

29. Marriage and Relationships Task Group

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Resolutions	See end of report.

Summary of content and impact

Subject and aims	To inform the Conference on the work and recommendations of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group.
Main points	<p>The Marriage and Relationships Task Group was established in 2014 to oversee the Connexion's reflections on matters of marriage and relationships.</p> <p>This report sets out the considerations of the Task Group, in particular the question of whether or not the 1992 Statement on <i>A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage</i> should be updated; and whether to revisit the question of embarking upon a process of revising the Methodist Church's definition of marriage.</p>
Background context and relevant documents (with function)	<p>2014 Conference report Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships</p> <p>Notice of Motion 2015/219 (Cohabitation)</p> <p>A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path: The Nature of Authority and the Place of the Bible, 1998</p> <p>Living with Contradictory Convictions 2006 Conference Statement on <i>A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage</i> 1992,</p> <p><i>1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality</i> <i>1996 Pilgrimage of Faith report, and its review in 2006</i> <i>1998 Christian Preparation for Marriage</i> <i>2000 Interfaith Marriages</i> <i>2002 Marriage in the Methodist Church</i> <i>2005 Domestic Violence Report</i> <i>2014 Marriage and Civil Partnerships</i></p>
Consultations	<p>Faith and Order Committee</p> <p>Ecumenical Partners</p> <p>Feedback from Districts on the progress of conversations across the Connexion</p>

Impact	Faith and Order	Faith and Order Committee involvement will be essential to ensure there is sufficient consideration of the breadth of scriptural and theological reflection. The Faith and Order Committee was invited to comment on three questions provided by the Task Group. The published comments reflect some initial discussion by the Committee, rather than constituting a final and considered view.
	Financial	Budget to support the work of a task group, development of and consultations on an updated Statement.
	Legal including impact on other jurisdictions	Ensuring that legal issues related to marriage legislation is duly considered
	Wider connexional	Further discussions to take place in Districts, Circuits and Local Churches, including consultations on an updated Statement.
	External (eg ecumenical)	Discussions with ecumenical partners and world church partners

1. Introduction and Context

1.1 The Task

- 1.1.1 The 2014 Conference recognised with gratitude that, over the years since the debate on human sexuality at the 1993 Conference, God's grace has been at work in the hearts and minds of the Methodist people to enable the Church to hold together in the bond of unity. It urged the Methodist people, under the guidance of the Spirit, to engage with each other honestly, prayerfully and graciously in a process of deep reflection and discernment about the issues which this report raises.
- 1.1.2 An important aspect of the reflections has been that the whole Church has been engaged in **conversation**, rather than consultation. The primary purpose has been to listen to each other rather than to answer specific questions.
- 1.1.3 The Conference established the Marriage and Relationships Task Group to:
- support the process of engagement using the resources on *Living with Contradictory Convictions: report and study guide (2006)* and *A Lamp to my Feet and Light to my Path: The Nature of Authority and the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church (1998)*;
 - consider whether or not the *1992 Statement on A Christian Understanding of Family Life, The Single Person and Marriage* should be updated; and

- consider whether to revisit the question of embarking upon a process of revising the Methodist Church's definition of marriage.

1.1.4 The resolutions that define the remit of the Task Group (**40/2** and **40/4**) are set out in **Appendix 1** of this report.

1.1.5 Additionally, the 2014 Conference tasked the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee, in consultation with the Marriage and Relationships Task Group, to consider providing a definition of homophobia including guidance on what is and is not to be considered homophobia in the context of church life. (See resolution **40/3** in **Appendix 1**.) The EDI Committee and the Marriage and Relationships Task Group formed a joint working group to develop this work.

1.2 Background

1.2.1 The 2013 Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships conducted a consultation on the question of how the Methodist Church should respond to changes in legislation allowing (in England, Wales and Scotland) the solemnisation of the marriage of same sex couples. Through that consultation it was clear that the Methodist people continue to hold contradictory convictions on matter of sexuality, relationships and marriage; these were not by any means limited to the question of the marriage of same sex couples. The Working Party concluded that there was no clear mind as to whether or not the Methodist Church should 'opt-in' to the solemnisation of the marriage of same sex couples. These contradictory convictions, although strongly held, were often not subject to discussion in church life. Whatever the ultimate decision, there would continue to be people who hold different views to each other.

1.2.2 There was a pastoral imperative to encourage the Methodist people to reflect and discuss these matters, to learn from each other and discern how we can live with these contradictory convictions.

1.3 Scripture as the context for discussions

The engagement and reflection on these matters needed to be in accordance with Methodist understanding of scriptural interpretation and reflection. Clause 4 of the Deed of Union states: "The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice." Therefore an important resource identified by the former Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships was the Conference report and study guide from 1998: *A Lamp to my Feet and Light to my Path: The Nature of Authority and the Place of the Bible*. The report affirms the primacy of scripture, interpreted through the lenses of tradition, experience and reason. Prayerful consideration of scripture in this way may lead us to varied and sometimes contradictory conclusions about what the Bible has to say to us today. Methodism's commitment to conferring together reminds us that we need each other to discern the mind of Christ. The Task Group sought to model this in our deliberations.

1.4 Living with Contradictory Convictions

1.4.1 The Task Group recognised that the Methodist people continue to live with contradictory convictions, but remain committed to work together, as members of the Body of Christ, to listen and discuss prayerfully and to try to resolve differences, and not passively 'agree to disagree'. However, some issues may remain matters of disagreement.

