretation(s)).

We all approach scripture with our different assumptions, and influenced by different life experiences and contexts. For all of us, tradition, reason and experience shape our understanding of what we read. As we seek to understand *why* we believe what we believe, it is good to try to identify those influences.

The Methodist Quadrilateral

Methodists traditionally use four sources of authority when thinking through issues of life and faith. Indeed, we have already been using them as we think about relationships and marriage. The following explanations are taken from the Methodist website:

Scripture



We seek to discover the word of God through reading the Bible. There are different understandings among Methodists about the Bible's authority in our lives. We need to use resources like different Bible translations, commentaries and Bible reading notes.

Tradition



This is the wisdom and creativity of Christians over time and across the world. It includes inspirational material like hymns, songs, prayers, poetry, Christian art and devotional books. There are also formally agreed teachings like the creeds, the content of the catechism, and statements and reports from the Methodist Conference.

Reason



We are called to love God with our minds as well as with our hearts. To the best of our ability we need to think things through in the light of reason. This means becoming aware of different points of view, and using our own critical thinking to make sense of God's world.

Experience



Methodism particularly stresses the importance of our own experience of God's grace working in our lives. We gain wisdom and maturity from life experience, especially when we pray and reflect about our story with other Christians.

The relationship between scripture, tradition, reason and experience is not straightforward. Each of the four sources affects, and is affected by, the other three.

For example, the way we interpret the experiences we have is shaped by the traditions in which we have been nurtured, and our experience can also lead us to question and re-interpret the traditions we have received.

Scripture is the primary authority, but comes to us as a tradition, read in the light of reason and experience. Tradition, reason and experience have all played their part in the copying and handing on of scripture over the centuries, and the choices made by translators are inevitably affected by their own theological views.

Think of an issue on which your viewpoint has changed. What factors brought you to this change? Where would you place them in the four categories?

The following examples offer interpretations and questions which, in no particular order, reflect different sources of authority (as indicated by the four images).

Biblical Narrative: Genesis 19:1-29 / Judges 19:1-30

One interpretation:

These two passages describe the depths of human depravity. Sodom (Genesis 19) became a byword for sexual immorality, and same-sex relationships lay at the heart of their sinfulness. Sodom is referred to many times in the Old and New Testaments as a wicked place, their sins are 'very grave' (Gen 18:20). Abraham pleads with God not to destroy the city if there are even ten righteous people among them. God rescues Lot and his family but destroys the rest of the city. The wickedness of Sodom is referred to many times in the Bible, including by Jesus.

The episode at Gibeah (Judges 19) closely echoes the story of Sodom, except that here the woman offered to the mob is gang raped and murdered. Gibeah is one of the towns of Benjamin, rather than a 'foreign' town. Like Sodom, Gibeah is destroyed, although by an Israelite army, rather than by God directly.

Another interpretation:

These two passages describe horrific events, and have fed into a perception that homosexual men are by nature violent and predatory. However, reading these stories as a condemnation of all same-sex relationships requires the reader to assume a connection between the violent, non-consensual nature of what is described, and the same sex aspect. Today our reading of the first story is affected by the later adoption of the word 'sodomy' as a term used primarily to refer to anal intercourse at the time when that was an illegal act in this country. If we seek to remove this layer of interpretative history and go back to the biblical text, the key issue is that this is a group of people wanting to carry out a violent and non-consensual act in gang raping the angelic visitors. In Judges 19 although the crowd ask for the male visitor to be given to them, the actual attack carried out is heterosexual

gang rape and murder, but this is not taken to mean that all heterosexual activity is sinful.

In several biblical texts Sodom is referred to as a place of wicked sinfulness. However, Ezekiel 16:49 spells out the reasons in more detail: 'This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.' The whole context of this chapter uses the imagery of an adulterous woman, a bride who prostitutes herself. There is no suggestion of same sex activity. When Jesus refers to Sodom in Matthew 10:15 and Luke 10:12 it is in the context of whether the disciples have been hospitably welcomed into a town or not, and there is no hint of reference to sexual activity. The writer of the Hebrews seems to be alluding to this story when writing of showing hospitality to strangers (Hebrews 13:2).

Far from being a condemnation of loving, same-sex relationships, these two stories are examples of extreme inhospitality – and LGBTQI+ people have much experience of being unwelcome.

How have stories of, or encounters with, people of different sexual orientations shaped your views about sexuality?



