

The report which follows was extensively discussed at the 2019 Conference. The Conference made amendments to some of the resolutions which were presented by the Task Group, and therefore some of the resolutions which are now presented to the Synods as provisional resolutions are different from those described in section 5 of the report. However, resolution 10/1 directed that the report be commended for study and prayerful discussion, and the full report is therefore reproduced here in the form in which it was presented to the Conference.

The resolutions shown at the end of the report, however, are shown in the form in which they were passed by the Conference and it is these, particularly those which are indicated as being provisional, which are to be debated in Synods.

Preface: A personal invitation to journey on in love, faith and joy

“The greatest thing you’ll ever learn
Is just to love and be loved in return”.¹

How can we best live in relationships today? We all live with a huge variety of relationships in our world; some closer and some more distant. Within our circles of friends, family and acquaintances, most of us will have at least some experience of conventional two-parent families, single parent families, cohabiting couples, single people, people who have divorced and re-married, same-sex partnerships, and many others.

How can we best live faithfully as Christians in these relationships today? As Methodist people, we differ in how we answer this question. Yet we are called

¹ The title of this report is taken from Fred Pratt Green’s hymn “How rich is God’s creation (The Joy of Being Friends)” and is used by permission of Stainer & Bell Ltd, London, England, www.stainer.co.uk
George Alexander Aberle (known as eden ahbez), *Nature Boy*, 1948 (sung by Nat King Cole).

to be in loving communion with one another. What we share, in loving God and in knowing we are loved by God, is much greater than anything that divides us.

We, the Methodist people, have been on a “Pilgrimage of Faith” over the last 25 years to discover how we can better express our love for God in how we love one another, and enable each other to love. Many courageous steps have already been taken. It has not been easy. We do not all agree. Sadly, we have sometimes hurt one another and have been tempted to part company over these issues of love. For the questions at the heart of this pilgrimage are fundamentally about how we can live and love appropriately.

Looking at these relationships raises questions about the nature of marriage, cohabitation, living in relationships and living with different sexualities. These questions cut right to the very identity of who we are, and who those we love are and can be. Our Pilgrimage of Faith has challenged us to listen and to learn from each other and to move together. Sometimes, we find it hard to understand why others do not see things as we do. Yet as the Methodist people, we have chosen to journey on together and find ways of living with contradictory convictions.

As the current Marriage and Relationships Task Group, we have committed ourselves to continue in that way. We invite you, as readers of this report, to journey with us, and with all our Methodist community. We invite you to bring your lived experience to what we say; and to join us in being open to learn more of what it means to love and be loved as God forms us as human persons.

Our journey as a Task Group is a living, worked example of the Pilgrimage of Faith. We have started at different places and we have disagreed. We have grappled with our contradictory convictions and found God meeting us in each other. In what follows we offer to you, and to the rest of the Methodist Church, the fruits of our conversations as we seek to journey further together.

We invite you to join us and pray that together:

“As partners of the living Christ
Who risk the path he trod,
With wondering love we find we share
the timeless joy of God.”²

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 O11A 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.

0.1 What is our task?

0.1.1 At the heart of Christianity is the power of God’s grace to transform us and our relationships, so that we might enjoy life in all its fullness. As Methodist Christians, we have engaged seriously in working out what this means for our relationship with God and with each other as disciples of Christ, and for our wider communities in terms of sharing the good news of salvation and social justice. We have said and done much less about application of the insights of faith to our intimate and sexual relationships.³ This report continues the work of developing, and more

² Rosemary Wakelin, quoted from last verse of *Singing the Faith* number 687.

³ For what we mean by ‘sexual relationships’ see further 1.4.1 and 1.4.5 and the glossary of terms.

wholly applying, our understanding of God's grace to all our relationships and our sexual relationships in particular. By so doing, we learn more of how God calls us to be human in the modern world.

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 1992.⁴ 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.

We believe that God has made us to be in relationships and has shown us how to flourish through those relationships.

0.1.3 Our task is a deeply complex one, with a long history and a vast array of relevant insights from theology and nearly every other aspect of human learning. In the wider world, new terms and a specialised vocabulary have been developed to talk about these matters, and we include a glossary in section 1. Some additional thinking that lies behind our reflections and our recommendations can be found in the ancillary papers and in the accompanying bibliography to this report.⁵ We would stress that what follows is simply a summary of our findings and recommendations, as we seek to discern more of what it means to follow God in all of our relating and to hold together as a diverse body of disciples.

⁴ *A Methodist Statement on A Christian Understanding of Family life, the Single Person and Marriage*, 1992.

⁵ See the Marriage and Relationships 2019 page on the Methodist Church website.

0.2 Why is this task necessary?

0.2.1 Our group was set up by the Methodist Conference in 2016, as a consequence of the work done by a previous Marriage and Relationships Task Group which reported to the 2016 Conference.⁶ Our terms of reference were then amended by the 2018 Conference.⁷

0.2.2 Building on the 2016 Task Group's Report, and the debates and workshops at the Conference in 2018, we have identified the following needs for this work.

Relationships, sex and marriage are important issues for everyone. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. As part of its calling and mission, the Methodist Church must engage with the reality of how people are living today.⁸

⁶ In 2016, the Conference adopted Resolutions 29/7, 29/8 and 29/9 in the following form (Daily Record 6/14/1 and 6/14/2):

29/7.

The Conference directed that a new Statement of the judgment of the Conference on marriage and relationships shall be prepared and that, as part of the process, the definition of marriage should be revisited.

29/8.

The Conference appointed a new Task Group, which shall include people with expert knowledge of matters of Faith and Order and marriage and relationships, to update the Statement and to oversee the process of consulting with the Methodist people on the definition of marriage.

29/9.

The Conference directed that the new Task Group shall report to the 2018 Conference with a draft text of a new statement which shall include:

a)

consideration of all relevant Reports produced and Resolutions passed by the Conference... (sc. as set out in paragraph 3.5.1 of the 2016 report);

b)

consideration of the definition of marriage, including the matters raised throughout section 3 of... (sc. the 2016) report.

⁷ In 2018, the Conference adopted Resolutions 27A/1 and 27A/2 (Daily Record 7/17/2), which charged the Task Group with bringing to the 2019 Conference a report with recommendations in place of a draft formal Statement. This process would allow for proper consultation, but also meet the sense of urgency being expressed by many in these matters.

⁸ Marriage and Relationships Task Group 2016 3.1.1 (a). Please see the Marriage and Relationships web page for a fuller discussion of how the current task group have developed the work of the 2016 Report.

There have been many developments in the understanding of these matters in the last forty years, and also several important legal changes. Since the Methodist Church has not fully reflected upon our theology of marriage and relationships since 1992, the 2016 Task Group identified the need for an update and the provision of policy guidance.⁹

Through their consultation with the Methodist people, the previous Task Group identified the need for the Methodist Church to revisit the ‘definition’ of marriage.¹⁰

There are pastoral imperatives for such work. These include addressing the hurt felt by those who perceive that the current definition implies they are ‘lesser persons’, and at the same time a need to recognise “the feelings of alienation and distress” expressed by those concerned that any revision to the definition of marriage might damage “how they understand their own marriage”.¹¹ There is also a need to review what the current definition with its emphasis on “marriage as gift” says to single people.¹²

A further pastoral imperative arises with regard to how the Methodist Church supports those “living faithfully together, but for whom marriage is a difficult option”.¹³ At the 2015 Conference, Notice of Motion 2015/219 directed that consideration of cohabitation should form part of any process of revising the Methodist Church’s definition of marriage.¹⁴

There is a need to be able to talk better together about relationships, marriage and sexuality. This has come most clearly from the Methodist

⁹ The request for policy guidance recurs repeatedly throughout the 2016 Marriage and Relationships report: see 3.2.1, 3.2.2 (a), (c) & (e).

¹⁰ *Marriage and Relationships* report, 2016, 3.7.

¹¹ 2016 Report 3.1.1 (b)

¹² 2016 Report 3.1.1 (b) (ii)

¹³ 2016 Report 3.1.1 (b) iv

¹⁴ 2016 Report 3.2.1

young people at 3Generate.¹⁵ It is also clear from previous reports to the Conference that there is still work to do to enable more of us across the Connexion to be able to engage openly, positively, biblically and respectfully with each other around these issues.

The debate at the 2018 Conference on several notices of motion indicated that the time has come to make decisions about our theology and practice which will affirm our diversity and enable us all to flourish as a people who hold contradictory convictions.¹⁶

0.2.3 In our worshipping lives as Methodist people, we often pray and sing about our commitment to one another. In our pastoral care and reflecting together we often focus on our significant relationships. This report aims to provide a resource that will enable us to be more who we are and talk well about matters of sexuality. In setting about our work as a Task Group, we have learnt more of how to do this while still holding contrary convictions.

0.3 How have we set about this task?

0.3.1 As a Task Group we have begun in all things with God. We were called to this work by the Conference as eight people of faith. We have brought to our encounters what we discover about God through prayer and the Bible, and what we already know of God and who God has formed us to be. We are of different genders, sexualities, cultural backgrounds and ages. Between us, we are in various kinds of relationship. We differ in our identities but we all find our primary identity in Christ.

0.3.2 In our conferring, we have remembered and heeded, as far as we are able, the diversity of theological traditions and emphases within the

¹⁵ 2016 Report 3.3.5

¹⁶ Notice of Motion 2018/203 was carried (Daily Record 7/17/8 and 8/53/1-2). Notice of Motion 2018/112 was fully debated but eventually not put (Daily Record 7/17/6). The debate showed the passion and urgency with which many are pressing for same-sex marriage to be made available within the Methodist Church, while at the same time there were other opinions that need to be respected.

Methodist people. We have recalled the range of identities to be found among human beings, especially with regard to gender and sexuality. We have spoken with those of other identities and insights not represented on our group. We have shared our own stories and experiences, and drawn from those stories and experiences publicly available on websites and in publications. Within our limitations, we have remembered other sister Churches (both in the UK and beyond) and followed their discussions and insights.¹⁷ We acknowledge the contexts from which our World Church partners carry out their ministry; that these contexts present different realities from those in Britain and may require different responses from what we are suggesting in this report. We have also read past British Methodist reports on these matters to familiarise ourselves with what our Church has said and done previously; and we have met with those who have led this work in recent years.¹⁸

0.3.3 As a group, we have disagreed about how best to reach conclusions.

While we all honour the authority of Scripture, some of us place primary importance upon Scripture and on particular interpretations of Scripture. Others emphasise the importance of interpreting Scripture with the benefit of insights from experience (not least, our experience of God), scientific discovery or the traditions of the Christian Church. In the past, the Conference has identified seven different attitudes to biblical authority, and indicated a range of ways in which Methodists use what is written in the Bible as a source for what they believe and do.¹⁹ In this report, you will therefore find the Bible being referred to in a number of different ways. Sometimes we shall quote a verse or phrase because we believe that it points to a truth or has an emotional resonance with what we are saying. At other times we shall explore a passage in greater

¹⁷ The 2014 report of the Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships and the 2016 report of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group both reflect on this issue with regard to ecumenical and World Church relationships.

¹⁸ A full list of relevant reports is available on the web pages of the Methodist Church's Marriage and Relationships section.

¹⁹ Faith and Order Committee report to the 1998 Conference, *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path*.

depth, comparing and contrasting its context with ours. At yet other times we shall explore broader biblical themes and trajectories. On each occasion, we have referred to the Bible in what we believe is the appropriate way, and which ‘seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us’.²⁰ Like those who have developed Methodist theology before us, we believe that “our theological reflection is firmly rooted in the revelation of God in scripture, in Jesus Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit in our tradition, experience and the exercise of human reason”.²¹

0.3.4 Importantly, we have followed the Model Statement on Conferring, which the last Task Group published and which we would again commend for all conversation in areas where we Methodists differ in our beliefs and views.²² By so listening and talking and praying, we have identified the principles of belief which we bring to inform this task. These include: God’s radical love; the inclusivity of God’s grace; God’s unrelenting call for justice; God’s holiness and righteousness, and the call for us to be holy and righteous also; God’s desire to live in covenant relationship with God’s people; and God’s nature as three persons (the Trinity), modelling for us the nature and importance of relationships. We also started with our experiences of God’s loving presence in all situations: with those on the margins; with us in the diverse body of Christ; in our relationships and in good loving; and ultimately in mercy and forgiveness for us and others. It is from within this rich and varied landscape that our reflections have emerged, as we summarise in the following section.

0.4 What is in the report?

0.4.1 The report begins in section 1 by examining where relationships fit into our understanding of what it is to be human, exploring how God created us all to be fundamentally relational beings, and the part our sexuality plays in that. By focusing on the nature of God, in whose image we are

²⁰ The allusion is to Acts 15:28.

²¹ *Created in God’s image: an ecumenical report on contemporary challenges and principles relating to early human life* (2008), para 59.

²² *Model Statement on Conferring* as published in the report of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group to the 2016 Conference (Agenda Item 29).

made, we expand our perception of what it means to be human, while still remembering our creatureliness and difference from God. As part of this, we explore the meaning of sexuality, consider developing understandings of sexual diversity, and look to see how sexuality can be celebrated more fully in our Church as one aspect of God's gracious goodness.

0.4.2 Next, we consider in section 2 the good purposes that God has in mind for relationships and the possibilities of great outcomes for self, community, creation and kingdom. We explore how God calls us as disciples of Christ to bear the marks of the love of Jesus in all of our relationships (what in shorthand we call good or 'Christ-like' relating), and we rejoice in the precious value of all relationships lived in this way.

0.4.3 We continue this section by applying these general principles of good relating to our sexual relationships, noting that the same outcomes apply here as for Christian relationships in general. We find that the patterns and practices of mutuality, exclusiveness and ever-deepening commitment that lead two people towards life-long union are also paths towards richer fulfilment for self, couple and community. We ponder how these insights can be offered to us all (whether heterosexual or LGBTQI+²³), and how they might apply with regard to cohabitation or whatever other place we have reached on our journey into deeper relating.

0.4.4 In section 3, we note the distinctive character of marriage and consider how the important concepts of covenant and grace have particular application to marriage. We highlight the potentially enriching character of marriage relationships, recognising that the lived reality may

²³ For this term see the Methodist Church's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit Module 7.2 page 27. *LGBTQI* – an umbrella term (sometimes just *LGB*, *LGBT* or *LGBT+*). *LGB* referring to people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual; *T* referring to transgender people; *Q* for people questioning or nonconforming to gender identities or sexual orientations and *I* for intersex people who do not identify exclusively as male or female.

sometimes differ from the vision which God offers to us. We track the changes in the Methodist Church's teaching on marriage towards it being more about companionship between equal partners.