1.4.2 The Task Group has been guided in its work by the 2006 Methodist Conference Report *Living with Contradictory Convictions* which set out how the Church lives with, and has tried to resolve,

contradictory convictions, considering Scripture in the light of tradition, experience and reason. The report encouraged reflection on the theological implications of being a Church that must live with or contend with mutually contradictory convictions. The Church has dealt with many issues in the past that have caused fundamental differences of view, or even division. Yet we are called into unity. Sometimes these differences of view have been for theological reasons, and sometimes they have been in relation to pastoral issues or ethical questions. Often it has been possible for the Church to reach a settled view, for example with regards to sexism and racism. (Whilst it is acknowledged there is a need for ongoing work to eliminate sexism and racism, the Methodist Church's settled view is that they are unacceptable.) At other times the Church has decided to continue to live with differences in our convictions. For example, there is a wide range of views within the Church on matters such as alcohol, pacifism and financial ethics.

- 1.4.3 It is important to acknowledge that, in the area of human sexuality, there is much the Methodist people agree on. For instance the Methodist Conference has affirmed that human sexuality is God's gift and has ruled 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. [The 1993 Conference resolutions on human sexuality are set out at Appendix 4 of this report.] But there are also matters where there is a wide range of views amongst the Methodist people, and it remains unclear, at this point, whether the Church can, or even should, try to express a common view. As with the Methodist Church's settled view on the marriage of persons previously divorced, there are key issues of conscience and appropriate pastoral responses to consider.

1.5 A model statement on Living with Contradictory Convictions

- 1.5.1 The Task Group members held diverse views on the matters under consideration and have held good discussions despite holding contradictory convictions. The Task Group prepared and issued the following model statement to help the Methodist people make clear their commitment to good conferring on matters of contradictory convictions:

Conferring on Matters where we hold Contradictory Convictions

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

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

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

Therefore, we resolve:

To engage with each other openly, honestly, prayerfully and graciously

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

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

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

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

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

- 1.5.2 **The Task Group recommends that the model statement *Conferring on Matters where we hold Contradictory Convictions*, be commended to the Methodist people as the basis upon which discussions should be held.**

2. Work Undertaken

The Task Group organised its work and the joint work with the EDI Committee as follows:

2.1 Guidance on Homophobia

- To produce Homophobia Definition and Guidance [Resolution 40/3 and 40/4 (b) (vii)]

- 2.1.1 This resource was produced by the Equality Diversity and Inclusion Committee, in consultation with the Marriage and Relationships Task Group. A copy was provided as part of the facilitation resources (see 2.2 below). The definition of what is and is not homophobia is provided below (see 2.1.2 and 2.1.3). This definition is available on the Methodist Church website along with guidance and short case studies. The definition and guidance is designed to promote respectful discussion.

2.1.2 Definition

Taking into consideration the Methodist Church's history, our context and our reading of Scripture:

Homophobia is any statement, policy or action which denies the image of God in another person due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation; which is, treating someone in a discriminatory manner because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

Homophobic attitudes, words, and behaviours are inconsistent with the nature of Christian conduct and a violation of the worth and dignity of all people.

Homophobia can be experienced in a number of ways, including:

- physical violence or emotional or psychological abuse, including the threat of or incitement to such behaviour (which may also be deemed hate crimes in law)
- applying stereotypes and assumptions to people based on their sexual orientation
- using language that is hostile, hurtful or offensive in its intent
- abusive or coercive 'spiritual practices' (ie demanding or requiring repentance or participation in healing or other types of service).

2.1.3 What Homophobia is not

Having defined what we believe homophobia to be, it is important that we also confirm what it is not. As a Church we would want to affirm that it is not homophobic to:

- disagree on matters of scriptural interpretation or to hold and express a view that same sex activity is wrong (provided that is not repeatedly targeted at an individual because of their sexual orientation).
- have lots of questions to ask; although the boundaries of personal space should be respected
- ‘get the language wrong’ when talking about sexual orientation; it is more important to speak honestly and respectfully about our feelings

2.1.4 The Task Group invites the Conference to thank the EDI Committee for the definition and guidance on homophobia set out in paragraphs 2.1.2 and 2.1.3 and directs that the definition be included within the guidance section of the *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*.

2.1.5 The Task Group further recommends that the Methodist Council in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee consider and make recommendations to the 2017 Conference on the question of whether a Standing Order would be appropriate to clarify that homophobia is contrary to the discipline of the Methodist Church.

2.2 Resourcing and enabling engagement and reflection across the Connexion

The bullet points below are the resolutions from 2014 that refer to the Task Group’s role in enabling and resourcing engagement and reflection across the Connexion.

- To enable engagement and reflection across the Connexion [Resolution 40/2 and Resolution 40/4 (b) (i and ii)]
 - To explore in depth, the implications arising from the divergence between the Methodist Church’s teaching on marriage and the legal definition and concept of marriage now applying in England, Wales and Scotland. [Resolution 40/4 (b) (iii)]
 - To consider and, as necessary, identify materials relating to cohabitation and a range of issues identified [Resolution 40/4 (b) (v and vi)]
 - To consider the key issues and proposals for any further work to be done, and including recommendations upon: whether the 1992 Conference Statement *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* should be updated; and whether to revisit the question of embarking upon a process of revising the Methodist Church’s definition of marriage. [Resolution 40/4 (b) (x)]
- a) The first three of the 4 points (above) are largely reported under section 3, headed ‘Considerations’, below, and relate to the Task Group’s own considerations. However, the Task Group came to the view that these considerations should be informed by the reflections and conversations across the Connexion. The 2014 Conference encouraged the Methodist people to reflect on matters relating to marriage and relationships and two existing resources (*Living with Contradictory Convictions*, and *A Lamp to my Feet and Light to my Path: The Nature of Authority and the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church*) were recommended as the context for those reflections.
- b) The Chair of the Task Group presented at the Connexional Leaders’ Forum in January 2015 and agreed with District Chairs the timetable and arrangements for managing the conversations. A guidance note was sent to all Districts on 23 March, setting out the timetable and arrangements for discussions and feedback, and a list of resources available on the Methodist Church website. The guidance note was reissued in August and October.