What is the purpose of Biblical narrative (stories)? Are all Biblical stories told as lessons for us about how to live? Is it always clear which actions are good or bad? In particular, do these stories suggest that heterosexual rape is a lesser evil than homosexual rape, i.e. that it was better to make a woman available than allow the rape of a man?



Old Testament Law: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

One interpretation:

While these verses do condemn same sex activity between men, there are many laws in Leviticus that Christians do not apply to themselves today, for example not wearing clothing made of mixed fibres (19:19), and not cutting the hair at the edges of your beard (19:27). These verses do not in themselves give any reason to condemn consensual, loving and faithful same sex relationships today.

When reading the laws of the Hebrew Scriptures it is more important to understand the reasons that lie behind those laws, and many of them had to do with social order rather than eternal principles. Lev 18:22 is probably describing same sex activity taking place in the context of worshipping false gods. Lev 18:21 refers to sacrificing children to the god Molech, and same sex activity was a common feature of certain religious cults at the time.

Another interpretation:

These two verses are clear in their condemnation of male same sex activity. They form part of the laws of the People of God, and would have been assumed and accepted as the basis for understanding what sexual relationships are appropriate. Both verses describe male-male sexual intercourse as an abomination. Leviticus 20:13 shows the seriousness with which this was understood because the penalty it gives is to be put to death. Even if we would not want to go that far today, it is clear that these acts are condemned by God.

Interpreting Language

Lev 20:13 is part of a passage which refers to many different forbidden degrees of relationship. The primary concern seems to

be about the social connection those people have, rather than any more fundamental reason. For example, it is forbidden that a man have a relationship with his daughter in law. If she were not his daughter in law, they would not be prevented from having a relationship, but the social connection they already have makes that relationship a 'perversion'. Verse 13 specifies that a 'man' shall not lie with a 'male' as with a 'woman'. The terms for 'man / woman' identify a person of status, whereas 'male / female' is more general, and frequently used to refer to a slave, child or animal. Some people have suggested that the wording is 'man' - 'male' rather than 'man' - 'man' because it condemns the practice of a master taking advantage of a slave or an adult male taking advantage of a boy, rather than prohibiting a consensual relationship between equals.

To what extent do you believe Old Testament law should be lived out by Christians today?

What is your basis for deciding which rules still apply? Can you appreciate that someone else may have thoughtfully and prayerfully considered reasons for taking a different view?



It could be claimed that the church has changed its position on a number of different 'biblical teachings' such as slavery and capital punishment. When is tradition a reliable guide to our interpretation and application of the Bible? What sort of grounds might there be for questioning traditional interpretations?



New Testament Law: 1 Cor 6:9-10 / 1Tim 1:9-10

One interpretation:

Both these passages give lists of various sinful actions, including (but not limited to) sexual sins. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 two Greek words are used, *malakoi* and *arsenokoites*. The NRSV translates these as 'male prostitutes, sodomites' while the NIV combines the two into the phrase 'men who have sex with men'. 1 Timothy 1:9 uses the second of those two words, again translated by the NRSV as 'sodomites', and by the NIV as 'those practicing homosexuality'. It is clear that homosexuality is counted among the sins that Paul condemns. We do not celebrate any of the other sins in these lists, and we have no reason to make an exception for homosexual practice.

Another interpretation:

It is not clear that the original Greek words refer to anything we would recognise today as consensual and loving same-sex relationships. The Greek word *malakoi* more literally means 'soft' or 'delicate'. Apart from 1 Corinthians 6:9, the only other use in the New Testament is when, concerning John the Baptist, Jesus asked the people if they went into the desert to see a man in 'soft' (fine) clothing. In a sexual context it came to mean the 'passive' sexual partner, but more particularly, in the Corinthian context of the pluralist pagan, fertility-worshipping context of Corinth, it refers to the temple prostitutes. It was not until the 1940s that Bible translators started to translate this as 'sodomites' or 'homosexuals'. Before then it was translated as 'weaklings' or 'effeminate'.

The Greek word *arsenokoites* is used in both 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. It seems to be a new word created by Paul by putting two words together – *arsen*, 'male' and *koite*, 'bed' –

probably alluding to the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 which uses these two words separately. It is not used anywhere else in the Bible and is very rare or non-existent in other contemporary writings. If Paul was alluding to Leviticus without any other reference, it would seem likely that he intended to refer to the same thing as was meant in Leviticus – likely to be temple prostitution.