0.4.5 Having developed our theology of marriage, we go on to explore the relationship between this and marriage as a legal institution. We note how, just as theological understandings of marriage have changed across the centuries, so marriage as an institution has varied in character through time and across cultures. We recognise that the relationship between Church understandings and practices of marriage and the legal institution of marriage has, historically, sometimes been closer together and sometimes further apart. We also note the changes in the State's understanding of marriage, which now includes same-sex marriage, as well as the move to offer civil partnerships to mixed-sex couples as well as same-sex couples. We conclude that the legal institution of marriage can prove a critical support for good relating, and that the change in the law opens up the possibility for the Methodist Church to consider extending its practice of marriage to include same-sex couples, which can be seen as part of an ongoing expanding of our understanding of marriage.

0.4.6 In section 4, we explore an understanding of marriage that is rooted in Christian principles of good relating and grace-filled commitments. The report then re-examines the issue of who can be married within the Church. In particular, it explores the question of whether same-sex couples may be married in Church, given that the Conference has already decided that there is no reason why any member ordained or lay may not enter into a (same-sex) civil partnership or same-sex marriage. Recognising that this is a matter about which Methodists hold contradictory convictions, we consider the various concerns that arise and in particular look at the teaching in Scripture with regard to these matters.

0.4.7 In section 5 of the report we move to consider how we can hold together in practice as a Christ-centred community of equal persons who hold differing convictions about relationships and marriage. In essence, we offer some guidance and some changes to the Methodist Church's Standing Orders concerning marriage. We also consider what further resources the Methodist Church might offer to support people in various stages of their relationships.

0.4.8 Overall, our developing theology is rooted in the God of love who is constantly enabling us to know fresh experiences of that love. As a Task Group, we believe that the Methodist people can find a way to stay together around the table and to enable one another to flourish. That is not to suggest that anything goes. The outworkings of the theology we offer also call for repentance with regard to how we have sometimes treated each other, and a recommitment to becoming more authentically who we are as a gospel people. This will also enable us to offer more humbly and joyfully the riches we are uncovering to all God's world.

God has made us to be in relationships and to be sexual

In this section we draw on common understandings of significant Bible verses and Christian theology to reflect on what it is to be human. We begin with the nature of God, in whose image we are made, and consider what this teaches us about human relating. We reflect further on how God has created us to be social and sexual beings and consider developing understandings of the complexity and diversity of human sexuality.

1.1 Made in God's Image

1.1.1. As human beings, we are made in the image of God. Therefore, in order to understand what it means to be human, we need to begin by understanding what God is like.

1.1.2 God is love. Out of love, God brings everything and everyone into being. That love is therefore creative. That love means that God sees the value and the worth in all that God makes, calls it 'good' and offers it life in abundance. When we human beings fail to return God's love and to reflect it to one another, God seeks in love to renew and restore us. God's love is therefore also re-creative. It is costly in that God gives of God's self to save us. Because God is love, God is forgiving, offering mercy and a fresh beginning to those who turn again to God.

1.1.3 In Christian conviction and experience, we see the creative and redeeming love of God most fully revealed in Jesus Christ, and we know that love through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Understanding God in this way, we find ourselves talking of God both as 'one' and as a trinity of 'persons'.²⁴ In the concept of the Trinity, we see these three persons of God being united in a relationship of dynamic love that is self-giving and overflowing in abundance. Relating is therefore an essential part of what it is for God to be God, within God's own being. In this we find a pattern for our relating in love.

1.1.4 In Jesus, "the Word became flesh" and revealed and embodied what God intends for everyone.²⁵ Jesus is the model for each of us. He shows how, within the particular circumstances of our own embodiment, we can each be a true person, fully alive, living in harmony with God and God's creation, and in loving relationship with other people.

1.1.5 We are made in God's image, but we are not God and God is not made in our image. We are finite, whereas God is infinite. God loves perfectly, whereas we love imperfectly. Yet we may be perfected by God and made

²⁴ In the traditional Creeds, the three persons are Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

²⁵ John 1:14 (NRSV)

holy when we open ourselves more and more to being in relationship with God, and to being shaped by God's dynamic of love.²⁶

1.2 Made to relate to God

1.2.1 We are made to be in relationship with God. Throughout the Bible we read of God constantly reaching out to human beings with a love that will transform them and their communities. That relationship is characterised as a **covenant**. It is a covenant rather than just a contract because it is "an act of favour, an act of grace which calls for a responding commitment. Those accepting the covenant choose to do so, but the initiative is God's."²⁷

1.2.2 The Bible also tells of the ways in which we, as human beings, have failed to live in covenant with God. We may choose to relate in love to God, and likewise to ourselves and our neighbours; or we may turn away in selfishness. As we have just noted, it was through Jesus that God offered to save and restore us, and brought to fulfilment what had been seen throughout the history and experience of the people of Israel. This new covenant relationship was celebrated by the community of Christ's Church, whose members shared a foretaste of God's new kingdom breaking into the world.

1.2.3 The response to God's covenant love, as Jesus re-iterated it, is to love God and others as we love ourselves.²⁸

1.3 Made to relate to others

²⁶ John Wesley returned to and wrestled with the idea of Christian Perfection again and again, attempting to understand and explain it clearly.

²⁷ *Called to Love and Praise* 2.2.2. This dynamic is well-known amongst Methodists, because it is that of the annual covenant service.

²⁸ Matthew 22:37-40, citing Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18.

1.3.1 Since as human beings we are made in the image of God, the capacity to love and be loved is a fundamental feature of being human. We are made to be in relationship with others. The Task Group has reflected on the different ways in which human beings relate. From the Bible, we learn that God created us to be interdependent and social beings. It is not good for us to be alone; we are made for companionship with one another and with God.²⁹ As we respond to God in love, we are called and enabled to relate to each other and to the rest of the world that God has made, and to care for it all. For Methodists, there is always a ‘social’ aspect to holiness.³⁰

1.3.2 God’s love is supremely expressed in God’s creative and redeeming care for humankind. Although we are not God and our love cannot match God’s, the fact that we are made in God’s image means that God has made us capable of loving others in a way that reflects God’s own nature. The way that we express that love varies according to the nature of the different kinds of relationship in which we engage.

1.3.3 We are social beings. We relate to others, giving and receiving as interdependent beings. We may do so, for example, in family relationships, in which we support each other and depend on each other for nurture. We may develop friendships or peer group relationships. We may have work relationships, and relationships with special interest groups. We may have church relationships, in which we celebrate, explore and develop the ways in which we relate to ourselves, to God and to others. In the Task Group’s observation, ‘friendship’ is a significant, if wide-ranging, category in the way people now talk of their relationships.

1.3.4 In each society, people typically develop terms and phrases to mark out key relationships. In contemporary British society, there is an

²⁹ “It is not good that a human being (*in terms of the story being told, a man*) should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” Genesis 2:18 (NRSV)

³⁰ In other words, holiness is not just a matter of an individual’s private, internal state. “The Gospel of Christ knows of no Religion, but Social; no Holiness but Social Holiness.” – John Wesley, writing in the preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, first published 1739.

increasing variety of relationships, many of which are largely functional and brief. In that context, the phrase ‘in a relationship’ is sometimes used to denote a greater level of commitment between two people. This phrase does not automatically carry sexual connotations, but it is often understood to imply that there may be sexual expressions of that commitment. It is notable that people in our society are still concerned about commitment. While it will not be the case for everyone, we observe that people still commonly desire to find a ‘significant other’ (to use another contemporary term) with whom they may spend significant time, often hoping to grow old together.

1.4 Made to relate as sexual beings

As a Task Group we have informed ourselves about the rapidly changing and developing understandings of sex, sexuality and gender. These are complex and contested areas. We begin this section with the theology of sexuality as developed so far in reports to the Methodist Conference, and move to draw on insights from emerging theologies as part of the Methodist Church’s ongoing theological thinking. None of us are experts on these highly specialised issues and within our limits we have drawn on a number of agencies and commentators to help us on our way. We provide a glossary of terms to aid our common understanding at this moment in time, while recognising that this glossary does not include every term used in discussion of this subject, nor every understanding of the terms offered by different individuals, groups and commentators.

1.4.1 God has made us to be, in the broadest terms, sexual beings. In unpacking what it means to be a sexual being we need to consider: “sex” (as it is assigned to us at birth, based on perceptions of our biology)³¹, gender (how we express ourselves in terms of masculinity and femininity), and sexuality (which may include some or all of sexual

³¹ The EDI Toolkit Module 5 Gender points out, “people are not defined by their sex”.

feelings, orientation and activity).³² These areas are increasingly recognised as being complex aspects of what it means to be human. Many terms have been, and are being, developed in particular contemporary debates on these matters. We therefore provide below a glossary of how several of these terms are frequently used. It is important to note that, as well as new terms being created, the meaning of some earlier terms, and how they are being used by some groups, has also changed. The term “sexuality”, for example, has been used in previous Methodist Reports as an umbrella term for discussion of what it means to be a sexual being; yet it is not always used in that way in contemporary debate. In the light of this, we draw on our inherited understanding, but then turn to more precise discussions of “sexuality and gender” as this is commonly coming to be described.

1.4.2 The report on human sexuality to the 1990 Conference suggested that sexuality is essentially good because “it enables the expression of love in a deep personal encounter. It relates to the physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions of human nature. We have been made by God with the potential to be fulfilled in deep loving relationships”. It is “a dimension of every human relationship, and human relationship is always the context of sexuality; as such it is part of the goodness of creation”. Sexuality “expresses God’s intention that we find our humanness in relationship; as such it expresses to others both our incompleteness on our own and our relatedness to other people”.³³

1.4.3 While finding this description of sexuality (in the broadest sense) helpful, the Task Group has also been aware that taken too far it might unhelpfully suggest that those who are not in a sexual relationship or do not experience sexual attraction, are by definition not fulfilled as human

³² These descriptions of key terms are based on the EDI Toolkit Module 5 Gender and the English Oxford Living Dictionaries en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sexuality, consulted 29 March 2019.

³³ The quotations in this paragraph are drawn from *The Report of the Commission on Human Sexuality*, 1990, paras 16, 17 and 23 respectively.

beings.³⁴ In addition, the idea that we need another human to complete us, is closely related to the concept of gender complementarity, in which women and men are understood to have different roles which complement each other. Yet gender complementarity often suggests fixed roles for men and women, in a way which can result in a valuing of one gender (often the male gender) over the other and the justification of gender discrimination and oppression.³⁵ It often further assumes there are only two genders (male and female), which fit together in a mixed-sex relationship. The 1990 report, however, commented on a diversity of sexuality, and there has been a growing understanding of the diversity both of sexuality and of gender in the intervening years. It is important to keep this in mind as we seek more fully to appreciate the complex gift that is human sexuality.³⁶

1.4.4 The Bible – most clearly in the poetry of the Song of Songs – vividly describes sex as something to be rejoiced in and as ‘passionate, equal, faithful and embodied ... lasting and transformative’.³⁷ Other sexualities are also noted in the Bible, and not always negatively.³⁸ A branch of theology called “queer theology” seeks to move beyond a focus on assigning sex and gender identities to people. The theologian Patrick Cheng, for example, argues in this vein that sexuality can be an expression of radical love, bringing humans into deeper relationships with each other and with the God of Trinitarian relationships.³⁹ Marcella

³⁴ An asexual person is a person who does not feel sexually attracted to anyone (Childline).

³⁵ James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, (Cambridge/UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2013) p. 19

³⁶ For the diversity of sexuality see further section 1.5 below.

³⁷ Rachel Starr, *Reimagining the Theologies of Marriage in the Contexts of Domestic Violence* (London: Routledge, 2017) p. 54

³⁸ See, for example, Isaiah 56:3-5 and Acts 8:26-39.

³⁹ Patrick S. Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace – Discovering the Queer Christ* (New York: Seabury Books, 2012) p. xiv

A Reid also makes the point that sexual desire can be seen as part of our wider desires for just and loving relationships.⁴⁰

1.4.5 Our understanding of how we might appropriately express the gift of human sexuality has also been developing. The 1992 Statement notes that “intimacy is a vital part of personal development” and that it involves the sharing of many elements of a personal nature, including “the appropriate physical expression of mutual affection”.⁴¹ Drawing on current developments in understanding of sexuality, the Task Group has noted that sexuality may be expressed in a wide variety of ways, from tender touch to sexual intercourse. In all intimate relationships, the expression of sexual intimacy can vary greatly. It can be affected by age and health (both mental and physical), and by experience, among other factors.⁴² Not all expressions of such sexuality are acceptable, though, and we unhesitatingly affirm the 1993 resolutions in stating that: “All practices of sexuality which are promiscuous, exploitative or demeaning in any way are unacceptable forms of behaviour and contradict God’s purposes for us all”.⁴³

1.4.6 The Task Group has noted that Christian theology has often emphasised concerns about human sexuality. As the 1982 report observed,⁴⁴ some parts of the Christian tradition have seen sexual activity as essentially related to procreation. The story of Adam and Eve (Genesis: 2 – 3) has been interpreted as teaching that sex is somehow related to sin. Over the course of Christian history, this has led to an understanding of sex as basically sinful, except when engaged in for the

⁴⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, ‘Let Them Talk ..! Doing Liberation Theology from Latin American Closets’ in *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 5-17

⁴¹ A Methodist Statement on A Christian Understanding of Family life (1992) 41

⁴² In this we drew on the knowledge of a *Relate* sex therapist.

⁴³ 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality, (2)

purposes of procreation.⁴⁴ Sex came to be seen as dangerous, needing to be regulated and controlled.⁴⁵ Women’s sexual and reproductive activity, in particular, has caused anxiety amongst theologians and church leaders, often with devastating results on women’s wellbeing. We need to ask ourselves whether we, as a Church, have not for too long upheld a system which has sought “to keep women decent and under control.”⁴⁶

1.4.7 The Task Group has also reflected on whether the context of a world population explosion has something to say to our developing understanding of the diversity of expressions of sexuality. Susannah Cornwall, a contemporary theologian of sexuality, calls for a reconsideration of the theology that privileges ‘fertile, potentially procreative sex, which made good sense when communities were small and the human species was at risk of being wiped out’. She argues that the ‘theological sanctioning of only one type of sexual activity – that is, fertile penetrative sex between a male and a female’ – no longer makes sense.⁴⁷

1.4.8 The power of sexuality has been commented on in previous reports.⁴⁸ There is power in sexuality for great good and for great harm. Drawing on the work of historian Stephanie Coontz, the Task Group has noted that, throughout history, much energy has been invested in regulating and

⁴⁴ A Christian Understanding of Sexuality, report to the 1982 Conference. The 1992 Statement para 62 says of the Christian tradition “some even regarding sexual intercourse as a sign of inherent depravity”.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Rachel Starr’s discussion of Augustine *on the Good of Marriage* in in her book, *Reimagining the Theologies of Marriage in the Contexts of Domestic Violence* (London: Routledge, 2017) pp. 44-49.