- c) Resources made available via the Methodist Church website prior to March 2015 included:
- i) *Living with Contradictory Convictions*, Conference report and Study Guide, 2006
 - ii) *A Lamp to my Feet and Light to my Path: The Nature of Authority and the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church, 1998*
 - iii) *A Methodist Statement on a Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage, 1992*
 - iv) resources produced by the Methodist Church of Southern Africa for its discussions on Christians and Same-Sex Relationships in 2003
 - v) resources to support marriage and relationships discussions produced by ecumenical partners
- d) Further resources were researched, developed and/or produced by the Task Group and made available on the Methodist Church website between June and October 2015, including:
- i) Worship resources to encourage and enable discussions, based on the *Living with Contradictory Convictions* Conference report and Study Guide; developed in partnership with *ROOTS for Churches*
 - ii) A model statement to support conversations where there are differing convictions (see section 1.5 above)
 - iii) *The Solemnisation of Christian Marriage in Methodism*, an extract from *Born in Song: Methodist Worship in Britain*, by the Revd Dr David M Chapman
 - iv) Timeline on the History of Marriage in Methodism
 - v) Vodcasts: the Revd Samuel E McBratney and the Revd D Paul C Smith talk about Marriage and Relationships from different perspectives.
- e) Workshop discussions were held at the 2015 Conference. Presentations from the workshops were published on the Methodist Church website.
- f) All Districts were invited to identify people who would enable and facilitate discussions across their District. A facilitation training weekend was held on 2-3 October 2015, with representatives from all but two Districts in attendance. Those attending the event were provided with a toolkit of additional resources to help support local conversations. These resources were made available to the other two Districts, who made alternative arrangements to ensure that facilitated conversations could take place within their Districts.
- g) In addition to any local discussions organised by individual Circuits and Local Churches, each District put in place arrangements for facilitated discussions. The resources from the facilitation training weekend were available to all Districts and to local conversations. In addition to the resources mentioned in paragraphs c), d) and e) above, the following resources were made available:
- *Homophobia Definition and Guidance* (see 2.1 above)
 - *Two Perspectives* (conservative and progressive Christian perspectives on same sex relationships) the Revd D Paul C Smith and the Revd Samuel E McBratney
 - Biblical authority activity sheet and sand theology context handout (to be used together)

- Presentation, quiz and notes on the History of Marriage by the Revd Dr David M Chapman and the Revd Dr Sheryl Anderson
- Paper by the Revd Dr Sheryl Anderson: *Towards a theology of marriage in the 21st century*
- Resources produced by the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network to help facilitators to organise good group discussions

These resources (c, d, e, and g above) are available on the Methodist Church website at www.methodist.org.uk/talkingofmarriageandrelationships

- h) The 2014 Conference [40/4 (b) (v)] directed the Task Group to develop resources to help people to explore the teaching and practice of the Church in relation to cohabitation, drawing as appropriate upon the theological material already produced by the Faith and Order Committee.

The 2015 Conference, on consideration of Notice of Motion 2015/219 (see Appendix 2), directed the Task Group and the Faith and Order Committee to ensure that, should the Conference decide to revisit the question of embarking upon a process of revising the Methodist Church's definition of marriage, consideration of cohabitation should form part of this process. The Task Group, therefore, has given extensive consideration to the issue of cohabitation and concludes that it cannot be adequately considered in isolation from the wider discussions on marriage and relationships (see Section 3.2.1 below).

2.3 Welcoming Same Sex Couples and their Families

- To find ways to encourage Local Churches to welcome same sex couples and their families and to enable their participation in the life and worship of the Church. [Resolution 40/4 (b) (iv)]

2.3.1 Independently of the Task Group's work, the Connexional Team has developed the *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit*. Within the toolkit there is a module on *Sexual Orientation*. The Task Group asked the Connexional Team to develop an additional learning resource on *Welcoming Same Sex Couples and their Families*. Both of these modules provide context, scriptural resources, case studies and guidance.

2.3.2 **The Task Group commends the module on *Welcoming Same Sex Couples and their Families*, which is part of the *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit*, as a valuable resource.**

2.4 Shared Premises

- To consider the implications of the same sex marriage legislation for shared buildings not held on Methodist Trusts and for those working in wider ecumenical contexts [Resolution 40/4 (b) (viii)]

2.4.1 The Conference will note that in 2015 the Task Group clarified that the legislation requires all denominations sharing church premises to 'opt in' before any shared premises can be used for same sex marriage, regardless of the ownership of the premises. Discussions with ecumenical partners confirmed that they recognised the need for time for discussions to be held and that ultimately a decision had to be made by the Methodist Conference. However the Task Group is aware of at least two local Methodist churches sharing premises with a church that wishes to hold same sex marriages on the premises. This is causing difficulty for at least one local Methodist church.

2.4.2 Consideration has been given by the Task Group to the question of whether the Conference could 'opt in' to the legislation for the purposes of allowing other sharing denominations to hold

same sex marriages on premises, where such premises are not Methodist premises. There was much discussion around this issue and whilst it would be possible for the Conference to 'opt in' with the limitation being that it was only for non-Methodist premises, the task group concluded such an action at this stage could be viewed as pre-empting any discussions to be held on the definition of marriage.