Within living memory for many people, male same-sex activity has been illegal. (Legalised in England & Wales in 1967, Scotland 1980, Northern Ireland 1982). This meant that homosexual men were forced to hide their sexuality, often marrying women. Some would seek homosexual encounters where they could find them, frequently with strangers in parks or public toilets. Until even more recently, speaking about same-sex relationships was often taboo. What impact do you think this recent history of experience has had on your feelings about same sex relationships? What changes have there been in what you have experienced as attitudes have changed?



To what extent do you believe that instructions for the early Church should be lived out by Christians today? What is your basis for deciding which rules still apply? Can you appreciate that someone else may have thoughtfully and prayerfully considered reasons for taking a different view?



Theological Reasoning: Romans 1:26-27

One interpretation:

Paul seems to be setting out same-sex relationships as part of his understanding of the fallen nature of creation. However, Paul lived in a different context from that of today and also did not have access to some of the scientific understanding available today. His arguments that same sex activity is shameful and unnatural, and perverting the natural created order are very similar to his arguments about head covering in 1 Corinthians 11. Very many Christians today would say that 1 Corinthians 11 is a cultural instruction not relevant to today, but Paul's arguments don't seem to suggest this. He says it is shameful for a woman to cut her hair or shave her head (v.6), a woman should cover her head because of the order of creation (v.8-10). It is unnatural and disgraceful for a man to have long hair (v.14) and all the churches follow this custom (v.16). If we can read 1 Corinthians 11 as something for a specific time and place that does not apply to us today, then we can prayerfully consider Romans 1:26-27 in the same light.

Another interpretation:

Romans 1:26-27 is part of an extended passage in which Paul sets out the fall of creation and ways in which humanity has departed from God's ways. Verses 26 and 27 describe both male and female same sex activity as something shameful and unnatural. Paul says God has allowed this to happen as part of the outworking of the consequences of worshipping the created order rather than the creator. The basic principles of the created order and God's relationship with creation do not change. Therefore the condemnation of same sex activity described here applies today even to consensual, committed, and loving same-sex partnerships.

Another interpretation:

The letters in the New Testament only give us one side of a conversation. Much of the time we can only guess at the situations and arguments he was responding to. There are times when Paul quotes the arguments of his opponents before responding to them, but because of the nature of the earliest Greek manuscripts, which have no punctuation, it is not always clear when translators ought to put certain passages in quotation marks. Some scholars think that the whole passage Romans 1:18-32 may be Paul's quotation of the traditional Jewish view of the Gentiles as people who do not know, acknowledge or worship God, part of an argument that the Jewish people are superior and have a special place in God's affection. There is a linguistic change in Paul's writing between 1:32 and 2:1, from speaking in very critical terms about the Gentiles as 'them', to addressing 'you', the Jewish readers, who Paul says have no excuse, and should not be passing judgement on others. If 1:26-27 is a quotation of the arguments of Paul's opponents, and he is using it to say people should not pass judgement on others, then we ought not to use it to pass judgement either!

Apart from the biblical arguments, what reasoning is there for society to accept or not accept same sex relationships? How important are these for our thinking as Christians?



What do you make of the process of reasoning Paul uses? In Romans 2 Paul strongly criticises those who judge others. How does this affect the way we understand and apply what is said in Romans 1?



Passages referred to in the report section 4.3.13

The following passages do not refer to same sex relationships, but are part of the wider scriptural context in which we interpret the passages above. The questions are intended to help us reflect on what we think they contribute to the conversation.

Psalm 139

The psalmist speaks of being intimately known by God, formed by God from the womb, and surrounded by God's presence.

The psalmist describes themselves as 'fearfully and wonderfully made' by God.

Does this apply to every human being?
We know none of us are perfect – do we draw lines between aspects of ourselves that are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' and other aspects that are not?

When Psalm 139 is read, the last verses are often not included because of the hatred expressed in them. Yet the psalmist finishes by asking God to test their thoughts for any wickedness and lead them in the way everlasting.

Is hatred ever godly?
How sure can we ever be that our thoughts about others (positive or negative) are justified?
How do we know whether we are experiencing God leading us 'in the way everlasting', or other influences leading us on a different path?