⁴⁶ Rachel Starr, *ibid.* p. 54

⁴⁷ Susannah Cornwall, *Un/familiar Theology – Reconceiving Sex, Reproduction and Generativity* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017) p. 93

⁴⁸ The Report of the Commission on Human Sexuality 1990, p. 127

controlling sexual intimacy in general, and procreation in particular.⁴⁹ Yet the ‘norms’ have changed from era to era, and from context to context. For example, in many parts of contemporary society in Great Britain (as elsewhere in what we know as the “West”), the greater availability of contraception has lessened some of the reasons that have often been given for regulating sexual intimacy. The fears that have sometimes driven people to want to control sexual activity have diminished. At the same time there has also been a growing recognition that the control in these matters has often been exercised by men over women in ways that are inappropriate and oppressive. The negative aspects of the power of sexuality have been considered in various reports to the Conference in the last twenty years.⁵⁰

1.4.9 The complexities of sexuality and gender have often meant that this is a subject about which we Methodist people find it difficult to talk. Yet as a Task Group we have come to understand that it is vital that we take seriously what it is to be made as sexual beings in order that we can experience more of the depth of God’s love and care for our whole being.⁵¹ In order further to inform this theology of sexuality, we turn now to developments in the natural and social sciences.

1.5 The diversity of sexuality

1.5.1 Sexuality in the broad sense, as we have noted above, is a core aspect of what it means to be a human being created in love by God. As a Task Group, we have found that it is important to remember that sexuality in terms of feelings of attraction is a very precious aspect of human identity,

⁴⁹ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, Penguin (USA): New York. 2005.

⁵⁰ *Domestic Violence and the Methodist Church, the way forward* 2002; *Safeguarding reports* 2016 and 2017; *Responding to the Realities and Challenges of Pornography* 2017

⁵¹ In this we are drawing on the writings of Tina Beattie, ‘The Theological Study of Gender’ in Adrian Thatcher (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

which cannot be reduced to biology or psychology or some other factor. At the same time, we have noted that the sciences are developing our understanding of the nature and diversity of sex, sexuality and gender. When the Task Group looked for an authoritative source of commentary in this area that was not only based in science but also accessible and respected (see introduction to Glossary above), we turned, like the EDI committee, to the World Health Organisation (WHO). As a highly respected and well-informed organisation it provides an independent and scientifically informed resource in these matters. The WHO takes a broad approach to understanding human health. The fact that we use the WHO definitions should not be seen as meaning that we are in any way reducing sexuality to a medical or purely physical issue. The WHO themselves situate sexuality within a wide range of considerations. From the WHO we learn that sexuality is a complex phenomenon, which “is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic,” and other cultural and spiritual factors.⁵² Our theological understanding can therefore be informed by greater understanding of the various other factors involved.

1.5.2 Since 1979, reports on sexuality to the Conference have noted a diversity of human sexual identities.⁵³ The 1990 report noted that social science research often used the image of a spectrum to describe human sexuality, while others spoke of overlapping possibilities.⁵⁴ 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. Observations from the sciences now reveal that the situation is much more complex and diverse when it comes to the

⁵² who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual_health/sh_definitions/en/ consulted on 28 November 2018.

⁵³ 1979 Report A5

⁵⁴ The Report of the Conference Commission on Human Sexuality, 1990 131

development of our sexual and gender identities, which can be much more fluid than previously assumed.

1.5.3 At birth we are given an identity by those who care for us and a key part of this is our sex, which is usually based upon the nature of our primary sex characteristics (genitalia) and reproductive functions.⁵⁵ The vast majority of people are born male or female, and named boy or girl on this basis. A small proportion of people are born with both sexual characteristics or characteristics which are not typical and may be described as intersex. The Intersex Society of North America states that “Intersex” is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male.⁵⁶ Between 1 in 1,500 and 1 in 2,000 babies are born noticeably intersex.⁵⁷ Sometimes a sex is assigned at birth that proves not to match the developing biological characteristics of the individual. Public awareness of intersex as a category has been raised by recent high-profile athletes being banned from competing under one sex or gender identity or another.⁵⁸

1.5.4 The Task Group has noted that, as with sex, gender has often been treated as if it were a simple given, when in reality it is also socially constructed and complex.⁵⁹ One definition of gender is to say that, “While most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours – including how they should interact with others of

⁵⁵ EDI Toolkit Module 5 Gender. We also note reports in the press that some parents are now choosing not to reveal the “sex” of their children and express a desire to bring their children up as “gender neutral”.

⁵⁶ isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex consulted on 21 February 2019

⁵⁷ isna.org/faq/frequency consulted on 21 February 2019

⁵⁸ See theguardian.com/sport/2016/jul/29/what-is-an-intersex-athlete-explaining-the-case-of-caster-semenya consulted on 4 March, 2019.

⁵⁹ The term ‘gender’ and ‘gender relations’ first began to be used in the 1970s in new ways which turned attention from the differences between the sexes to social and conceptual relations between them (apps.who.int/medicinedocs/en/d/Jh2997e/4.html accessed 11 March 2019).

the same or opposite sex” within different settings.⁶⁰ These gender norms and behaviours differ according to culture and can change within cultures. They are learned through a continuing process of socialisation and have usually involved a difference in the power being held by people of one gender over those of another.⁶¹

1.5.5 The concept of gender has been further broken down into gender expression and gender identity. *Gender expression* is how an individual person will live out or express gender (eg in choice of clothing, body movement and actions).⁶² *Gender identity* is “the way an individual understands their own gender, which may or may not correspond to the gender or physical sex assigned at birth or by societal norms”.⁶³ A person’s sense of gender identity may change through time. There are now a wide range of gender identities and we list some in the glossary above, including new terms that express the way in which binary gender terms have been questioned or rejected as too narrow.

1.5.6 Sexuality is coming to be understood as referring to the capacity for sexual feelings, sexual orientation or preference and sexual activity.⁶⁴ Sexual orientation is about attraction to others and may include elements of physical, emotional and spiritual attraction.⁶⁵ There are a wide range of sexualities now identified and spoken about, and we also include definitions of some of these in our glossary. While the majority of

⁶⁰ WHO definition who.int/gender-equity-rights/understanding/gender-definition/en/ consulted 22 March 2019

⁶¹ who.int/medicinedocs/en/d/Jh2997e/4.html accessed 11 March 2019

⁶² Childline childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/sexual-identity/transgender-identity/ accessed 22 March 2019

⁶³ *Sexuality: The Inclusive Church Resource*, pp/ 115-116

⁶⁴ English Oxford Living Dictionaries <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sexuality> consulted 29 March 2019.

⁶⁵ From the Genderbreadperson <https://www.genderbread.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Breaking-through-the-Binary-by-Sam-Killermann.pdf> accessed 25 March 2019

people find themselves to be heterosexual in sexual orientation, this is not the case for everyone. As a group, we have noted the difficulties in reporting accurate figures regarding the numbers of people who identify themselves as being lesbian, gay or bisexual in sexual orientation. This is largely due to the discrimination they experienced, which results in the under-reporting of these sexualities in statistical gathering exercises. Thus, while we note that in the UK the Office for National Statistics suggested that in 2016, 2% of people identified themselves as being lesbian, gay or bisexual, there are likely to be many more in reality.⁶⁶

1.5.7 The Task Group has reflected on what this widening understanding of the diversity of human sexuality means for our theology. The Methodist Church continues to develop its understanding of every human being as an equal person before God.⁶⁷ As the 1992 Statement put it, “every person has infinite value before God”.⁶⁸ We have remembered that God has “made nothing in vain” and loves all that God has made.⁶⁹ The Methodist Church has been making substantial progress over the years in applying this theology of equality, not least recently through the work of its Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee. Yet there are still ways in which we do not pay equal regard in practice to people of different sexualities. 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?

⁶⁶ Statistics taken from Office of National Statistics Statistical Bulletin “Sexual Identity, UK: 2016” released on 3 October 2017.

⁶⁷ *Created in God’s image*, 2008, p. 32

⁶⁸ A Methodist Statement on A Christian Understanding of Family Life 1992, p. 29

⁶⁹ *The Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, p. 493

God guides us in all our relating

In section 1 we established that human beings are made to relate in love to God and to each other. In Section 2 we address the questions of what makes for good relating and for good sexual relating in particular. We seek to discern the purposes of good relationships, and also their qualities. We explore what patterns of behaviour and practices enable these good relationships to flourish. We then consider contemporary patterns and practices of relationships in the light of these reflections. In all this, we offer our reflections on biblical passages and previous Methodist teaching.

2.1 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’.⁷⁰ 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”.⁷¹ This gives us our core purpose as human beings. Those who have responded to God’s offer of a covenant of love have become communities whose loving response to what God has done involves both worshipping and serving God. The Church has recognised that this service means participating in God’s loving mission to the world. In what follows we identify several more of the main purposes for relating as revealed through the Bible and reflect on how participation in these purposes guides us towards good relating.

2.1.2 A significant way in which we worship and love God in practice is through caring for God’s creation. We are made to relate to each other as **co-stewards** in this task. Genesis 1:26-28 and Genesis 5:1-2 make the

⁷⁰ Genesis 1

⁷¹ Psalm 24:1

point that all human beings are equally made in the image of God⁷² and being in that image means “having dominion” over all other created things (Genesis 1:26, 28-31). That dominion, if it is truly to be in the image of God, entails sharing in God’s creative love.⁷³

2.1.3 The praising of God and the caring for God’s creation are the work of communities. In the picture language of Genesis, we are told that God, in looking upon all of the creation as good, saw that it was not good for the first human being to be alone. A helper of the human being’s own kind was needed for the task of sharing in God’s creative love.⁷⁴ This leads to Genesis 2:21-25.⁷⁵ Human beings are not intended to be completely independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient. Instead, as we read in Genesis 2, coming from one and the same flesh, humans look to become “one flesh” with each other. They are meant to be interdependent, relational and social beings. That drive is part of our human nature, as we collaborate in helping care for God’s creation. This companionship means that what was not good becomes good, and

⁷² The picture language of the narrative uses binary terms of male and female to express this, where we would now use more inclusive language.

⁷³ Thus, in Genesis 2:15 the first human being to be created is placed in the creation (the Garden of Eden) to till it and take care of it. This shows how the statement in chapter 1 about ‘having dominion’ is to be understood.

⁷⁴ Genesis 2:19-20 explains how other types of creature do not fully fit the bill of being the human being’s helper.

⁷⁵ *“²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.’ ²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his woman/wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.”*

The word in verse 24 translated by the NRSV as ‘wife’ is the same word for ‘woman’ as just used in 2:23. ‘His woman’ does, in the context of a patriarchal society, come to mean a man’s partner or mate, and that is why the NRSV, like many other versions, translates it the way that it does. But that runs the danger of our reading in to it unthinkingly our own connotations of marriage and what it means to be a ‘wife’.

contributes to the flourishing of each individual. We are made to relate to each other as **co-workers** or **companions**.

2.1.4 The opening chapters of Genesis are situated within a broad understanding of the creation of a **community of people** who will love, worship and serve God. This means that the verses in Genesis 2:21-25 are not simply about what we have come to call ‘marriage’ or a sexual relationship between two people. The purpose of their relating was not just to procreate, but also to share as co-workers and companions in caring for others and for the rest of God’s creation. This wider purpose applies to everyone. All human beings, single or in partnerships, can experience this companionship, express this collaboration and find ultimate life and fulfilment through various forms of relationships.

2.1.5 As we have seen above, having dominion over all things means sharing in God’s creative love as co-stewards. In other words, the emphasis is on being **co-creators** with God. We fulfil this purpose in procreation,⁷⁶ and also when we use our bodies and minds, our skills and imaginations in ways that develop our own selves, our communities and the rest of creation. Co-creating requires us to develop new means of protecting the earth. As we noted in Section 1, in the current situation of overpopulation this can be seen to be as much in line with God’s purposes as procreation.

2.1.6 With the coming of Christ a new impetus was given to speaking of God’s purposes in terms of the breaking in and realisation of God’s kingdom on earth. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus refers many times to the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Following the command or blessing to be “fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28).

⁷⁷ There is a long, scholarly debate about the ‘kingdom’ language. The metaphor points to something dynamic and has been described by one scholar as “a process, a course of events, whereby God begins to govern or to act as king or Lord, an action, therefore, by which God manifests his being-God in the world”, Schillebeeckx, Edward, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (London, Fount Paperbacks, 1983), pp. 140–141.

The disciples and early followers of Jesus were commanded to spread the message of the promise of this kingdom and to help bring it in. Followers of Jesus became **co-workers** with him in this task. This was foreshadowed in his earthly ministry with them, but became really important with the breaking in of the new life of the resurrection. Then and now a purpose for the relationships of the followers of Jesus is to help bring in God's kingdom.

2.1.7 Those who were transformed by their encounters with Christ became members of a new community. As such, they were to share the message of the new covenant relationship made available through Christ and be workers in God's Kingdom. The new community was to be the means of them nurturing one another in this as brothers and sisters. As the 1992 Statement put it, "Jesus described the fellowship of the people of God as the provision of a new family context for the individual: Matthew 19:27-30, Mark 3:35, John 19:25-27. Paul taught that those who believed in Christ were adopted as the children of God (Ephesians 1:5) experiencing the fatherhood of God and the sister/brotherhood of believers."⁷⁸ The emphasis that we draw from this as a Task Group is on a relationship with Christ bringing about a new family context, one in which believers were and are **co-heirs** together.⁷⁹ From the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels we can deduce that 'kinship' relationships and 'discipleship' relationships were to be melded together and re-founded in the light of the values of God's kingdom.⁸⁰

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**

⁷⁸ 1992 Conference Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*

⁷⁹ Romans 8:17

⁸⁰ Jesus was remembered as in effect warning against making anything into an idol and exalting it over the love of God, including: work (eg Mark 1:16-20 and 2:13-14); money (eg Matthew 6:24); the state (eg John 19:8-11); religious institutions and functionaries (eg Mark 12:38 – 13:37); or, of most relevance to us here, marriage and the family (eg Mark 3:31-35 and 10:28-31, Luke 9:59-60).