2.5 Terminology in Standing Orders

- To consider any actions necessary relating to any amendments to Standing Orders in relation to decisions of the previous working party (relating to terminology around 'spouse') [Resolution 40/4 (b) (ix)]
- 2.5.1 The Task Group report to the 2015 Conference clarified that there was no need to amend Standing Orders regarding spouse entitlement under pension provisions as legislation amended this without any need for Standing Order amendments.
- 2.5.2 The references in SO 364(1) to spouse were removed by the Conference in 2015 to be replaced by "any member of their immediate household" as recommended by the Connexional Allowances Committee.
- 2.5.3 The Conference will note that in SOs 364(1)(vii) and 805(3)(b) reference is made to the right of a "widow" or "widower" to apply for assistance from the Fund for the Support and Presbyters and Deacons. The task group is of the view that until the Conference has made a decision on whether or not it wants to amend the definition of marriage, the Connexional Allowances Committee is bound to continue to interpret reference to "widow" or "widower" only to be in respect of opposite sex marriages. The Task Group is however aware that the question as to who requires support from the Fund for the Support of Presbyters and Deacons extends beyond marriage, to those in civil partnerships and other close family relationships. The Task Group is informed that the Connexional Allowances Committee is aware of this issue and the need to review SO 364(1)(vii).
- 2.5.4 It is for the Methodist Ministers Housing Society to consider whether or not it wishes to amend its rules on entitlement to include same sex marriages and/or other relationships.
- 2.5.5 Standing Order 775 and 803(2) refers to married couples for the purposes of stationing and provision of a manse when both ministers are being stationed in the active work. The Task Group was of the view that the Standing Orders could not be amended to have a meaning other than the definition of marriage in SO 011A. The Task Group considers it necessary for the Conference to first to conclude whether or not it wishes to redefine the definition of marriage in SO 011A. Only after such consideration could more thought be given to SO 775 and 803(2) and whether the Standing Orders should be extended to include same sex marriage and also other relationships.

3. The Task Group's Considerations

3.1 Divergence between the Methodist and Legal Definitions of Marriage

- To explore in depth, the implications arising from the divergence between the Methodist Church's teaching on marriage and the legal definition and concept of marriage now applying in England, Wales and Scotland. [Resolution 40/4 (b) (iii)]

3.1.1 Missional Challenges

The Task Group discussed and reflected on the missional challenges and opportunities of either revisiting or not revisiting the definition of marriage. This reflection has also been informed by feedback from the workshops held at the 2015 Conference and the local conversations within Districts (see section 3.3 below) in 2015/16. The reflections and the feedback fell broadly into the following two categories:

a) The relationship between the Church and wider society

- i) Some felt that if the Church opted into the marriage of same sex couples it could damage its prophetic and counter-cultural role by giving in to changes in society. Other people felt that, by not opting into same sex marriage, the Church appears out of touch with society and reality, and is failing to see where God may be speaking to us through society. A wide range of people consider that revisiting our definition of marriage would be an opportunity to speak to society about faithfulness in relationships, or that talking about 'complex issues' in an open and mature way means that the wider community may be more willing to listen to the Church in general. Some people are looking to the Church for clear answers, others are attracted by the ability to deal with ethical issues in a mature way; these can both be seen as faithfully representing God's love in the Church.
- ii) For some, revisiting the definition of marriage would show an openness of mind and potentially create an opportunity to reconcile the Church with those it has already lost. It is felt by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Christians, in particular, but others too, that it is currently difficult to hold a credible witness to the LGBT community because of the Church (and even God) being perceived as having rejected LGBT people.

b) Pastoral situations requiring careful consideration

- i) Revisiting the definition would help the church on its *Pilgrimage of Faith* on human sexuality, to recognise, celebrate and affirm LGBT Methodists, and in particular those who have chosen faithful relationships. The current situation leaves many same sex couples within the church, and most same sex couples outside the church, and their families and friends, continuing to feel alienated, unloved and unaccepted by the Methodist Church. The current definition is perceived by LGBT Christians as implying they are 'lesser persons', and subject to the decisions of others. A sense of affirmation is also important to the families and friends of LGBT people. These are recognised as pastoral priorities.
- ii) Revisiting the definition of marriage may also create an opportunity to consider not only matters for same sex couples, but wider issues such as cultural patterns and attitudes to marriage. The current definition (as set out in SO 011A) states that 'marriage is a gift of God', and some people have questioned what this says to them as single people about how they are valued.
- iii) Alongside this, the group recognises the feelings of alienation and distress expressed by those who feel that any revision to the definition of marriage damages how they understand their own marriage. Some may feel that the Church has abandoned its traditional principles, thereby affecting their own relationship with the church itself. Any future process will need to be alert to these concerns and offer appropriate pastoral responses to those who are deeply affected.

- iv) There are a wide range of reasons why people cohabit but do not marry, ranging from how they feel about previous experience of marriage (either their own, or of family members), through consideration for how other family members may feel (eg how their children may feel if they remarry), to seeing faithful cohabitation as an alternative to, or step on the road towards marriage. The Church has an existing pastoral relationship with people in this wide range of situations. Further consideration of the definition of marriage or the Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* may help the Methodist Church to evaluate how it supports those living faithfully together, but for whom marriage is a difficult option.

3.1.2 The Tradition and Experience of the Church

- a) The Task Group consulted the Faith and Order Committee on the question of the 'role of the tradition and experience of the Church where its values, teachings and practice in regards to marriage are not shared with surrounding society'. The Committee felt that the assumption in the original recommendation implied a rather static understanding of what tradition is, and that the interrelationship between tradition, culture and experience needed further reflection. All three concepts warrant critique. The Committee noted that there is a variety of traditions, and a variety of experiences.
- b) The original recommendation further suggested that society and church are two different things, yet the church comprises people who live in society. Language that implies a false dichotomy between church and society is unhelpful. There is a danger of those who are living and wrestling with some of these issues being told that they are not the Church. Some theological reflection on living with the dissonance between the teaching of the Church and what is happening in people's lives may help unpack some of these issues.
- c) The Task Group identified and provided resources about the historic role of the Methodist Church in the solemnisation of marriage, in order to assist reflection and discussion. For example, these included a chapter on the *History of the Solemnisation of Marriage in Methodism*, from the Revd Dr David Chapman's book *Born in Song* and a timeline illustrating key points from the chapter and from past Conference reports. Examining the history of Methodism it is possible to see that Methodist thinking around marriage, relationships and single life has been considered many times in Methodist history. In his lifetime, John Wesley revised his published thoughts on marriage at least twice, reflecting his experience, pastoral concerns and theological reflection. Over the years changes in practice and understanding were made due to changes in intellectual or theological reflection, and often changes were made for pastoral reasons. Examples include:
- i) Whilst some things about our stated understanding of Christian marriage (eg monogamy) have not changed, the reasons for marriage have been reconsidered on several occasions. The Book of Common Prayer (used as the basis for the earliest of Methodist marriage orders) included Augustine's 'reasons for marriage':
- First, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.
 - Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.
 - Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.