Isaiah 56:3-5; Acts 8:26-39

Both these passages refer to eunuchs – primarily meaning those who had been castrated or were otherwise impotent, perhaps through intersex conditions. Castration was usually a deliberate act because eunuchs would be appointed as high status servants and officials, especially to care for a royal harem. In Old Testament law, men with damaged genitalia and other injuries, diseases or congenital disabilities were not permitted to participate in worship and sacrifice as others did (Leviticus 21:20; Deuteronomy 23:1). However, Isaiah prophesies that God will welcome eunuchs into his house and bless them, and in Acts 8 we see a particular eunuch coming to faith through a God-led encounter with Philip.

What reasons might there be for laws in the Old Testament to be overridden by later scriptural writings?
Does God's mind on these things change?

Should these passages about eunuchs inform the church's attitude toward those who are 'sexually other', such as non-binary and transgender people?
If so, what do they tell us?

Acts 10

This passage marks a turning point for the spread of the gospel. There are several occasions in the New Testament when it is made clear that Jews and Jewish Christians believed that eating with, or even visiting Gentiles was unlawful and put them in a state of ritual impurity (John 18:28; Acts 10:28; 11:3; Galatians 2:12). Even though Peter is staying with a tanner (an unclean occupation), he still seems hesitant about visiting a Gentile home. However, through a vision or dream, which coincides with the arrival of messengers from Cornelius, Peter realises that God is

sending him into this Gentile household to share the gospel. This is confirmed both by Cornelius's vision and when Peter witnesses the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit. He then has to argue the case with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who are persuaded by his evidence. The fact that this story is told and retold at such length perhaps underlines its importance.

What reasons might there be for God to override traditional understandings of the law?

Do you believe God still speaks in this way, or did that end with the New Testament era?

Throughout the course of the New Testament it seems that the boundaries are continually being opened up. Against accepted norms, Jesus associates with women, children, various outcasts, and even Samaritans. Philip baptises a eunuch. Peter and Paul take the gospel to Gentiles (and they are included without becoming Jews).

Do we have boundaries today, expressed or not?

Should boundaries be widened further?

Are there limits?

What Peter felt he was hearing from God was confirmed in several ways: the same vision came to him three times; what Peter heard fitted with Cornelius's vision and coincided with the visit of the messengers; Peter witnessed the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit; the Jerusalem Church accepted Peter's interpretation of events.

Do we look for similar confirmation when we hear God speaking to us today? How important for you is the conferring and agreement of the Church in considering a new perspective?

Matthew 22:34-40 (parallels Mark 12:28-34 / Luke 10:25-28)

Although these are perhaps Jesus' most famous words and often thought of as a Christian development, Jesus is directly quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

The story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29ff) explicitly widens the understanding of 'neighbour' to include a representative of an unclean and despised group of people. Jesus goes even further in saying that the Samaritan sets an example of how to love that we ought to follow.

If these are the two greatest laws, they must shape our reading of all other commandments and instruction.

Does this mean that love overrides laws that seem cruel or divisive? If the principles of loving God and neighbour go right back to some of the oldest Jewish Law, what are we to make of subsequent commands to apply the death penalty or carry out genocide, for example?

What does it mean to say 'love is the fulfilment of the law' (Romans 13:10)? What does it look like in practice to love those with whom you disagree?

Thinking more widely

We have only covered a limited selection of Bible passages here (but consider also, for example, those in Appendix 1).

What other passages do you feel have a bearing on the issues surrounding marriage and relationships?

Living with Contradictory Convictions

Within the church there are a range of views on many issues. These different views are usually held thoughtfully and with much prayer. This section helps us to think about how we feel about those Christians whose views are different from our own.

Different views have always clashed among those who follow Jesus. Among his first disciples Jesus called Matthew the tax collector, who may have been collaborating with the Romans, and Simon the Zealot, who may have been seeking to overthrow the Roman occupation by violence. There must have been some very lively conversations!

Do you think this diversity among his followers was a deliberate choice on Jesus' part? Why?

The history of the church is littered with some very ugly behaviours including torture and murder of those who refused to sign up to particular articles of faith. At other times those in authority have granted freedom of conscience for each person to act as they believe God was leading them.

How important is freedom of religious conscience to you? Are you content to grant that to others?
Are there limits, and if so where?

In recent years the Methodist Church has thought about how we might live with our differences. In 1998 the Conference report *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path* described seven 'Models of Biblical Authority' as examples to represent the different perspectives held within the Methodist Church.

Consider the different models of biblical authority in Appendix 2 to this guide: do you prefer some (or a combination of them) more than others? If so, why?