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.

2.1.9 This applies as much to sexual relationships as to other relationships. We have already discussed in Section 1 some aspects of the nature of sexual relationships which contribute towards the fulfilling of the purposes mentioned here. These include the desire to relate beyond ourselves and the joyful pleasure of sex when appropriately managed. Sexual intimacy creates a psychological, spiritual and social bond between people as well as a physical one.⁸¹ This can strengthen the relationships between couples which form the basis for family and community relationships. A good sexual relationship will serve the purposes of nurturing the self and couple involved, strengthening their relationship, and enabling them in turn to support members of their family and friends, strengthening ties in the community around them, and potentially thereby helping care for the creation and love God.

2.2 The qualities of good relating

2.2.1 God is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus' actions, behaviour and attitudes are all rooted in his relationship with God and flow from it. They reveal something of God and the transforming nature of God's love, and they make the kingdom present. In this way, the New Testament points to Jesus as incarnating God's way of relating. In the Gospels, Jesus is shown as relating to real people in the midst of their daily lives and struggles. He made real relationships with women and men, with children and the elderly. Amongst them, he shared a deep intimacy with Martha, Mary and Lazarus; and he had a special relationship with the 'beloved disciple'.⁸² As noted above, he both loved and at times 'distanced' himself from blood family, pointing to a

⁸¹ We echo here paragraphs 15 and 16 of the 1990 Commission on Human Sexuality report.

⁸² See John 19:26; 20:2 and 21:7.

transformed family – the sons and daughters of God. He openly challenged unjust practices of the time in which he lived: for example, the attempted stoning of the woman, but not the man, caught in adultery; the exclusion from society of an unclean bleeding woman. He turned expectations on their head, sometimes physically demonstrating his relationship to people through touch.⁸³

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;⁸⁴ 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.

2.2.3 As followers of Jesus, we aspire to bear the marks of the love that we see in Jesus. Paul deals with this movingly in Philippians 2. To paraphrase verse 5, ‘In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus’.⁸⁵ This basic way of being and behaving, of imitating Christ and being a disciple, works out in every aspect of human life and all sorts of human relationships. It leads to the Methodist

⁸³ *Called to Love and Praise* 1999, para 2.1.2

⁸⁴ ‘Law’ here refers to what is otherwise known as the ‘Torah’, the story of God’s creative ordering of the universe that is told in the Old Testament.

⁸⁵ Philippians 2:5

emphasis on living and growing in holiness.⁸⁶ It flows out from our responding to the love of God through Jesus Christ, and our being transformed by that love.

2.2.4 As a Task Group we found it helpful to note that while as human beings we are created in the image of God, we are called to grow into the likeness of Christ. Christ's Church is a community of persons committed to doing this and, amongst other things, being shaped by the Spirit of God to respect and revere other people. This truth is expressed in the 1999 formal Statement on the nature of the Christian Church in Methodist experience and practice, *Called to Love and Praise*. We pray it in our prayers and sing it in our hymns, for example "Let me be as Christ to you".⁸⁷ This is who we say we are.

2.2.5 By the grace of God transforming our hearts and the guidance of the Spirit, we continue to deepen our understanding of what this Christ-like, holy relating means. We recognise that modern concepts of 'equality' and 'mutuality' and the ways in which they are now expressed in the Methodist Church cannot be read back simply into the stories of Jesus, who was incarnated as a Jewish man in first century Palestine. We believe, though, that these and the other qualities named below are the fruits of a long process of reflection on the Scriptures (including those stories) and on Christian experience. We now see that women and men are equal persons; differently able people are equal persons; people of different skin colour and ethnic backgrounds are equal persons.⁸⁸ As we learn how to respect all as equal persons and to behave in an

⁸⁶ One of the classic spiritual texts that Wesley edited and published for the Methodist people was *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. For further descriptions of the holiness traditions in Methodist spirituality and practice see [The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory - Report of the Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church \(2016\)](#)

⁸⁷ *Singing the Faith*, no. 611

⁸⁸ Yet whilst Methodism has come some way towards treating those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning or of other sexualities (LGBTQI+) as equal persons, it has not yet agreed to same-sex couples marrying in Church.

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]).

2.2.6 Given the power of the feelings evoked in sexual relationships and the potential for good or harm, it is particularly important that these qualities are nurtured and cultivated. They apply as much to sexual relationships as they do to other kinds of relationship. Sadly, though, as a Methodist people we have not always been good at talking about this and supporting one another in it. We have privatised matters of sex (declaring them to be 'personal') and regarded them as happening in the 'world' that lies outside the Church's overview. This has sat alongside, and in tension with, the desire to regulate and control people's sexual behaviour that we noted earlier. It is noticeable that when matters of sexual intimacy are talked about in our Church, it is in the context of same-sex relationships far more often than mixed-sex ones (particularly with regard to the application of biblical texts and insights). The Task Group would suggest that a shift to focusing on the qualities of good relationships, and good sexual relationships in particular, would help to enable all of us in the Methodist Church to flourish. It would also be something that we can offer in humility to others outside the Church.

2.3 The patterns and practices of good relating

2.3.1 There are practices and patterns of behaviour that support and enable the purposes and qualities of good relating. With regard to our relationships with God, we see this, for example, in the ordering of creation where God sets aside the seventh day as holy and as a day of rest.⁸⁹ The fourth commandment makes clear the application of this practice to human life.⁹⁰ In the Gospels we see Jesus following a pattern of religious life, attending the synagogue and also drawing aside for times of private prayer.

2.3.2 As a Task Group, we have noted that our primary calling is to be a disciple of Christ. From this flows our subsidiary callings to particular forms of service and to particular relationships. All of these require good patterns and practices of support, if we are to flourish in them. Within the Methodist tradition, our relationship with God and our discipleship are supported as we follow a 'methodical' way of life in the company of others.⁹¹ This finds expression through various 'means of grace', including: baptism; receiving Holy Communion and attending worship regularly; renewing our Covenant with God annually; sharing in friendship; and putting our discipleship into practice. We see an emphasis on the patterns and practices which support our discipleship being developed in the Methodist Way of Life which is currently being explored afresh.

2.3.3 What patterns of behaviour and practices might encourage good relating in our relationships with other people, particularly our more 'personal' or 'family' relationships? There are a few indications in the

⁸⁹ Genesis 2:1-3

⁹⁰ Exodus 20:8-11

⁹¹ The 2018 Conference heard of how suggestions for a contemporary Methodist Way of Life were being explored in the context of the relaunch of the programme *Our Calling*.

Bible. For example, there is a movement towards monogamy by New Testament times, and that seems to be the position of Jesus.⁹² There are also references to practices of betrothal and wedding ceremonies, and there was a practice of divorce.⁹³ Beyond that, there is not much said directly in the New Testament about how sexual relationships were to be conducted. In New Testament times, the belief that the Second Coming and the end of the world were imminent led to the early Christians continuing traditional Jewish models of the family.⁹⁴

2.3.4 Advice on patterns and practices for personal relating has been given throughout Christian history. There was a variety of reasons for such advice being offered. Often it was with good intentions, in the light of the circumstances and understanding at the time. With hindsight, however, it can fairly be argued that whether intentionally or not it resulted in the controlling or moderating of sexual activity. One important guide to the Christian life from 1650 was *Holy Living* by an Anglican Cleric, 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”.⁹⁵ The recent consideration in the Methodist Church on sexuality as a gift and

⁹² In the area of relationships and marriage, biblical texts originating from earlier times provide for polygamy in the form of a man being able to have many wives (without that being seen as a contradiction of a man and a woman becoming ‘one flesh’). Texts from later times, however, only allow for monogamy. Whereas the Hebrew text of Genesis 2:24 simply talks of “man” and “woman”, and “they shall become one flesh”, in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was made between the third and the second century BC the phrase is “the two shall become one flesh”, with the emphasis on “two” (and, presumably, only two). It is this version which is quoted by Jesus in Mark 10:7-8 and Matthew 19:4-6, where the emphasis on ‘two’ is repeated in a phrase that comes after the quotation. This emphasis on monogamy leads to the statements in 1 Timothy 3:2 and 12, and Titus 1:6 that bishops, elders and deacons (and presumably therefore men in general) should only have one wife.

⁹³ Matthew 19:3-12

⁹⁴ For the New Testament household codes see, for example: Ephesians 5:22-6:9, Colossians 3:18-4:1, Titus 2:1-10, 1 Peter 2:13-3:7 and 1 Corinthians 7:24ff.

⁹⁵ Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* 1838, pp. 79-80

the place of joy and pleasure might seem to some to be far removed from this influential text.

2.3.5 Even so, beyond the ‘Marriage service’ and ‘Service for the blessing of a marriage previously solemnized’ in our Worship Books, we have very few resources specifically designed to promote patterns of good relating for couples, parents or families. The 1992 Statement spoke of the importance of stability and commitment for the nurture of children, yet we have offered little as a Church to promote such stability and commitment. As a Task Group we recommend that the Methodist Church look again at the production of resources for the development of good relating in various forms, and we make specific suggestions about this later in this report (Section 5.4.3).⁹⁶

2.4 Good sexual relating

2.4.1 As a Task Group we now turn to offer additional reflections on good sexual relating in particular, drawing on some insights from Scripture and some contemporary theological developments. Two qualities that the New Testament promises the disciple of Christ are the gift of **wisdom** (eg Ephesians 1:16-19) and one of the fruits of the Spirit, **self-control** (eg Galatians 5:22-23). The Task Group found these helpful with regard to sexual relationships. The former is about discernment. The latter is not just about saying ‘no’. Both can help us to identify patterns and practices which will enable our sexuality to flourish to the glory of God.

2.4.2 In this regard, the Task Group has reflected on two key terms, ‘chastity’ and ‘fidelity’. The root of the concept **chastity** is in purity, which we would understand in terms of the dynamic of holiness. Just as the love of God means that it is God’s nature to be loving, and the righteousness of God means that it is God’s nature to work to make things ‘right’, so the

⁹⁶ The 2002 report suggested that materials for marriage preparation be prepared. We suggest that the Methodist Church work ecumenically to produce resources for couples and families.

holiness of God means that it is God's nature to seek to make people holy. That holiness is dynamic.⁹⁷ As God makes people holy, their lives are opened up to be transformed so that they live in holy ways. What that means in practice may vary according to circumstances. At times, it may appropriately involve sexual abstinence, both for those who are married and for those who are not. At all times, it involves one person being open to another person and putting their interests before her or his own. For a Christian, it also involves being open to God, and putting God's interests before one's own.

2.4.3 Chastity in this sense is the opposite of self-seeking, self-gratifying casual sex which potentially demeans or diminishes those who engage in it. Instead, it is a means of setting appropriate boundaries for passion. Holy ways of loving involve discovering what it means to love in a way that is self-giving. A chaste way of loving is one in which one person always intends to give pleasure to the other above all else; and gratefully receives a similar intention in return.⁹⁸

2.4.4 The concept of **fidelity** flows from the New Testament understanding of faith. The underlying train of thought is that just as we love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19), so we have faith because God first had faith in us. Fidelity, therefore, is not about believing or trusting that such-and-such a fact is the case. It is much more a matter of believing in somebody and entrusting yourself to them, and allowing them to believe in you and entrust themselves to you. Being faithful in this sense is, therefore, a way in which people affirm each other and enable each other to take the risk of becoming more intimate with each other. In doing so,

⁹⁷ "Note: 'Holy', as applied to people and things, means first of all 'set apart for God's exclusive use'. As applied to God, it refers to that which makes (sc. God) God, wholly different from human beings, awe-inspiring, glorious, yet not separated by distance so much as nature." This quotation is from *What we believe: a Catechism for the use of the people called Methodists*, 1986/2000.

⁹⁸ The Task Group has been prompted in these reflections by Richard Rohr Meditations <https://cac.org/purity-and-passion-2017-11-13/> where Rohr in turn draws on the work of Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity* (Shambhala: 2010), 121.

they start to realise that there might need to be exclusivity in their relationship, if such a deep sense of mutual trust is to flourish in an intimate and sexual way.

2.4.5 Intimate expressions of sexuality can deepen the bonds between couples and also at the same time increase their vulnerability and potential to be hurt and to hurt, especially where there is a lack of commitment. As we discussed in section 1, sexual expression is a precious and powerful aspect of our humanity that should be treated with great care. The greater the intimacy in a relationship (sexual or otherwise), the greater the vulnerability of the people concerned; and the greater the need for a constant dynamic of loving fidelity and exclusivity.

2.4.6 These insights help us to identify patterns of behaviour that enable good relating as people become more intimate with one another. They include practices such as monogamy, the commitment of time and resources to the relationship, and the attentiveness of each person to the other. If a couple have an exclusive sexual relationship, their love expresses itself towards others by including and nurturing them through hospitality. Wisdom and self-control help with the management of expressions of sexuality in the relationship between couples, and also in the management of appropriate relationships within communities.⁹⁹

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

⁹⁹ One example of the latter is the development of robust safeguarding procedures and harassment policies in the Methodist Church in order to avoid abuse.

(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.

2.4.8 In the face of this, the Task Group believes that sexual activity should not be seen merely as an interaction with someone to fulfil a particular purpose, to experience a particular pleasure, or to meet a particular need. Rather, it is something that involves many other forms of interaction between the persons concerned, and is enriched by the vision God has shared for good relating.

2.5 Contemporary sexual relating

2.5.1 Attitudes towards sexual intimacy have constantly changed over the years, and will continue to change. There is, for example, an increasing talk of 'friendships' or other 'relationships' being with or without 'benefits', where the 'benefits' are what would once have been termed 'sexual favours'. There has also been a growing acceptance that the choices people make and the things that they do are a personal and private matter, unless they involve harassment, oppression, harm or abuse. The result has been an increasing openness in society at large to people engaging in all sorts of sexual intimacy.

2.5.2 As a Task Group we have been open and honest in recognising the reality of many people's experiences. We would urge the Methodist Church likewise to recognise the lived realities of the way relationships are practised today. A failure to do so may ultimately be regarded as hypocrisy, if it simply ignores how its members and adherents are actually leading their lives. In our mission and ministry as a Church, we need to be able to engage in conversations about these matters in a discerning and pastorally sensitive way, which draws in other resources when the conversation exceeds our skills or our competence. These

reflections on the purposes, gospel qualities and patterns of good relating enable us to offer insights on relating irrespective of the sexuality of a couple or the place in their relationship journey, and it is to this that we next turn.