- ii) However, the Wesleyan Methodists removed the second reason in 1846 (although it was briefly reinstated after 1882) and the Primitive Methodists removed all three reasons in 1860. In 1890 the Primitive Methodists reinstated the third reason (for the mutual society, help and comfort ...) along with a new reason 'that children might enjoy the privileges of family life'.
- iii) In 1903 the Bible Christian Church did not include Augustine's reasons, but, reflecting social changes in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century asserted that 'the divine institution of marriage in the time of man's purity and innocence (is) for the comfort and help of man, and that families might be trained up in obedience and love, wisdom and piety'.
- iv) The Book of Offices of 1936 states that marriage was ordained for 'mutual society, help and comfort' and 'that children might be brought up in the knowledge and love of God and to the praise of His holy name'. In 1975 the Methodist Church included the words 'marriage, when blessed with the gift of children, is God's chosen way for the continuance of mankind', as an option. Since 1999 the marriage service has included the words 'Through such marriage, children may be nurtured, family strengthened and human society enriched'.
- v) The giving of rings was purposefully not included from John Wesley's first Methodist marriage order (prepared for North America) in 1784 as it was considered unnecessary and sacramental and, therefore, not consistent with Methodist understandings of what is and is not sacramental. However, it was reinstated by Wesleyan Methodists in 1846 because people felt strongly connected to it as a tradition.
- vi) There was even a brief period where the Wesleyans did not license chapels for marriage at all.
- vii) The United Methodist Free Church (of Great Britain) introduced egalitarian language in relation to gender in 1913. This partly reflected the changing role of women in society, but still considerably predated society's view of equality between men and women.
- d) Since the 1992 Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* was produced, there have been several reports from the Methodist Conference and resolutions on Human Sexuality, including the 1993 Conference Resolutions on Human Sexuality, the resolutions of the 2006 Conference that stated that there is no reason, per se, why a Methodist may not enter a civil partnership, and those in 2014 that applied the same principle to a legally formed same sex marriage. Standing Order 011A is itself an interpretation of the definition contained in the Statement.

3.1.3 Arguments for and against the continued involvement of the Methodist Church in the solemnisation of marriage

- a) A major consideration here was the perception that there is a dependence on the legal definition, which, in turn, can give an impression that the State has changed the definition of marriage entirely. This is, in fact, not the case (see also 3.6.2 below). The law no longer limits marriage to 'one man and one woman', but the marriage of opposite sex couples and same sex couples is under different legislation. The marriage of opposite sex couples,

including the registration of premises in England and Wales and authorised persons in Scotland, remains regulated by the *Marriage Act 1949*; and the marriage of same sex couples, including the registration of premises in England and Wales and authorised persons in Scotland, is regulated by the *Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013* and the *Marriage and Civil Partnerships (Scotland) Act 2015*.

- b) In considering the Church's role in the solemnisation of marriage, the Task Group also considered questions such as:
- i) To what extent is marriage a matter of law, religion, social custom or a union of two people through mutual love?
 - ii) What should constitute marriage?
 - iii) Is there such a thing as 'Christian marriage' or is it more accurately a Christian definition of marriage, which the Church affirms/solemnises, but which God creates?
- c) As part of the Task Group's own considerations it looked at the Church's role in the solemnisation of marriage. At one extreme, it could be argued that marriage is about faithful relationships, not religious rites or law. That could provide an argument against both Church and state having any involvement in marriage; but it is unlikely that the state would withdraw from marriage, as it would be both politically and practically difficult to do so. Ceasing to solemnise marriage would have practical advantages for the Church: there would be no need to opt into same sex marriage, or any other point of perceived or actual divergence between Church and state. This would therefore be administratively simple; but overlooks the pastoral and missional role of the Church in society. In any case, there could still remain a divergence between what the Church currently accepts as Christian marriage, based on sexual orientation. It is for the Church to consider to what extent discontinuation of the solemnisation of marriage would impact on the mission and pastoral ministry of the Church. The Church has an incarnational role, showing God's love and presence in the world, which must include valuing and recognising those landmark points in people's lives, such as marriage. It is, however, up to the Local Church to decide whether or not to register the church premises for marriages under the *Marriage Act 1949*.
- d) Considerations of the Faith and Order Committee
- In its discussion the Committee noted the following points:
- i) This question arose out of the previous consultation where some argued that the Church should not be involved in the solemnisation of marriage but in blessings.
 - ii) In its response to the government's bill (before the consultation) the Methodist Church aligned itself with the argument that the Church should be involved.
 - iii) Methodism does not exist in a vacuum and if we were to withdraw this may put us out of step with our ecumenical partners and signify a withdrawal from the public space. However it is unlikely that there would be a common ecumenical response, and we should acknowledge the different legal situation of the Church of England.
 - iv) There have been persisting questions about whether the solemnisation of marriages is the business of the Methodist Church (there are ecclesiological questions about the nature and purpose of the Church).
 - v) There has been diversity in Methodist and Christian tradition in relation to issues of marriage, blessing and solemnisation of marriage.

- vi) It is important to consider our relationship with other members of the worldwide Methodist family, and whether these might be impacted if we were no longer involved in the solemnisation of marriage.
- vii) A declining number of marriages take place in Methodist churches, yet some people approach the Church because they 'want to do something that involves God'. Would a blessing meet this need?