The 2006 Conference report *Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church* also referred (like this guide) to the Methodist quadrilateral. The report reflected on how we might live well together with differences in the Church.

What are your experiences of disagreement in the church?
(Brexit, divorce, women in ministry, pews or chairs, type of coffee, paint colours... interpretation of the bible?)
Do you have any experiences of people 'disagreeing well'?

Are differences of opinion a sign of failure within the body of Christ, or a positive sign of diversity?
Should we always be seeking to reach a common view on every issue, or can there be a range of views (and if so, is there any limit on that range)?

What does it mean to be united in Christ if we hold very different theological, political, moral or ethical views?

The provisional resolutions (summarised in Appendix 3) reflect the different views sincerely held in the Methodist Church about marriage and relationships, and seek to offer a way of respecting

and including these views within the Church, so as to exist well together.

The 2019 Conference passed these provisional resolutions for consideration by the wider Church. In Cumbria, we are inviting everyone to consider them through circuit forums and circuit meetings in readiness for the April 2020 District Synod, and the summer 2020 Methodist Conference that will make final decisions about the resolutions.

A moving statue



‘Reconciliation’

Josefina de Vasconcellos. 1977.

Photo by Martinvi [CC BY-SA 4.0]

Vasconcellos says: "The sculpture was originally conceived in the aftermath of the War. Europe was in shock, people were stunned. I read in a newspaper about a woman who crossed Europe on foot to find her husband, and I was so moved that I made the sculpture. Then I thought that it wasn't only about the reunion of two people but hopefully a reunion of nations which had been fighting."

When we look at the sculpture *Reconciliation* what do we see? Below are some reflections.

There are two people –
two separate starting points,
both connected and rooted to the ground from which they come.

And there is space between them –
a space perhaps for difference...
room for all that has taken place...
an acknowledgement of what has passed...
a place for suffering to rest.

Yet, over-arching the two is the powerful embrace –
the reaching out... the coming together...
the holding on... the uniting...

Unity... Reconciliation

Not static but surging forward, showing a hope for the future.
Perhaps what we see in reconciliation
is a glimpse of God in action.

Where might God be
seeking reconciliation
today?

What might reconciliation look like for
the Methodist Church as we discuss
God in Love Unites Us and think about
the way forward?

Appendices

Appendix 1: Index of main Biblical references discussed in the report *God in Love Unites Us*

Bible reference	Theme	Section(s) of report
Gen 1:26-28, Gen 5:1-2	Human beings are created as co-stewards, equally made in the image of God	2.1.2
Gen 2:24	Greek translation of Hebrew scripture makes monogamy a clearer emphasis	2.3.3
Gen 2:21-25	co-workers in community	2.1.3; 2.1.4
Gen 2:22-24	emphasis on companionship or procreation or both? Command or blessing?	3.1.10
Gen 19:1-29	Reference to same sex activity - desire to gang rape male visitors	4.3.11; 4.3.12
Gen 38	Levirate marriage	4.3.16
Lev 18:22; 20:13	Reference to same sex activity - if a man lies with another man	4.3.11; 4.3.12
Deut 25:5-6	Levirate marriage	4.3.16
Judg 19:1-30	Reference to same sex activity - desire to gang rape male visitor	4.3.11; 4.3.12
Ruth	Levirate marriage	4.3.16
Ps 139	God's intimate knowledge and love of each person, 'fearfully and wonderfully made'	4.3.13
Isaiah 56:3-5	Eunuchs will be blessed by God	4.3.13
Hos, Jer, Isa, Ezek	marriage as a metaphor to describe God's covenant relationship with God's people	3.1.1
Matt 5:17	Jesus fulfils the law	4.3.10
Matt 19:4-6	Marriage as a creation ordinance endorsed by Jesus	3.1.1
Matt 19:4-6	Monogamy endorsed by Jesus	4.3.16
Matt 19:27-30	people of God as new family context for individual	2.1.7
Matt 22:23-28	Levirate marriage	4.3.16