2.6 Cohabitation

2.6.1 The cohabiting couple family is described as “the fastest growing family type in the UK”.¹⁰⁰ Cohabitation has sometimes been seen as a ‘young person’s issue’; and, indeed, youth representatives from the 3Generate gatherings have repeatedly asked the Conference for guidance on it.¹⁰¹ Yet we also know that many older people in our churches are living together as a couple in relationship, unwilling to get married for various reasons including complications with pension rights, inheritance issues and other matters.¹⁰² At the same time, over recent years the number of weddings that have taken place in Methodist churches has fallen quite heavily, as has the number of blessings of marriages previously solemnised. In 2013, the figures were 2751 and 350 respectively, and 1879 and 269 in 2017.¹⁰³

2.6.2 People live together for a variety of reasons. Because we have increasingly recognised and emphasised that all people are made in the image of God, we need to express in practice the theological principle of respecting the otherness (distinctiveness) of every human life. Stigmatising children whose parents are not married is no longer acceptable in our Church, if it ever were. At the same time, it follows from

¹⁰⁰ Office for National Statistics

ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2017#number-of-families-in-the-uk-continues-to-grow-with-cohabiting-couple-families-growing-the-fastest (consulted 25th March 2019)

¹⁰¹ A detailed summary of the requests can be found in the Methodist Church website version of the report of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group to the 2016 Conference, Section 3.3.5 and Appendix 6. methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2016-29-Marriage-and-Relationships-Task-Group.pdf

¹⁰² Reasons for cohabiting are discussed in the 2016 report 3.1.1 (b) iv.

¹⁰³ In 2017, the Connexion consisted of 4355 Local Churches (not all of which are authorised for the conducting of marriage services); and there were also 1517 ministers in the active work.

our theology of relating as described above that it is a better situation when there is a deep and long-lasting commitment between those acting as parents in a particular 'family unit', whether they are the biological parents or not.

2.6.3 The Task Group has noted that in recent years, cohabitation and various other forms of intimate personal relationship have become well-established and generally accepted. Over the course of time, the levels of commitment in those relationships may develop or diminish. Those who cohabit may move through various degrees of sharing their selves with each other. The Task Group judges that more work needs to be done on considering how the Methodist Church can encourage good relating in all couple and family relationships in order for this to be a deepening commitment; and in the development of liturgical practices to support and celebrate various stages or forms of committed relating.

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.

2.7 Civil Partnerships

2.7.1 The State has already moved to offer forms of affirming and legalising committed relationships in addition to marriage. In 2004, the Civil Partnership Act allowed same-sex couples in the United Kingdom to enter into a civil partnership. In 2006, the Conference effectively permitted its members and ministers to enter same-sex civil partnerships (and then, in 2014, to enter same-sex civil marriages). In other words, entering such a partnership was not to be seen as putting people in breach of the 1993 Conference Resolutions on Human Sexuality.

2.7.2 A crucially important recent development was the announcement in 2018 that the UK Government intended 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. Reflecting on this matter, the Task Group urges the Conference to affirm in due course those who enter mixed-sex civil partnerships, just as it has affirmed those who enter same-sex civil partnerships. Where it is appropriate, we would then welcome it if the relationship that has led a couple to enter a partnership were to strengthen further and bring them to seek marriage as the Church understands it.¹⁰⁴

2.7.3 That said, where couples are open and receptive to the possibility of discerning God's love present in what has brought them to form their partnership, and where real pastoral need exists for not simply offering the couple an opportunity to marry in church, we believe it would be appropriate for the Church to offer thanks for and bless such partnerships on its premises. This would require developing and offering appropriate forms of prayer and orders of service.

2.8 LGBTQI+

¹⁰⁴ See 2.9 below.

2.8.1 As a Task Group, as at successive discussions during the Conference, we have shared many stories and experiences of people whose sexuality and gender is lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer or intersex not being treated equally in our churches. These experiences included the following:

LGBTQI+ people not being treated as God's people;

a fear of "coming out" and keeping sexuality hidden;

discrimination that led to suicide;

attempts at changing a person's sexuality that led to illness;

meeting God powerfully at times of being persecuted for sexuality;

finding God through a committed, faithful, loving same-sex relationship;

faithfully keeping on with the Methodist Church in hope.

The Task Group believes that the faithfulness of those of us who are LGBTQI+ needs to be respected and honoured. Since 1979, the Methodist Church has been seeking ever more to understand the variety of human sexual identities and to support everyone in being treated with love and dignity. The insights on the purposes, gospel qualities and practices of good relating that we have identified above apply equally to people who are LGBTQI+ as they do to everyone else.

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*.

2.9 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.

3. God's guidance for marriage: developing our vision

In this section, we note the distinctive character of the commitment that constitutes marriage as the Methodist Church understands it. We consider how the important concepts of covenant and grace have particular application to it. We highlight the potentially enriching character of marriage relationships, recognising that the lived reality may sometimes differ from the vision which God offers to us. We track the changes in the Methodist Church's teaching on marriage towards it being more about companionship between equal partners, with less emphasis upon the creation of children. As a Task Group, we offer our reflections upon a theology of marriage based upon our reading of the Bible, Methodist theology (as distilled in marriage service liturgies), and people's lived experiences.

3.1 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. This is what is sometimes meant by those who talk of marriage as one of the 'creation ordinances', and can be seen to be what is being endorsed by Jesus in Mark 10:6-8 and Matthew 19:4-6.¹⁰⁵ In other parts of the Old Testament, marriage is also used as a metaphor for God's covenant relationship with God's people.¹⁰⁶ The nature of that covenant

¹⁰⁵ See further paragraph 2.3.3 and footnotes 92, 112, 122 and 160.

¹⁰⁶ Hosea, Jeremiah, Second Isaiah and Ezekiel all turn to this metaphor to describe God's covenant relationship with God's people.

relationship then influences the Church's understanding of marriage. In the New Testament, marriage is used as a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and the Church, which is itself seen as an experience of saving grace.¹⁰⁷

3.1.2 Within the Methodist Church, marriage has been treated as a very important relationship, sometimes called a 'vocation', or 'calling', or even "a gift of God" (as the 1998 report described it).¹⁰⁸ The Task Group has noted that the phrase "marriage is a gift of God" is one that for some people carries a great deal of weight. However, the report of the 2016 Marriage and Relationships Task Group raised pastoral concerns around use of this phrase. It noted, for example, that some people have questioned what this language says to single people about how they are valued.¹⁰⁹

3.1.3 Although Scripture uses the language of marriage in particular ways that point to its importance, there is no direct scriptural precedent for talking of marriage as a gift of God. The introduction of this language is relatively recent. The 1992 Statement while clearly privileging marriage as something 'good' which carries its own special blessing from God, does not use this phrase.¹¹⁰ The Methodist Service Book 1975 talks of marriage being 'given by God'. The language of 'gift' is then introduced in the 1996 report on Preparing for Christian Marriage and incorporated into Standing Order 011A in 1998. The Methodist Worship Book 1999 also speaks of thanking God for the "gift of marriage".

3.1.4 Having considered these matters the current Task Group has come to the following conclusions.

¹⁰⁷ Ephesians 5:25, 32; 2 Corinthians 11:2; and (implicitly) Romans 7:4

¹⁰⁸ Christian Preparation for Marriage 1998 Report 1.14 and SO 011A

¹⁰⁹ 2016 Report 3.1.1 (b) ii

¹¹⁰ 1992 Statement paragraph 64

The phrase “marriage is a gift of God” is a metaphor which expresses something of the esteem in which marriage may be held, and the intentions of God through marriage to bestow something good on humankind. This picture language is evocative and sits well in a marriage service.

Thanking God for the gift of marriage is consistent with the theology being developed in this report. Thanking God for the gift of other relationships is also important and we have developed these themes below.

Marriage is a gift of God, alongside other gifts from God in relationships that are lived according to God’s purposes and bear the qualities of God’s love.

3.1.5 Marriage is given by God as a particular channel of grace. The Task Group has found it helpful to see marriage as a significant form of close and enriching relationship, which calls for particular commitment and discipline and through which grace may be joyfully experienced. In 1 Corinthians 7:7, Paul describes both being ‘married’ and being ‘single’ as ‘charisms’ from God. That word is often translated as ‘gifts’, but not always helpfully. The term can best be understood in terms of ways of being and behaving that are both experiences and also expressions of God’s grace.

3.1.6 That is true of all close relationships, but it is particularly true of marriage. All the purposes, qualities and practices which we have noted above as applying to all relationships, apply also to it.¹¹¹ Marriage, though, is also intentionally life-long, exclusive and monogamous.¹¹² Above all, marriage is a relationship **in which grace may and should be**

¹¹¹ See Section 2

¹¹² Older forms of the marriage service talked about ‘forsaking all other’. In the Bible, the practice of heterosexual polygamy in the Old Testament was never revoked, but by the time of the New Testament exclusive monogamy had become the norm. This is reflected in the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:3-12, and Mark 10:2-12.

known abundantly. This means that the nature of marriage is sacramental, even though in Methodist understanding the marriage ceremony is not a sacrament. As the theologian Rachel Starr expresses it, “its sacramental nature must be located in the ongoing lived relationship of the couple, through the celebration of the gifts of creation, the sharing of sorrows and struggles, and the increase of joy and justice”.¹¹³

3.1.7 Throughout its history, the Methodist Church has built on these biblically based insights and developed its understanding of marriage.¹¹⁴ As a priest in the Church of England, John Wesley ensured that Methodism inherited that Church’s formulations about marriage. Those in turn derived from a tradition of thinking whose origin can be traced back to St Augustine writing in 401 AD. Those formulations, as set out in the Church of England’s Book of Common Prayer of 1662, described particular purposes for marriage. They can be summarised as:

- (1) the procreation of children (and Christian children in particular, who will live to praise God);
- (2) a remedy for sin (and sexual sin in particular); and
- (3) mutual comfort and help.

3.1.8 Over time within the Methodist movement, the relative importance of these purposes has changed. Indeed, ‘remedy for sin’ has disappeared altogether. This can clearly be seen in the table below, which sets out some important historical developments within the marriage liturgies of the different parts of the Methodist Church.

¹¹³ Rachel Starr *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage in contexts of Domestic Violence: When Salvation is Survival* Abingdon: Routledge 2018 p. 120

¹¹⁴ See further the 2016 report 3.1.2(c).

Table: Changes in the expressed purpose of marriage within Methodist liturgy¹¹⁵

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’

¹¹⁵ Material largely taken from: David M Chapman, *Born in Song: Methodist Worship in Britain* (London, Church in the Market Place Publications, 2006), ‘The Solemnisation of Christian Marriage’, pp. 197-217.

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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3.1.9

It is crucial to recognise, therefore, that even in the short history of Methodism – compared to the 2,000 year history of the Christian Church – our understanding of the purpose of marriage has changed significantly. Our marriage services have demonstrably moved over the years from seeing the dominant purpose of marriage as being procreation, to seeing it as being about profound companionship. Exactly why this change has happened is unclear. It may be because Methodists have become more and more reticent about sexual activity. It may be in response to the increasing number of people coming to it for marriage who are beyond child-bearing age. (However, it needs to be noted that even older couples entering marriage can still provide a nurturing and caring environment for children, including children from earlier marriages, and grandchildren.) It may also be because of the growing availability of effective means of contraception, and the realisation that sexual expression can have other important functions as well as procreation.

3.1.10

Proponents of both emphases (‘companionship’ and ‘procreation’) might claim support for their point of view in Genesis 2:22-24, but by reading those verses in different ways.¹¹⁶ Those who interpret the reason for a

¹¹⁶ See footnote 75 for the biblical text.

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. But it is hard to see whether that statement is a command or a blessing, or a mixture of both. It is certainly the case that there is not a 'duty of procreation' in the Bible, in the sense that procreation is an absolute command for all people at all times. There is a recognition that there are other ways of responding to God and dedicating oneself to God's ways than through fulfilling a duty to procreate.¹¹⁷

3.1.11

Bearing all this in mind, the Task Group has been happy to affirm the understanding of Christian marriage as expressed in the Methodist Worship Book (1999), namely, that marriage is not a duty, but a relationship in which grace and love may be experienced and expressed. It is a relationship where two people may enjoy a "life-long unity of heart, body and mind; comfort and companionship; enrichment and encouragement; tenderness and trust". This in turn will allow them both to "grow towards maturity, so that children may be nurtured, family life strengthened, and human society enriched".¹¹⁸ All of this provides the context for the commitments that the couple freely make to each other. As the liturgy goes on to make clear, this act of commitment is made in the presence of witnesses and a congregation, grounding both the service and the relationship in the worshipping and caring life of the church community. The text of the marriage service then goes on to describe the act of commitment between the couple as one of "binding themselves to each other in the covenant of marriage". That phrase both complements and also deepens the reference in the introduction to "a

¹¹⁷ See, for example, 1 Corinthians 7 and Matthew 19:12

¹¹⁸ Methodist Worship Book 1999 p. 369.

solemn, legal contract". The legal proclamation of the couple as husband and wife is similarly complemented and deepened by a spiritual or religious blessing of them: "God so join you together that none shall ever part you".

3.1.12

The Task Group suggests, therefore, that marriage is a grateful response to gracious love, a commitment to love graciously in turn, and a deepening experience of God's love and grace in and through the love for the partner.

3.2 Divine grace and human frailty

3.2.1 The Task Group has found it important to recognise that marriage has not always been understood in the same way, nor to have required what we now think of as good or holy relating. This is true both in the various Christian traditions, and in wider society. Some understand marriage to be an inherently unjust, and often patriarchal institution; and that the Christian Church has traditionally supported, recommended and even tried to enforce that view.¹¹⁹ There is indeed a history of seemingly unjust and patriarchal practices being affirmed in Christian liturgies, and of various biblical texts being cited as justification for doing so. Specific examples would include the practice of women being given from the authority of a father to that of a husband; the transfer with them of property and resources to husbands; and women promising to obey their husbands.

3.2.2 A different understanding can be found, however, in the 1992 Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* and the Marriage Services in the 1999 Methodist Worship

¹¹⁹ See *Liberating Sex*, Adrian Thatcher, 1993 for a discussion of these themes

Book.¹²⁰ That understanding can in turn be grounded in the reading of other Scriptures that are judged to take priority over the ones which appear patriarchal.¹²¹

3.2.3 Taking these Scriptures together, our Task Group finds no biblical basis justifying imbalances of power within marriage, exploitation and abuse, or the reduction of one person to the status of an object in the relationship. In the same vein no one should be coerced to enter a marriage or to stay in a marriage. Marriage, therefore, cannot be used by anyone to damage, oppress or control people in their weakness, for the God revealed to us in Jesus is not like that. If power is to be exercised, it must be the power of self-emptying not self-serving love.