3.2 Cohabitation and Other Considerations

3.2.1 Cohabitation

As mentioned in section 2.2 (h) above, the 2015 Conference, in adopting Notice of Motion 2015/219 directed the Task Group and the Faith and Order Committee to ensure that, should the Conference decide to revisit the question of embarking upon a process of revising the Methodist Church's definition of marriage, consideration of cohabitation should form part of this process. This is a variation to the original resolution (40/4 (b) (v) from 2014).

The Task Group considered that the core guidance for consideration of matters relating to cohabitation remains the 1992 Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*. However, whilst valuing much of the Statement, the Task Group considers that it should be updated, or, at the very least, that pastoral and policy guidance be created.

Based on their own reflections and the feedback received from conversations across the Connexion, a number of questions arise in respect of cohabitation, which would benefit from further discussion and theological reflection. These include:

- a) What constitutes marriage?
- b) When does marriage begin?
- c) Is cohabitation a form of marriage?
- d) Is there a need for an outward ceremony?
- e) How can we affirm fidelity and monogamy in relationships that may not be legally or institutionally formed?
- f) Why do some people choose to cohabit rather than marry?
- g) Why do some people live together for a period and then choose to marry?
- h) Why do some people seek civil partnership rather than marriage? This last point also acknowledges a trend in society whereby some opposite sex couples wish the law to be changed to allow the opportunity for civil partnership to be extended to them.

3.2.2 Broader questions about our teaching and practice

The 2014 Conference resolved [40/4 (b) (vi)] that the Task Group consider a range of other issues and to investigate what material is already available or could, within the financial and personnel resources available, be produced in order to encourage wider discussions about marriage and other relationships. Therefore, the Task Group has identified the following resources and issues:

a) Divorce, Lifelong Union

In addition to the Task Group's considerations; at section 3.5.8 below, the 1992 Statement, subsequent reports and resolutions (as set out in section 3.5.2 below) should be commended for further discussion, and supported through pastoral and policy guidance. The Task Group noted that a significant proportion of marriages in the Methodist Church involve at least one person who has been divorced; and that opposite

sex marriages are already formed in a variety of circumstances, including first time marriage, marriage of divorced persons, civil marriages, marriages in other denominations, marriages in other jurisdictions (including those that have less formal institutions and/or same sex marriage), and mixed faith marriages. This should be recognised in the pastoral guidance.

b) Transgender Issues regarding one man and one woman

- i) There is little or no scriptural material on gender identity. However, the *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Toolkit* provides information and guidance around transgender status as part of the materials on *Gender*, and is commended to the Connexion for study. The former Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships consulted the Gender Stakeholder Forum (now superseded by the EDI Committee), who advised that “Provision is a must for transgender and intersex state persons; the physiological reality is that gender is significantly more complex than male and female”. Furthermore, the law does not permit discrimination against people who have undergone gender reassignment, and there are no exemptions in law for religious organisations.
- ii) A reality is that the marriage of transgender people in church may be already be happening, because the authorised person and celebrant would probably not know a person’s gender status other than what is on the legal documents. If the Task Group recommends that the definition of marriage be revisited and if that revisiting recommends removing or widening statements around gender, then the issue of transgender in relation to the marriage definition would be irrelevant – although there would continue to be pastoral responsibilities.
- iii) The Task Group recommends that a simple guide to transgender issues and status be drafted and suggests this might best be done by the EDI Committee under the direction of the Methodist Council.

The Task Group consulted the EDI Committee on the matter of transgender and intersex status. The Committee has advised that any work on transgender should only be undertaken on the principle of including transgender people in the considerations, and with adequate resourcing and pastoral preparation.

c) Marriage Preparation

- i) The 1998 Report, *Preparing for Christian Marriage*, continues to be commended to the Connexion. However, an updated Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* and/or pastoral and policy guidance should include updated guidance on marriage preparation.
- ii) Even if the Church maintains its current definition and practice, there are same sex couples who are married or who will marry. How is the Church supporting them with an appropriate pastoral response? The Task Group was mindful that the current resources, whilst adaptable to provide guidance for same sex couples, do not explicitly do so. The pastoral and policy guidance should, therefore, include a review of how adequately the existing resources deal with issues of lifelong union and marriage for same sex couples.
- iii) The Task Group was disappointed to discover that ecumenical marriage preparation resources previously recommended (in the 1998 report) were no longer available, and that many of the resources published by other sources are either dated or not

available free of charge. General marriage preparation resources are available from a variety of other Christian sources. It may be appropriate to consider whether Methodist resources are necessary now (eg if the 1992 Statement is not updated) or at a later date (eg if the Statement is updated). Whilst it may be assumed that ministers and others involved make use of good material that suits their contexts we suggest that the Methodist Council may wish to consider whether specific Methodist resources could be helpful after any updating of the Statement has taken place

- iv) **The Task Group recommends that the Conference directs the Methodist Council to consider whether there is a need for new marriage preparation resources and to direct the Connexional Team to undertake such work if necessary.**

d) **Marriage and Children**

There is a great deal in the 1992 Statement that remains a valuable resource, in particular its recognition of the diversity of modern family life. The Task Group considered that there are some areas that require additional attention, particularly concerning societal changes in relation to adoption, fostering, and surrogacy. The Statement provides a pastorally sensitive approach to the complexities of modern family life. The baptism of the children of unmarried parents is a good example of where the Church is able to provide a pastoral response, and missional opportunities, where its principles and ideals and the realities of people's lives appear to be in conflict.

e) **Other issues**

- i) The Task Group was asked to consider several other issues raised in Section 101 of the previous report, namely: abusive relationships; the lower status of women and girls; pornography and the sexualisation of young people; and female genital mutilation (FGM). These would benefit from being included in an updated Statement and/or pastoral and policy guidance for the 1992 Statement.
- ii) In respect of abusive relationships, attention is drawn to the 2005 Conference Report on Domestic Violence.
- iii) The matter of pornography is under consideration by a separate working group, which has provided the following briefing statement regarding Notice of Motion 2015/215 and the work of the Working Group on Pornography.