Matt 22:34-40	OT law summed up in overriding principle of love for God and neighbour	4.3.13
Matt 22:36-40	Loving God and loving others as fulfilment of the law	4.3.10
Mark 3:35	people of God as new family context for individual	2.1.7
Mark 10:6-8	Marriage as a creation ordinance endorsed by Jesus	3.1.1
Mark 10:7-8	Monogamy endorsed by Jesus	4.3.16
Mark 12:28-34	OT law summed up in overriding principle of love for God and neighbour	4.3.13
Luke 10:25-28	OT law summed up in overriding principle of love for God and neighbour	4.3.13
John 19:25-27	people of God as new family context for individual	2.1.7
Acts 8:26-39	Eunuch not excluded by sexual status	4.3.13
Acts 10	God's inclusion of those excluded by human understanding of God's law	4.3.13
Rom 1:26-27	Same sex activity - worshipping creature rather than creator	4.3.11; 4.3.12
Rom 14:1-15:7	Christians holding opposing convictions must act according to conscience	4.3.21
1 Cor 6:9-10	Potential reference to same sex activity - two words in a list of ten unjust behaviours	4.3.11; 4.3.12
1 Cor 11:14	unnatural for a man to have long hair	4.3.9
1 Cor 13	God's way of relating involves self-giving love	2.2.2
2 Cor 11:2	marriage as a metaphor for Christ's relationship with the Church	3.1.1
Gal 5:22-23	God's way involves self-giving love	2.2.2
Gal 5:22-23	Fruit of the spirit includes self control	2.4.1
Eph 1:16-19	Gift of wisdom	2.4.1
Eph 5:25, 32	marriage as a metaphor for Christ's relationship with the Church	3.1.1
Philippians 2	bearing the marks of Jesus' love	2.2.3
1 Tim 1:9-10	Potential reference to same sex activity – one word in a list of thirteen or fourteen unjust behaviours	4.3.11; 4.3.12

Appendix 2: Models of Biblical Authority

The following 'Models of Biblical Authority' appear as representative examples in the 1998 Conference Report *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path* (the report's original paragraph numbering is retained here):

7.9.1 The Bible is the Word of God and is therefore inerrant (free of all error and entirely trustworthy in everything which it records) and has complete authority in all matters of theology and behaviour. It is 'God-breathed' and its human authors were channels of the divine Word. The Christian's task is to discern accurately what the Bible teaches and then to believe and obey it. Reason, experience and tradition should be judged in the light of the Bible, not the other way round.

This view is concerned to safeguard the conviction that the Bible has its origin in God. It works from the premise that God cannot be the author of error, and therefore the Bible cannot contain error. To give undue status to any other source of authority is to exalt fallible human insight over the infallible Word of God.

7.9.2 The Bible's teaching about God, salvation and Christian living is entirely trustworthy. It cannot be expected, however, to provide entirely accurate scientific or historical information since this is not its purpose. Nevertheless, it provides the supreme rule for faith and conduct, to which other ways of 'knowing', while important, should be subordinate.

This view also stresses the divine origin of Scripture, its supreme authority for Christian belief and practice, and its priority over other sources of authority. But it holds that reliable information

on, for example, historical or scientific matters may not fall within God's purpose in giving the Bible.

7.9.3 The Bible is the essential foundation on which Christian faith and life are built. However, its teachings were formed in particular historical and cultural contexts, and must therefore be read in that light. The way to apply biblical teaching in today's very different context is not always obvious or straightforward. Reason is an important (God-given) gift which must be used to the full in this process of interpretation.

This view emphasizes that the Word of God is contained in a collection of books written in times and places very different from our own and cannot simply be read as a message for our own situation. We must work out by the use of reason how far and in what way the ancient text can appropriately be applied to the modern situation.

7.9.4 The Bible's teaching, while foundational and authoritative for Christians, needs to be interpreted by the Church. In practice it is the interpretation and guidance offered by Church leaders and preachers which provides authoritative teaching. Church tradition is therefore of high importance as a practical source of authority.

This view is concerned to stress that the people of God, the Church, existed before the Bible and that the Bible therefore does not exist independently of the Church. Interpretation of the Bible is essentially a matter for the Church community, and especially its appointed leaders, rather than for private individuals.

7.9.5 The Bible is one of the main ways in which God speaks to the believer. However, the movement of God's Spirit is free and unpredictable, and it is what the Spirit is doing today that is of the greatest importance. The Bible helps to

interpret experience, but much stress is placed on spiritual experience itself, which conveys its own compelling authority.

On this view, to give too high a status to the Bible may prevent us from hearing what God is saying to us today. We should be guided principally by the convictions which emerge from our own Christian experience as individuals and as a church community, which on occasion will go against the main thrust of the Bible's teaching.