3.2.4 People approaching marriage may well understand that it is God's intention that marriage be a life-long commitment in love. They may also understand the dynamic of this love, and anticipate in turn that the nature of their commitment to each other be life-long. But human beings are frail and fallible because we are all affected by sin. The Methodist Church has recognised that not everyone who has made that commitment with integrity finds it possible to fulfil it.¹²² In some cases, the damage being caused in a marriage not just to the partners

¹²⁰ *A Methodist Statement* 1992, paras 57 and 58

¹²¹ Thus Ephesians 5:22 states that wives are to obey their husbands. But there are already signs that this is part of a passage in which understandings of the patriarchal family structures of the time are being modified by gospel values and insights. Wives are to obey their husbands as part of their obedient response to Christ; and husbands are to love their wives as part of Christ's love for the Church (Ephesians 5:23-33). There is still a potential imbalance there between husband and wife, but underlying both is the dynamic of Christ's love. That raises the question of how the imbalance might be modified by the insight in Galatians 3:28 that "... there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus". Philippians 2:1-18 states that in Christ all are to relate to each in Christ-like love. So in any relationship there may be a diversity of roles, but an equality of persons. 1 Corinthians 7:3ff states that both partners in a marriage have equal rights and responsibilities sexually.

¹²² In Mark 10:1-12 Jesus points out how God's intention for marriage is not undermined but damaged by divorce and re-marriage. He then seems to say that the provision for divorce in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy continues to exist to deal with cases where, through hardness of heart or of circumstances, it is impossible to sustain the marriage.

concerned but also to others (notably children) is greater than that of ending it.

3.2.5 The good news of the gospel is that God's response is always to be gracious, merciful and forgiving to those willing to seek it. The Methodist Church changed the way it responded to divorce across the 20th century. These issues have been thoroughly addressed in the 1998 Report on Christian Preparation for Marriage and in the 1996 report that led to it.¹²³ Following from the qualities of good relating outlined above, the Task Group suggests a marriage needs to be entered into in love, and, if breakdown is unavoidable, ended in love as far as possible.¹²⁴ Our Church needs to enable us to support one another in all our significant relationships, and especially through times of pressure. Where appropriate, that support can come in the context of worship and prayers that acknowledge both our weaknesses as human beings and the power of God's grace to heal.

3.2.6 We therefore recommend that liturgical texts be produced and commended for use at the ending of a marriage, not to glorify divorce but to acknowledge its reality and enable the partners and other people affected (and also the Church) to offer and open themselves to the gracious love of God as they go through it.¹²⁵ The availability of such a service would be an expression of our belief in God's grace and healing, and show that nothing is beyond the care of God and the Church. The recent service of the Presbyterian Church (USA) provides a helpful model.¹²⁶

3.2.7 So, we note that the Methodist Church has developed a theology of marriage which is about equality, mutuality and companionship. Over the

¹²³ Christian Preparation for Marriage (1998) and Preparing for Christian Marriage.

¹²⁴ Whilst recognising that in cases of domestic violence or abuse, it may be hard for the victim to express or even feel love in ending the relationship.

¹²⁵ The booklet *Vows and Partings* published by Methodist Publishing House 2002 has some helpful material for prayers, but not a service.

¹²⁶ *The Book of Common Worship* 4th edition Presbyterian Church (USA) 2018

years, the Church has changed the wording and the practice of the service of marriage in response to that.¹²⁷ This developing sense of God as a God of grace and mercy has led to changes in how Methodists respond to those going through marriage break-up. 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 Marriage as a social and legal institution

3.3.1 Marriage is a ***social institution identifiable beyond the Methodist Church's understanding and experience of it***. As a social institution marriage has also appeared in many guises and is constantly changing. In British society, and many societies across the world throughout history, a special category of significant intimate relationships called 'marriage' has long been recognised and socially sanctioned. There is a long pre-Christian history of marriage; and even in our culture, heavily influenced over many centuries by Christianity and the Church, the practice of marriage has changed.¹²⁸ It is therefore vital that we do not fall into the trap of imagining that relationships portrayed in the Bible were conducted in the same way and according to the same values as those portrayed in many adverts, films and television shows.

3.3.2 Within our own context, we must note the developments in the relationship between a civil marriage and a religious one. At one point in British history, the two were seen to be almost indistinguishable.¹²⁹ More

¹²⁷ See the Marriage and Relationships webpage for a further discussion of changes in the Methodist Church's wording and practice of the marriage service.

¹²⁸ Coontz, Stephanie, *Marriage, a History: How Love conquered Marriage*. London: Penguin. 2005. 1.

¹²⁹ In the Marriage Act 1753 (often known as Lord Hardwicke's Act), marriage in England and Wales was regulated so that it could only take place in a local Parish Church of the established Church, the

recently, however, it has become increasingly difficult to say that the understanding of marriage in the law of the land and that of the Churches are coterminous.¹³⁰ Over time, a ‘secular’ understanding has become the prime source for the defining of civil marriage rather than a ‘Christian’ one. The law in England and Wales at least (provisions in other jurisdictions vary) now stipulates that ceremonies for both civil partnerships and civil marriages can contain readings, songs or music, but must not contain anything that is religious, including hymns or readings from the Bible. In the case of a marriage service in an authorised church building, Methodist or otherwise, the couple are required to make a particular declaration and exchange promises in order to fulfil legal requirements, following which the couple and witnesses sign the register.¹³¹ When all these things have been done, the marriage service in the church results in the couple’s marriage being counted as valid under the law of the land.¹³²

3.3.3 The Introduction to the current *Methodist Worship Book*’s services for “Marriage and the Blessing of a Marriage” therefore states that: “A marriage ceremony is a formal occasion when a solemn, legal contract is made between a man and a woman. In a Christian context, it is also an act of worship in which marriage is celebrated as a gift of God and the joy of the couple is shared and their commitment to each other is witnessed by family and friends.”¹³³

Church of England. In a judgement of 1866, Lord Penzance stated that “... *it is obvious that the matrimonial law of this country is adapted to the Christian marriage, and it is wholly inapplicable to polygamy*” and that “*I conceive that marriage, as understood in Christendom, may for this purpose be defined as the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others*”

¹³⁰ The law of the land has stretched over time to encompass marriage ceremonies not just of the established Church of England (in England) but also those of other Christian denominations (including Methodism); those of other faiths; and those that are purely ‘secular’ with no aspects of religious faith in them.

¹³¹ Only fourteen words are needed to fulfil those legal requirements.

¹³² Please see the additional web site pages for a timeline of relevant developments in the history of marriage and relationships.

¹³³ Methodist Worship Book 1999, p. 367

3.3.4 It could be inferred from the use of the term ‘solemn, legal contract’ and the reference that follows to ‘a Marriage previously solemnised’ that it is primarily the law or the state which not only defines what marriage is, but also in some sense ‘makes’ a particular marriage by declaring that from a particular moment it validly exists. It is certainly the case that the Church judges that 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.

3.3.5 The Task Group has reconsidered whether ‘decoupling’ the civic ceremony and the church service would strengthen or weaken the Church’s understanding and practice of marriage, and its standing in and influence on society.¹³⁴ Doing so might enable the Church to put the emphasis more on the quality of the relationships being developed, and on the spirituality of the union being effected. However, ‘decoupling’ would likely decrease the opportunities to engage with members of wider society at crucial moments in their journey of life, embodying God’s grace and ministering God’s love to them. This was a very clear message from the workshops at the 2018 Conference. Moreover, it is hard for an incarnational faith to separate the spiritual or religious aspects of life from civic, legal or practical ones. On reflection, therefore, we do not recommend ‘decoupling’. We judge that the legal or civil understanding of marriage with regard to mixed-sex marriages is contained within the understanding of the Methodist Church, which then goes beyond it. Having said that, the Task Group would want to continue to affirm those couples undertaking a civil marriage. The making of vows, often before the couple’s community, symbolises and confirms the commitments being made. Civil marriage can support good relating and all such relationships are precious and to be celebrated.

3.4 Resources to support marriage

¹³⁴ This was previously considered in the 2016 Marriage and Relationships report 3.1.3

Over recent years, marriage has become less popular, and statistics show that a high proportion of marriages fail.¹³⁵ The Task Group therefore recommends that the Methodist Church offer more support for marriage, alongside other committed relationships.¹³⁶ Resources to help provide this support could include the theological insights of the purposes, qualities and patterns for good relating that are set out in this report.

4. Widening the practice of marriage

We have noted that while the Methodist understanding of marriage goes deeper and is more particular than that stipulated in the law of the land, the validation by the State is in practice necessary to confirm all marriages in the Methodist Church. In this section, we look at how the State has developed marriage-like relationships with the creation of civil partnerships and also widened the definition of marriage itself to include same-sex couples. Alongside this, we consider whether the developing Methodist theology of marriage and relationships, and the previous decisions of the Methodist Church not to debar its members from entering into such relationships as defined and validated by the law, mean that the Methodist Church can now widen its own practice of marriage. In reaching our conclusions we reflect upon previous arguments for not widening the celebration of marriage to include same-sex couples. We consider previous approaches to Scripture and emerging interpretations. We share here the thinking that has enabled the Task Group to offer its conclusions.

¹³⁵ The Office for National Statistics Divorces in England and Wales 2015 suggests that 42% of marriages end in divorce. ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/bulletins/divorcesinenglandandwales/2015#what-percentage-of-marriages-end-in-divorce (consulted 25th March 2019)

¹³⁶ The 2002 Marriage in the Methodist Church report to Conference raised questions as to how we should continue to develop our marriage preparation practice. Resolution 5 named various officers of the Connexional Team as being tasked with producing an action plan for 2003-2005.

4.1 The question posed by the Marriage (Same Sex Couples Act) 2013

The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 legalised same-sex marriage in England and Wales starting from March 2014.¹³⁷ 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.¹³⁸ As a Church, we have declared that all people are equally valued by God.¹³⁹ Now we must address the question of whether it should be possible for same-sex couples to marry in the Methodist Church.

4.2 Who can register a civil partnership or be married in law?

At the time of publication of this report, only couples who are of the same sex and meet the requirements of the law can register to enter a civil partnership.¹⁴⁰ Corresponding provisions apply to the marriage of mixed-sex couples under the various pieces of legislation in all parts of the United Kingdom, and to the marriage of same-sex couples in those parts of the UK where that has been legalised.

4.3 Who may register a civil partnership or be married under the discipline of the Methodist Church?

¹³⁷ 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.

¹³⁸ In the first year that such marriages were possible (March 2014 to June 2015), a total of 7,366 marriages were formed in England & Wales, of which 55% were between female couples and 45% between male couples. (ONS: Marriages in England and Wales (provisional) for Same Sex Couples, 2014, released 20 October)

¹³⁹ See the EDI Toolkit

¹⁴⁰ The requirements are that they are not blood relatives; are over the age of 18 (or 16 if they have the written consent of their parents or legal guardians); and are free to enter the partnership (ie are not already in a civil partnership or married). For further details, see: www.gov.uk/get-married-in-england-or-wales.

4.3.1 So far as same sex civil partnerships are concerned, 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”.¹⁴¹

4.3.2 With regard to mixed-sex marriages, the Conference has always accepted and affirmed those who solemnise them in a civic ceremony rather than a Church. Indeed, it has provided a form of service for the ‘Blessing of a Marriage previously Solemnised’ for those who subsequently wish to celebrate and pray for their relationship in an act of worship.¹⁴²

4.3.3 The current situation is somewhat different when it comes to authorised services for civil partnerships and marriages. With regard to civil partnerships, the 2006 Conference Report *The Pilgrimage of Faith* led to the Conference resolving that “the 1993 Resolutions preclude the possibility of the Methodist Church giving an ‘official’ blessing to a same-sex relationship.”¹⁴³ It resolved that this excluded “the possibility of authorised liturgies being adopted for the blessing of same-sex

¹⁴¹ Resolution 40/6 of the 2014 Conference reads in full “The Conference resolved that, whilst recognising that the 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality would still apply to all relationships, the ruling regarding those entering civil partnerships, namely that there is no reason *per se* to prevent anyone within the Church, ordained or lay, from entering into or remaining within such a relationship, should also extend to those entering into legally contracted same sex marriages.”

¹⁴² *Methodist Worship Book* 1999 p 385ff

¹⁴³ Agenda Item 40 of the 2006 Conference.

relationships and that Methodist premises may not be used for such a purpose”.¹⁴⁴

4.3.4 At the same time, however, the 2006 Conference issued guidance about what would be good pastoral practice in responding to requests for prayers or for services of blessing for same-sex couples. Those approached in this way could offer “informal, spontaneous prayer in response to a pastoral need”, but were not to use Methodist premises “for the blessing of same-sex relationships.”¹⁴⁵ Then in 2014, the Conference revised that guidance in a way that implicitly recognised that Methodist premises could be used as the venue for any response that was consonant with the Methodist Church’s understanding and discipline.¹⁴⁶ In 2018, the Conference adopted a Notice of Motion which effectively made this an explicit part of the formal guidance, stating: “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.”¹⁴⁷

4.3.5 When first introduced, the legislation for civil partnerships did not allow for them to be contracted on religious premises. In 2010, however, the Equality Act removed that barrier, but stipulated that any application to the registration authorities for local church premises to be authorised for use in this way could only be made with the consent of a specified body.¹⁴⁸ In the case of the Methodist Church, this would be the Methodist

¹⁴⁴ Resolution 40/8 of the 2006 Conference. The 1993 Resolutions referred to can be found in Book VII Guidance Part 11 of the *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*

¹⁴⁵ Resolution 40/10 of the 2006 Conference.

¹⁴⁶ Resolution 40/5 of the 2014 Conference. The full text of the revised guidance can be found in the *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* Book VII Part 10.

¹⁴⁷ 2018 Conference Notice of Motion 203 [Daily Record 7/17/8 as clarified by 8/53/1-2].

¹⁴⁸ Equality Act 2010, section 202, which amended section 6 of the Civil Partnership Act 2004.

Conference. Yet no resolution seeking the Conference's consent has as yet come to the Conference. Moreover, since the essence of a civil partnership is above all to register the partnership, with no vows or commitments being necessary, the Task Group does not recommend that such a resolution be brought.