Following on from the report to the Conference from 3Generate 2014, the 2015 Conference directed the Council to set up a working group to produce a statement on the issue of pornography. However, at the initial meeting on 28 January, this group felt that a short report would prove more helpful than a statement – providing flexibility, signposting to helpful resources (where they exist) and being more 'future-proof' with regards to changes in technology etc that affect the debate. The group also felt that this was an extremely complex issue and could not be looked at in isolation but needed to be considered within the context of healthy sexual relationships, sex and relationships education and body confidence.

To begin with the working group has started to map existing resources dealing with these issues and will also be undertaking some theological thinking on the subject. As part of its Terms of Reference, the group has been directed to, "Produce appropriate discussion material aimed at enabling different age groups to understand the realities and challenges of pornography and resourcing informed and reflective conversation on these issues". The group feels that the phrase, "understand the realities and challenges" is key and, to progress with this, it is

looking to produce an online questionnaire, seeking to answer the following question: "Does the Church have a role in helping people to learn about healthy sexual relationships? If so, how effectively does it do this?"

The Marriage and Relationships Task Group has noted this position and (if the Conference determines that the 1992 Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* should be updated), encourages co-operation between the Working Group on Pornography and the proposed new working group who will consider the updating of the 1992 Statement and/or any pastoral guidance on the Statement.

- iv) In terms of 'the status of women and girls' and 'female genital mutilation' (FGM), the Task Group notes two resources that are available to the Connexion: *The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit module on Gender Equality*, and the *Home Office Select Committee Report on FGM (July 2014)*. The latter is available from the UK Parliament website.

3.2.3 The Task Group recommends that the Conference directs the Methodist Council to ensure that work is undertaken to identify the key issues for intersex or transgender people when being part of the Church.

3.3 Feedback from the conversations across the Connexion

3.3.1 Districts played a vital role in enabling and facilitating discussions, and co-ordinating feedback to the Task Group. It was important for not only the Task Group to receive feedback but for district and circuit leadership teams to hear the breadth of conversation within the discussions. Facilitation training was offered in October 2015, with 29 Districts/Synods identifying people to receive training as facilitators or enablers for local discussions. The remaining two Districts put alternative arrangements in place. All Districts/Synods provided opportunities for local discussions, and have provided feedback on the conversations.

3.3.2 Participation

- a) The Task Group was very pleased that over 8,000 people across the Connexion participated in conversations, although numbers as a percentage of membership varied considerably from District to District. Whilst few conversations detailed the socio-demographic profile of conversations, most Districts reported that participants were predominantly over 50, with a few young people present. The ethnic profile was reported as predominantly white, with the notable exception of London which was considerably more diverse. These participation rates are similar to the estimated profile of the membership of the Methodist Church. (NB – the Methodist Church does not have detailed records on the socio-demographic profile of members, but does have estimates based on limited data from the 2011 Church Census report.)
- b) Several facilitators reported being contacted by people who did not participate in conversations. There appeared to be two common reasons: because people did not want to be in an environment where there could be arguments; and because people felt the subject matter was too personal. This indicates that any further conversations need to ensure that the matter of 'safe space' is promoted before conversations begin.

- c) There were very few individual responses where people had not participated in conversations, and so had not taken the opportunity to listen to others and contribute their views to a conversation. It is noted that the range of views expressed in individual feedback reflects the range of feedback in the conversations.

3.3.3 Experience

- a) The feedback showed that those who participated in conversations have generally valued the experience, finding it good and useful. Conversations have overwhelmingly been reported as respectful, with a wide range of views both expressed and listened to, and a desire for further conversations. It is disappointing to note that there were some examples of disrespectful behaviour, but reassuring that these were rare and isolated incidents involving a few individuals.
- b) The purpose of the conversations was not to reach specific conclusions or decisions, but to participate in good conversations on matters where it was already known that people have differing views and contradictory convictions. From this point of view, the conversations do indicate that there has been good conferring on matters of contradictory convictions, and that people's views and convictions have been listened to with respect.

3.3.4 Views

- a) Given the wide range of views expressed in the consultation in 2013/14 by the previous Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships, it was anticipated that there would be a range of views and convictions in these conversations. This was, indeed, the case. Views did not necessarily coalesce within particular age groups or cultural groups (ie there was a range of views within each age group and within different ethnic and cultural identities).
- b) The Task Group has observed that, despite encouraging wider discussions, many of the conversations concentrated heavily on the matter of the marriage of same sex couples, thereby missing the opportunity to reflect on other issues. However, a wider range of topics was discussed in many of the other conversations across the Connexion.
- c) Whilst the range of views varied, and whilst some people felt strongly that the definition of marriage should not be revisited, most conversations indicated that the balance of views were towards revisiting the definition of marriage. However, the reasons for wanting to revisit the definition were themselves varied. Reasons to revisit the definition of marriage ranged from enabling the marriage of same sex couples, considering the nature and purpose of marriage in the present age, to revisiting the definition in order to affirm it.
- d) A selection of typical quotes from the feedback is included at Appendix 6.
- e) Contrary to some individual views that such conversations are a source of conflict and division, and despite some isolated reports of disrespectful behaviour, the conversations themselves were examples of how the Methodist people do confer well in situations where people have strongly held contradictory convictions.