7.9.6 The Bible witnesses to God's revelation of himself through history and supremely through Jesus Christ. However, the Bible is not itself that revelation, but only the witness to it. Christians must therefore discern where and to what extent they perceive the true gospel witness in the various voices of the Bible. Reason, tradition and experience are as important as the biblical witnesses.

This view emphasizes that the Bible mediates the Word of God but is not identical with the Word of God. We can discover which parts of the Bible are God's Word for us only if we make use of all the resources of reason, church tradition and experience.

7.9.7 The Bible comprises a diverse and often contradictory collection of documents which represent the experiences of various people in various times and places. The Christian's task is to follow, in some way, the example of Christ. And to the extent that the Bible records evidence of his character and teaching it offers a useful resource. However, in the late 20th century it is simply not possible to obey all its teachings since these stem from very human authors and often represent the ideology of particular groups or classes in an ancient and foreign culture. Reason and experience provide much more important tools for faith and practice.

This view also stresses that the Bible was written by people addressing particular times and situations. But, guided by the insights of, for example, feminist and liberation theologies, it further argues that before we can discover in it God's Word for us we must strip away from it those elements which betray the vested interests of particular groups, for instance, the interests of male dominance or of political and economic power-blocks.

Appendix 3: Summary of resolutions

The resolutions that each district synod is asked to consider have been approved by Conference as 'provisional resolutions'. These will come to the spring synods for a vote. A summary of the resolutions is set out below, and it may be helpful to read them with the *God in Love Unites Us* report alongside, as some resolutions refer to paragraphs within the report (and, for the full terms of the provisional resolutions, please see the end of the report itself where they are set out).

“10/2 The Conference adopts the recommendation in paragraph 2.2.5 [of the report] that it affirm the following summary understanding of the principles or qualities of good relating.”

Good relating is built upon the desire for all to flourish through self-giving (rather than self-seeking) love, commitment, fidelity, loyalty, honesty, mutual respect and equality.

“10/3 The Conference adopts the recommendation in paragraph 2.6.4 that it affirm the following summary understanding of cohabitation”

The Church recognises that God's love is found in human love, whether that is expressed in formal or informal commitment, and the church is called to celebrate that love. The Church is called

to point to the presence of God in such relationships, and to encourage the deepening of commitment within them.

“10/7 the Conference adopts the Guidance on the understanding of marriage set out in paragraph 5.1.2 and directs that it be included in the Guidance section of CPD”

G1 – The Methodist Church welcomes marriage enquiries from both members and non-members, looking for an openness to God within the couple.

G2 – Marriage is a legal contract, but the law does not define the nature of the commitment or of marriage. 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 – 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 appropriate to each partner”, offering security, love and care, in which “children may be nurtured, family life strengthened, and human society enriched”.

G4 – It is acknowledged that the Methodist Church is made up of people who hold different interpretations of marriage, and to respect this some practical provisions are suggested.

G5 – As always, the provisions of the law must be met for a service of marriage or blessing to take place in Methodist premises.

G6 – This permits church councils to ‘opt in’ to register for same-sex as well as mixed-sex marriages. This should be considered at least every five years.

G7 – reminds church councils that they must undertake the relevant legislative registration requirements to ensure marriages can take place.

“10/8 The Conference consents in principle to the marriage of same-sex couples on Methodist premises throughout the

Connexion and by Methodist ministers, probationers or members” (provided that this is in compliance with the applicable jurisdiction).

Resolution 10/9 is a much longer resolution that details changes necessary to CPD and Standing Orders, and which sets out the proposed ‘mixed economy’ (although the phrase is not used) of understanding and practice concerning marriage. In particular:

011A Marriage (1) – Marriage is given by God as a channel of grace, freely entered into for a life-long union. “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” [i.e. equally, without preferring or prioritising one understanding over the other].

(011B) (2) Allows ministers or those authorised to officiate at the weddings not to marry those against the dictates of their conscience [e.g. for some a same-sex couple].

(3)-(10) Consequent provisions include that:
managing trustees must approve the use of the premises for same-sex marriages before same-sex marriages can take place, and must notify the District Chair;
ministers and officiants unable to conduct a marriage on the grounds of conscience shall notify the District Chair, and the couple shall be referred to an authorised colleague who would be willing to marry them;
similar provisions apply where premises are not registered;
ministers or officiants who agree to marry a same-sex couple must also notify the District Chair; and,

any discrimination including on the grounds of sexuality is rejected, including if giving rise to any objection regarding the performance of any duty in respect of any proposed marriage.



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