4.3.6 In the case of marriage, the Conference has authorised forms of service solemnising the marriages of mixed-sex couples. Those services contain the statements and commitments that are necessary for the marriage to be legally registered as 'valid' but place them in the context of the formation of a covenant relationship between two people in an act of worship. In England and Wales, they take place in those Methodist premises that have been authorised under the law for the registration of marriages. Such authorisation has to be applied for by the local managing trustees. The Conference has permitted them to apply, if they choose so to do.

4.3.7 Legally in England and Wales, same-sex marriages are registered under a different Act of Parliament to that for mixed-sex ones, and buildings that are used to register them are separately authorised under that Act.¹⁴⁹ The Conference has not given permission for local managing trustees to apply for that authorisation, nor has it authorised forms of service for the solemnisation of same-sex marriages or the blessing of such marriages that have been previously solemnised.¹⁵⁰

4.3.8 The implication of the above is that the Methodist 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 Task Group is aware that some members of the Methodist Church

¹⁴⁹ Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, Schedule 1.

¹⁵⁰ Although public prayers of thanksgiving for same-sex marriages are permitted (see para 4.3.4 above).

would be happy to see the Conference authorising forms of service which enable same-sex couples to exchange vows and to make commitments to each other in the sight of God and the Church that create a life-long, exclusive covenant relationship between them; but that they would not want this relationship to be called ‘marriage’.¹⁵¹ Others oppose any sort of formalised same-sex relationship, and some struggle with the 1993 declarations of the Conference concerning sexuality as a whole.

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*. This is sometimes due to a dislike or fear of habits and practices that are not our own, or beyond our personal experience. At other times, it is because an assumption is being made that what is good for human beings is what is in accordance with the principles engrained in nature, and that those principles can be discerned by reason.¹⁵² Yet what is declared to be ‘natural’ and what is not is often what is in accord with the judgement and self-interest of the powerful. What are perceived to be principles of nature are often more like social conventions. Thus when in 1 Corinthians 11:14 Paul says that it is not natural for a man to have long hair, he is not saying that it will not grow long, but that allowing it to grow long is not normal.¹⁵³ Moreover, the fact that same-sex activity has now been discerned in many classes of animals makes it difficult to argue that it is not ‘natural’ for humans because it does not occur among other animals. Among human beings, there is a diversity of human sexuality, each expression of which can be said to be influenced by a variety of factors (as we have explored in Section 1 of this report).

¹⁵¹ Appendix 5 of the 2016 Report gives examples of such opinions given in District consultations.

¹⁵² It is worth noting that although the Wesleys and later Methodism have not paid much formal attention to ‘natural law’ as such, their emphasis on combining reason, experience and tradition with Scripture makes them receptive to the possibilities of “integrating an implicit natural law approach with theological perspectives that may be both complementary and critically constructive”. See further John Harrod *Natural Law in the Methodist Tradition* = Chapter 6 in ed. Norman Doe *Christianity and Natural Law: An Introduction* Cambridge University Press 2017

¹⁵³ Long hair was often seen as a sign of effeminacy.

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. In the Old Testament, they lead to ordinances which condemn some particular forms of sexual conduct, amongst other things. However, Jesus is seen as fulfilling the law (Matthew 5:17) in a way that brings everything under two basic principles of 'loving God and loving others' (Matthew 22:36-40). In fulfilling those principles, people are to bear each other's burdens and gently restore those who transgress.¹⁵⁴ So far as the ordinances about sexual conduct are concerned, it is noticeable that the emphasis of Jesus and Paul "is entirely on the quality of the relationship, and in particular that it should be a covenant of total sexual fidelity and indissoluble union".¹⁵⁵ It can be argued that it is no less moral to see that fulfilled in same-sex relationships as in mixed-sex ones.¹⁵⁶

4.3.11 The last two paragraphs have already been referring to the Scriptures. For Methodists by far the strongest argument has been that for marriage to be other than between one man and one woman is *not scriptural*. There are seven texts which are sometimes cited as condemning all acts that we would now term 'same-sex'. They are:

Genesis 19:1-29, where the men of Sodom seek to gang-rape Lot's male visitors;

Judges 19:1-30, where the men of Gibeah seek to gang-rape a man's male visitor;

Leviticus 18:22 and *20:13*, where it is said to be an abomination for a man to lie with another man, as if with a woman;

¹⁵⁴ See "the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

¹⁵⁵ Jeffrey John *Permanent, Faithful, Stable* 2nd ed. DLT 2012 p.20

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* page 22.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10, where there are two words, one of which recurs in *1 Timothy 1:9-10*, which are often understood as referring to same-sex male behaviour (the New Revised Standard Version translates them as ‘male prostitutes’ and ‘sodomites’) and occur in lists of people whose behaviour is said to put them outside the kingdom of God; and

Romans 1:26-27, in which the giving up of mixed-sex for same-sex intercourse is seen as the result of people worshipping the creature rather than the Creator God.

4.3.12 These texts have, however, been much discussed and fiercely debated. Some people have experienced them being used to justify all manner of prejudice, exclusion and even, sadly, violence. They, and others, have often read and interpreted the texts in other ways.

Genesis 19:1-29 and *Judges 19:1-30* are about violent rape intended to subjugate and humiliate foreigners or strangers in a way that breaches God’s law of love and hospitality. There is no condemnation in the stories of the offering up of women to be sexually abused by the mobs in place of the visitors; but we would not use these stories to condone such behaviour today. When Jesus is reported in Matthew 10:11-15 as referring to Sodom and Gomorrah it is in the context of a discussion about the rules of hospitality.

Leviticus 18:22 and *20:13* occur in the Holiness Codes, which define the religious, civic and cultural identity of the people of God (‘Israel’). This was above all to be done through *separation*. For example, Israel should keep separate from other nations (the Gentiles) in all things; male and female should be kept distinct; different kinds of seed should be sown in separate fields; different kinds of material should not be woven together in the same garment.¹⁵⁷ These and other things are not differentiated in the codes. It is hard to pick some out some of them as still binding and dispense with the others without importing other criteria from outside the texts themselves. Moreover, in Matthew

¹⁵⁷ Leviticus 19:19

15:10-11, 17-20 Jesus says that holiness is not so much a matter of external act as of inner disposition, in other words whether what is being done is done to love God and love one's neighbour.

It is hard to establish exactly the meaning of the words used in *1 Corinthians 6:9-10* and *1 Timothy 1:9-10*. It is the case that the most commonly visible forms of same-sex acts in the predominately Gentile world would be prostitution and pederasty. In any event, it is not possible to generalise with confidence from the terms used and to conclude that non-exploitative, consenting and loving same-sex acts are necessarily condemned by them.

Romans 1:26-27 occur in a passage which is about idolatry. It is aimed at showing that all the Gentiles have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, whereas chapter 2 turns to show how all the Jews have also sinned and fallen short of God's glory through disobedience. Paul may be thinking of ritual prostitution and excessive sexual acts committed in connection with pagan cults and temples (which have 'idols'). He may be assuming that all people are heterosexually oriented, and that all same-sex behaviour is the result of choices to act against that orientation (an idea which no longer accords with what is known today about human nature). "Idolaters fail to give God glory and gratitude. God allows them to lose control in erotic passion, which brings them dishonour".¹⁵⁸

4.3.13 At the same time, other texts have been brought to bear on the debate and, as a task group, we have considered what light these bring to the topic. For example:

Psalms 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

¹⁵⁸ Jack Rogers *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality* 2nd edn. Westminster John Knox Press 2009 pp. 75-76

‘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 over-riding principles of love for God and love for neighbour.

4.3.14 The above are not meant to be exhaustive treatments of the relevant texts, but representative ones. They are presented in groups which reflect basic ways of reading the Bible and interpreting the authority of its statements. The challenge for the Methodist Church, and therefore for our work as a Task Group, is that, (as we mentioned in 0.3.3) a report to the 1998 Conference identified seven different attitudes to biblical authority, and indicated a range of ways in which Methodists use what is written in the Bible as a source for what they believe and do.¹⁵⁹ But neither the 1998 Conference nor any subsequent Conference has chosen to reject any of these ways of using Scripture that it had identified; nor has it promoted any of them as being more useful or correct than the others. So, where a variety of views about the interpretation and use of the Bible - each of which the Conference has affirmed - lead to different or even contradictory conclusions about matters of belief or practice, the Conference has a challenging task in finding its way forward.

¹⁵⁹ Faith and Order Committee report to the 1998 Conference, *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path*

4.3.15 That said, the Task Group is aware that the scholarly debate is tending to move away from arguments about the precise meaning and implication of terms in particular texts, to judgements about their importance within the context of the whole range of voices that make up the Bible. Together, these voices form its authority as the Word of God, through which the Word made flesh in Jesus speaks to us. As a Task Group, we have come to see that we can only proceed humbly, carefully, prayerfully, and in constant engagement with the Scriptures as we confer together to attempt to see how the principles of God's love might be embodied today.

4.3.16 In every generation, faithful, Bible-reading Christians have interpreted and re-interpreted particular texts under the guidance of the Spirit, as they have come to understand more of the cultures in which they were written and in the light of the changing circumstances of their own times. The Scriptures themselves are full of examples of texts that were at one time granted great status or privilege, but which are later declared to be of much less importance in other parts of the Bible. In the area of relationships and marriage, for example, scriptures in the Old Testament provide for polygamy in the form of a man being able to have many wives, without that being seen as a contradiction of a man and a woman becoming 'one flesh'. Texts from later times, however, only allow for monogamy; and this is a position endorsed in the gospels by Jesus.¹⁶⁰ Another example is the provisions for levirate marriage.¹⁶¹ Under these, even if he is already married, a man marries his brother's widow, in order to provide for her and preserve his brother's inheritance. These scriptural provisions are never countermanded, even by Jesus. Yet, following trajectories set by Jesus, and in the light of their experience of the Spirit in the early Church, Christians have later ceased to treat them as normative or grant them any importance.

¹⁶⁰ Mark 10:7-8, Matthew 19:4-6. See paragraph 2.3.3 above.

¹⁶¹ Genesis 38; Deuteronomy 25:5-6; Ruth (*passim*); Matthew 22:23-28

4.3.17 One argument sometimes made against same-sex marriage is that it is not mentioned in the Bible; and that every mention of marriage in the Bible involves a man and (at least) one woman. Other Methodist reports, however, have stated that we should not limit our ideas of what God might do to those things which have occurred historically within biblical times.¹⁶²

4.3.18 Another objection to same-sex marriage often raised is that a same-sex couple cannot naturally procreate.¹⁶³ We have seen earlier that as the emphasis in the Methodist Church's understanding of Christian Marriage on companionship and human flourishing has grown over the years, so that on procreation has lessened.¹⁶⁴ If the clock were to be turned back in the Methodist Church, and the importance of procreation re-emphasised, the rationality of conducting marriages for those who, through age, capability or some other reason, are not able to procreate would have to be reassessed. This would not be welcome or easy. The Task Group would not want the Church's representatives to refuse to conduct marriage services for people in such situations. Pastoral sensitivity and compassion have always made Methodists want to respond positively in such cases. In line with our developing theology of relationships and marriage, the Task Group would want to affirm and rejoice in self-giving love wherever it can be found.

4.3.19 The Task Group believes that the 'companionship' model of marriage that the Methodist Church has developed over the years in terms of mixed-sex relationships, applies, theologically and practically, just as well to the same-sex marriages that are now permitted by the law

¹⁶² *Created in God's image* is a good example of such a report.

¹⁶³ Robert Song, *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships* (London, SCM Press, 2014), pp. 47, 53, 81 and 84.

¹⁶⁴ There are still Christian traditions, however, where what we might term 'the duty of procreation' is the predominant issue for determining their thinking. For example, under Roman Catholic Canon Law, people are not allowed to marry if, through natural or accidental disability, they are incapable of vaginal sexual intercourse. There is also provision for a marriage that has not been consummated to be dissolved.

of the land in most parts of the United Kingdom. The purposes, qualities and practices of marriage relationships that we have identified in this report as enabling those relationships to flourish 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.

4.3.21 In recommending this move, the Task Group believes that we are responding to the promptings of the Spirit in the light of the gospel values and the trajectories of development that are recorded in the Scriptures overall. We believe that in taking this step, the Methodist Church will be being both scriptural and faithful. But the Task Group also recognises that there will be those in the Church who, with equal integrity, will continue to grant great privilege to those verses in the Bible mentioned above, which speak against forms of sexual activity between people of the same sex. The faithfulness of those of us who base our theology on those interpretations will also have to be respected and honoured, and our convictions protected in the same way as we are asked to respect those of others. We shall return to how this may be done in Section 5 of this report. According to Paul (Romans 14:1-15.7), when Christians hold opposing convictions on the same issues, all equally are accountable to God, each must act according to their conscience and none must behave in a way which damages or even destroys the faith of another.¹⁶⁵ The summary in Romans 14:13 of Paul's advice on how to live with contradictory convictions amongst the members of the body of Christ still

¹⁶⁵ *The Pilgrimage of Faith* (2006), paragraph E10.

stands: “Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of one another”.

5. Next Steps for the Methodist Church

In this penultimate section of the report, we move to consider what our developing theology of relationships and marriage will mean for the Methodist Church in practice and how we hold together as a Christ-centred community of equal persons who have differing convictions on these matters. In essence, we offer changes to the Standing Order on marriage and suggest that a more developed description of our understanding of marriage be included in the Guidance section of *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (CPD). We also offer proposals for the development of resources to support marriage and other significant relationships.

5.1 Guidance on the understanding of marriage

5.1.1 The Standing Orders and other material in the *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (CPD) do not just contain definitions as in a dictionary. Nor do they just consist of rules. They also reflect the Church’s teaching, and express theological principles and theological descriptions that apply to the matters they address.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Examples include Standing Order 400A about the ‘Nature and Purposes’ of Districts; 500 about the ‘Nature and Purposes’ of Circuits; 600 on ‘The Nature of the Local Church’; 700 about the ‘Principles of Presbyteral Ministry’ and 701 about the ‘Principles of Diaconal Ministry’. With regard to these latter two sets of ‘Principles’, it is interesting to note for our present purposes that Standing Orders 700(2) and 701(2) clarify how the Church’s covenantal understanding of the relationship between its ordained ministers and the Conference fits with a contractual understanding in the eyes of the law. The Standing Orders state that the covenant relationship between ministers and the Conference arises within their existing relationship with the Church as members, which continues; and neither entry into the covenant relationship nor service within it has ever created or is intended to create, or does create, contractual relations. This in turn relates back to the basic understanding of membership in the Methodist Church. The Deed of Union Clause 9(b) states that “*The privileges and duties of membership.... are commitments by each member to Christian discipleship within the Methodist Church, and to acceptance of its discipline, and by the Church to provision of the means by which that discipleship may be fully expressed, including pastoral care and oversight. Membership is therefore a covenant relationship between the member and the Church, freely entered into by the grace of God, but entry into membership has never been, and is not, intended on the part of either party to create, and does not create, a contract or other legal relations.*”

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 re-consider 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.

5.2 Amended Standing Order concerning Marriage

The Task Group recommends that the Standing Order concerning marriage be amended to read as follows (for a full description of the changes to the current Standing Order, see Resolution 9 below)¹⁶⁷:

011A Marriage

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.

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

Note: The Task Group presented the above recommendation to the Conference; the decisions of the Conference in relation to it are shown in the Resolutions at the end of the Report.

5.3 Respect for differing convictions

5.3.1 The previous paragraphs have raised the question of whether differing convictions can be protected in the Methodist Church concerning matters to do with marriage. As a Task Group, we recognise that our recommendations touch on issues of love and affirmation in marriage which go to the very heart of people's identity, happiness, flourishing and position in their communities. Some will therefore see these as being much more serious and important than other matters that the Church has considered, and about which it has made provision for differing views. Nevertheless, there may be useful parallels and pointers in what has been allowed before.

¹⁶⁷ The Task Group recommends that the provisions for divorce and remarriage currently found in other clauses of Standing Order 011A should be grouped with new provisions for the protection of differing convictions concerning who may be married in a Methodist Church, and placed in a new Standing Order 011B. See further 5.3.8 below.

5.3.2 With regard to the remarriage of divorcees, the emphasis is on the convictions of the minister or authorised person, not those of the local church. There are clauses in Standing Orders which were designed to address this in respect of the remarriage of divorcees, but phrased in such a way as to be much more generally applicable. They state that a minister or other person who is authorised to conduct marriages and who is under the discipline of the Church is not required to officiate at the marriage of a particular couple contrary to the dictates of his or her ‘conscience’; but is required to refer the couple concerned to an authorised colleague who is not so prevented.¹⁶⁸ The underlying principle of this latter is that of ‘connexionalism’.¹⁶⁹

5.3.3 On the other hand, if a couple request that a particular minister should not officiate at their marriage service, and do so on the grounds of gender or race, Standing Orders state that because the Church opposes discrimination, no exception is allowed.¹⁷⁰ The argument here is again that of connexionalism. No matter what the individual view of a minister, of another member, or of a local church, they all belong to a Church which refuses to discriminate; and they are bound by that.

5.3.4 How, then, should ‘conscience’ be protected in the matter of the Christian marriage of same-sex couples? With regard to ministers or other officiants, provisions analogous to those concerning the remarriage of divorcees could be introduced. In no circumstances would a minister or other authorised officiant be forced to conduct a same-sex marriage,

¹⁶⁸ SO 011A (2), (3) and (4).

¹⁶⁹ Connexionalism is the underlying dynamic of the Methodist way of being the Church. As the 2017 report *The Gift of Connexionalism* paragraph 9 put it: “*Relationship is at the heart of connexionalism. Methodist structures and practice seek to express and witness to “a mutuality and interdependence which derive from the participation of all Christians through Christ in the very life of God” (Called to Love and Praise, §4.6.1).*”

¹⁷⁰ SO 011A (5)

but they would be required to refer any couple who requested one to a colleague who could.

5.3.5 With regard to the use of local church premises, the 2014 report from the Working Party on marriage and civil partnerships noted that, were the Conference to agree to allow same-sex marriages to be solemnised in Local Churches, the Church Council of any Local Church wishing to avail themselves of this opportunity would be required to apply to register the church for such purposes under the relevant legislation before any such marriage could take place.¹⁷¹ The 2014 report also reported concerns expressed to them about the difficulties that the making of such decisions in the Local Churches might create.¹⁷² The Task Group is profoundly conscious of the tension which lies within these issues, although it is already the case that the local Church Council has to decide to register a building under relevant legislation before mixed-sex marriages can be solemnised in it. Nevertheless, such individual choices for the Local Church lead to a congregational model of decision making and loosen the unity of the Connexion. This is also problematic as the Methodist Church would be giving a mixed message to people with regard to inclusivity, their welcome and pastoral need. The result might well be inherent tension between individuals within each church and between churches in Circuits.

5.3.6 The difficulty is not just about how we live together as the Methodist Church when we have contradictory convictions, but how we live with contradictory practices between different churches in the Connexion. One possibility might be for managing trustees to be told by the Conference that if premises are to be registered as an authorised building for the solemnisation of any kind of marriage, they must be registered both under the Marriage Act 1949 (in respect of mixed-sex marriages) and

¹⁷¹ Working Party on Marriage and Relationships 2014, para 10, 116

¹⁷² Working Party on Marriage and Relationships 2014, paras 61, 117

also under the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act 2013 in England and Wales (and their equivalents in other jurisdictions).

5.3.7 The Task Group is aware that the guidance previously given about Local Churches and same-sex marriages are parallel to the provisions for Local Churches about mixed-sex marriages, where the managing trustees already have a choice about whether to register their premises for them. Therefore, the Task Group is not minded to recommend that the previous guidance be changed. 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.

5.3.8 The Task Group recommends that provisions for the protection of differing convictions concerning who may be married in a Methodist church be grouped in a new Standing Order 011B, together with provisions for the protection of ‘conscience’ concerning divorce and remarriage that are currently found in clauses of Standing Order 011A. (For a full description of the changes to the current Standing Order, see Resolution 9 below.)

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.*

Note: The Task Group presented the recommendation above to the Conference; the decisions of the Conference in relation to it are shown in the Resolutions at the end of the Report.

5.4 Steps to support marriage and other significant relationships

5.4.1 As proposed in 2.7 we recommend that the Methodist Church develop resources for the celebration of civil partnerships. The analogy would be with what is already provided for the marriage of mixed-sex couples. We already have a service for mixed-sex couples who have entered a marriage in a civil ceremony (eg at a Registry Office). We call it a Service of or for 'The Blessing of a Marriage Previously Solemnised'. Such a service does not affect or create a legal marriage. A similar service for civil partnerships would not affect or create a legal partnership. But it would open the

occasion up to the grace of God through thanksgiving, and to the blessing of God as we have outlined it.

5.4.2 As proposed in 3.2.6 we recommend that liturgical texts be produced and commended for use at the ending of a marriage, to acknowledge the reality of the ending of the relationship and enable the partners and other people affected (and also the Church) to offer and open themselves to the gracious love of God as they go through it. While it may seem strange to recommend this in a section headed support for marriage and other significant relationships, endings are important and this would honour that which has ceased to be. An ending can become the first step towards a new beginning. The recent service of the Presbyterian Church (USA) provides a helpful model.¹⁷³

5.4.3 We ask that steps be taken to review the resources that the Methodist Church has produced in the last twenty years to support marriage (and not just preparation for marriage), parenting and other significant relationships. In the light of this review, which will include the guidance given in Book VII of CPD, Section C, Part 8, on Christian Preparation for Marriage, we suggest that materials be updated or developed to take account of the contemporary realities described in this report. Such resources should also include the matters raised by the 2016 Marriage and Relationships Task Group Report to be included in any updated Statement or pastoral and policy guidance.¹⁷⁴ We suggest that in whatever ways possible this work be done ecumenically. Such work should take into account the paper “We are family” published jointly by the Children’s Ministry Network and the Methodist Church which documents the changing nature of families and the crucial role the Church has to play in supporting families in nurturing a sense of

¹⁷³ *The Book of Common Worship* 4th edition Presbyterian Church (USA) 2018

¹⁷⁴ Marriage and Relationships Task Group Report 2016 3.2.2 (e)

wellbeing.¹⁷⁵

5.4.4 We ask that the materials produced already by the EDI committee to enable the development in understanding of sexuality and gender be further promoted and used around the connexion (EDI Toolkit modules 5, 7.1 and 7.2). We commend the work being done concerning the inclusion of transgender, intersex and other gender diverse people in church life, and ask that in due course the Connexion be encouraged to use this new module of the EDI Toolkit when it is produced.¹⁷⁶

5.4.5. At the 2018 Conference, Notice of Motion 2018/203 asked that we include proposals in this report which were consistent with previous commitments to live with contradictory convictions and also that the Conference “receive reports on emerging practice which will inform ongoing theological reflection”.¹⁷⁷ We simply note that reference here for future inclusion in work undertaken on these matters.

¹⁷⁵ *We are Family: the changing face of family ministry* p 30-31, TMCP 2017

¹⁷⁶ Notice of Motion 2018/204 Trans Stakeholder Group. Daily Record No 7/17/9

¹⁷⁷ Daily Record 2018 7/17/8

Conclusions

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?”

John Wesley (Sermon XXXIV, *Catholic Spirit*¹⁷⁸)

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”.¹⁷⁹ 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.

¹⁷⁸ John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* Fourteenth Impression 1980

¹⁷⁹ Ibid

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”.¹⁸⁰

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

¹⁸⁰ John Wesley, *The character of a Methodist* first published 1742

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.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Dolores Dufner, OSB as in *Singing the Faith* number 689.

*****RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED BY THE CONFERENCE**

- 10/1.** The Conference received the Report and commended it to the Connexion for study and prayerful discussion.
- 10/4.** The Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to review the provision of liturgical resources in the light of this report, including the question of whether there should be one marriage service or two in the *Methodist Worship Book*, the preparation of a draft service of celebration for civil partnerships, and the preparation of any other draft liturgical resources that may be required. The Conference further directed the Faith and Order Committee to report to the 2020 Conference, on the understanding that the bringing of any draft liturgies and proposed amendments to the *Methodist Worship Book* for approval by the Conference would depend upon the results of consultation on the resolutions of the 2019 Conference and any resolutions of the 2020 Conference that result from it.
- 10/5.** The Conference adopted the recommendation in paragraphs 3.2.6 and 5.4.2, and directed the Faith and Order Committee to explore producing liturgical resources and relevant guidance for use at the ending of a marriage.
- 10/6.** The Conference adopted the recommendation in paragraph 3.4 that the Methodist Church offer more support for marriage, alongside other committed relationships; and directed that the Methodist Council ensure resources be produced to help provide this support drawing on the theological insights of the purposes, qualities and patterns for good relating set out in the report.
- 10/10.** The Conference directed that Resolutions 10/2, 10/3, 10/7, 10/8 and 10/9 be treated as Provisional Resolutions under Standing Order 122.

10/10A. Resolutions 10/8A and 10/8B shall have effect conditionally upon the confirmation of resolution 10/8 by the Conference of 2020 in the same or substantially similar form and from the date upon which the confirmed resolution takes effect.

10/8A. For the purposes of section 26A of the Marriage Act 1949 (as inserted by section 4(1) of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013) the Conference consents to the marriage of same sex couples and accordingly authorises the managing trustees or, if none, the trustees, of any Methodist building in England and Wales capable of registration under section 43A of the Marriage Act 1949 (as amended by paragraph 1 of Schedule 1 to the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013) to register that building under that section.

10/8B. For the purposes of the Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977 as amended by the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014, the Conference resolves that Methodist ministers, probationers or members may be nominated by the Methodist Church in Scotland to the Registrar General in Scotland to be registered to solemnise same sex marriage and that same-sex marriages may be solemnised on Methodist premises in Scotland if the managing trustees so permit and all other relevant legal requirements have been satisfied.

10/11. The Conference directed the Secretary of the Conference to convene a group of persons representing the Law and Polity Committee, the Faith and Order Committee and the Marriage and Relationships Task Group, to receive the reports of the Synods and the Law and Polity Committee and to report to the Conference of 2020 with appropriate resolutions, including a statement of the ecumenical implications as required under Standing Order 121(2).

*****RESOLUTIONS APPROVED BY THE CONFERENCE AS PROVISIONAL RESOLUTIONS**

10/2. The Conference adopts the recommendation in paragraph 2.2.5 that it affirm 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 (though 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 wellbeing of the ones abused [often women]).

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 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.

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 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 re-consider 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.*

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 in so far as the law of the relevant jurisdiction permits or requires and subject to compliance with such further requirements, if any, as that law imposes.

10/9. The Conference amends Standing Orders as follows:

011A Marriage (1) The Methodist Church believes that marriage ~~is a gift of God and that it is God's intention that a marriage should be~~ *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 ~~one man and one woman~~ 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.***

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

011B Divorce, Remarriage, Marriage of Same Sex Couples and Respect for Conscience

~~(2)~~**(1)** Divorce *in a court of the land* does not of itself prevent a person being married in any Methodist place of worship.

~~(3)~~**(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.

~~(4)~~**(3) When:**

~~A~~ a minister **or**, probationer **is stationed in a new appointment;** or

it is proposed that a member ~~who is~~ **should become** authorised to conduct marriages

~~but who~~ **and he or she** 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~~ **the person concerned shall participate in a pastoral conversation on the matter with the District Chair and the Superintendent of the relevant Circuit (if he or she is not the Superintendent). Every effort shall be made to ensure that no individual is placed under any pressure to act against the dictates of conscience.**

(4) Whether or not the law of the relevant jurisdiction requires that Methodist premises must be registered for same-sex marriages before such marriages can take place, no same-sex marriage may take place on Methodist premises unless the managing trustees or, if none, the

trustees, have approved the use of the premises for that purpose and taken any steps which may be necessary under the applicable law.

(5) A minister, probationer or member who is asked to officiate at the marriage of a mixed-sex couple in Methodist premises which are appropriately registered for the purpose (where registration is required) but who is prevented from officiating for reasons of conscience shall refer the couple to an authorised colleague who is not so prevented.

(6) A minister, probationer or member who is asked to officiate at the marriage of a same-sex couple in Methodist premises which are appropriately registered for the purpose (where registration is required) but who is prevented from officiating for reasons of conscience shall notify the District Chair, who shall refer the couple to an authorised colleague who is not so prevented.

(7) A couple who seek to be married in Methodist premises which are not appropriately registered for the purpose shall be referred, if registration is required, to the persons responsible for the conduct of marriages at premises which are so registered, preferably in the same circuit. If the person receiving the request is not willing for reasons of conscience to make such a reference, he or she shall so inform the District Chair, who shall make the reference in that person's place.

(8) No minister, probationer or member may agree to conduct a same-sex wedding without first notifying the District Chair.

(9) The managing trustees or, if none, the trustees of any Methodist premises which are registered for the solemnisation of the marriage of same-sex couples shall ensure that the District Chair is notified of such registration.

~~(5)~~**(10)** 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, **officer** or member of any duty in respect of their proposed marriage shall be entertained on such a ground. No minister, probationer, **officer** 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.