3.3.5 Discussions at 3Generate

- a) Following 3Generate in November 2015 (the Methodist Children's and Youth Assembly), the first-ever age stream manifestos were published for the coming year. These documents highlight the priorities that each age stream would like the Church to focus on for the coming year.
- b) The 11 – 18s manifesto included the following priority:
“Discussions about same sex marriage: in particular reflecting on biblical perspectives and exploring the Church's understanding.”
- c) This recommendation resulted from a workshop that took place in the 11 – 18s stream, entitled *Same-Sex Marriage- I'm getting married in the morning?* This session explored the issue through scripture, tradition, reason and experience to help the young people to develop a considered Christian response.
- d) Also in the programme for the 2015 11 – 18s stream of 3Generate was a session entitled *Let's talk about sex...and relationships...*, looking at what young people thought they should be discussing in sex and relationships education (SRE) at school, when it should happen and what influence and involvement churches should have in developing the ways people learn about sex and relationships in schools, families and the Church.
- e) This session led to two recommendations:

Suggestion 1: We want the Church to equip, resource and train our youth workers and ministers to create safe spaces to talk about relationships and sex within them.
Suggestion 2: We want to encourage open discussions about sex inside and outside of marriage.
- f) An expanded briefing note on the 3Generate discussions is included at Appendix 6 to this report.

3.4 Ecumenical and World Church relationships

3.4.1 Marriage of same sex couples

- a) In relation to the matter of the marriage of same sex couples, the Task Group considered the situations and varying priorities of our ecumenical partners and world church partners.
- b) In Great Britain, most denominations have not 'opted in' to the marriage of same sex couples. The Baptist Union of Great Britain has made it clear that the appropriate decision-making body for Baptist churches is the local church. This is due to local churches having a greater independence, as opposed to the connexional nature of Methodism. The Baptist Union of Great Britain has not changed its definition of marriage, and has urged churches not to register for same sex marriages, although some individual Baptist churches have registered for the marriage of same sex couples.
- c) The United Reformed Church has described its current position as being almost at the end of a long process of agreeing that local churches should be allowed to discern for themselves whether to register and conduct same sex marriage and to do so if they so

discern. This fits with the URC's agreement made in 2007 to allow differing views on homosexuality to coexist in tension and with mutual respect. The question of marriage was determined by the URC not to be a doctrinal issue as there is no position defining marriage as between a man and a woman in the Basis of Union. The URC General Assembly will make a decision in July 2016.

- d) The Church of England, the Church in Wales and the Scottish Episcopal Church are actively engaged in discussions about the marriage of same sex couples. The Church of Scotland is discussing the position of ministers in same sex marriages in order to bring its legislation on ministers in same sex partnerships into line with civil law. Views of individuals on the marriage of same sex couples, and wider considerations about the nature and purpose of marriage, vary considerably within other denominations, as they do in Methodism.

3.4.2 Wider considerations

- a) There are differences from denomination to denomination, even in Great Britain, on the understandings of the purposes of marriage.
- b) The previous Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships consulted with World Church partners. This showed that there are differences of view between and with Churches on issues around marriage and relationships. There is a need to recognise in our own deliberations, and in discussions with other Methodist Churches, the varied context and priorities in different parts of the world and the range of views. This means being open about where and how issues facing this Connexion affect them, but also how their decisions and issues affect us.
- c) Within Methodism across the world, marriage takes place within different legal, social and cultural contexts. Some of our World Church partners are facing considerably different challenges and questions about the nature and purpose of marriage from within their own cultural contexts.
- d) These differences are held together in one church family.

3.5 The 1992 Statement

3.5.1 The Task Group considers that much of the 1992 Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* continues to provide an excellent resource. However, since the Conference Statement was adopted, several other reports have been produced and resolutions passed by the Conference (see below). It was felt that, at the very least, further guidance was needed to take account of these.

- 1992 Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*
- 1993 *Resolutions on Human Sexuality*
- 1996 *Pilgrimage of Faith report, and its review in 2006*
- 1998 *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path: The Nature of Authority and the Place of the Bible* (in respect of how it is used in discussions on marriage and relationships)
- 1998 *Christian Preparation for Marriage*
- 2000 *Interfaith Marriages*
- 2002 *Marriage in the Methodist Church*
- 2005 *Domestic Violence Report*

- 2006 *Living with Contradictory Convictions* (in respect of how it is used in discussions on marriage and relationships)
- 2014 *Marriage and Civil Partnerships*
- 2016 *Marriage and Relationships*

3.5.2 The Task Group consulted the Faith and Order Committee, who responded that there are some matters of language that need to be updated, and that the Committee would welcome a new Conference Statement. There are also specific areas such as the legal status of fostering and adoption that need updating, and some of the social contexts, such as civil partnerships and the marriage of same sex couples, were not anticipated in the 1992 Statement. These require reflection and attention. The Task Group considered that it would not be possible to provide a simple revision, and that the Statement would benefit from including guidance on its application.

3.5.3 Standing Order 011A states that “The Methodist Church believes that marriage is a gift of God and that it is God’s intention that a marriage should be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman ...”. However, The Task Group and the Faith and Order Committee both considered the 1992 Statement and noted that the Statement does not state a theological basis for the definition of marriage. (The definitions of marriage as they appear in the 1992 Statement and Standing Order 011A are set out in Appendix 3 to this report.)

3.5.4 An update of the Statement may require the revisiting of any definitions within it. It is important to make clear that a revisiting of a definition does not in itself imply a change or revision of such definitions, but may simply a restating in updated language.

3.6 The Definition of Marriage

3.6.1 The current definition of marriage in the Methodist Church is set out in paragraphs 48 to 50 of the 1992 Statement, and articulated in Standing Order 011A. These definitions are set out in Appendix 3 of this report.

3.6.2 Perceived dependence on the legal definition (see also 3.1.3 (a) above)

For the reasons set out in 3.1.4, above, the Task Group considered that there is no divergence of definitions, simply that the State has two definitions, one of which is consistent with the Methodist Church’s current definition. If the Church maintains its current understanding of marriage, it would not be inconsistent with the legal situation. If the Church considered it did wish to revisit the definition of marriage, and if that included the marriage of same sex couples, the Church’s definition could mirror the legal definitions (by having two definitions) or, as some denominations are considering, it could be one definition without reference to gender.

3.6.3 Standing Order 011A

The Task Group considered whether or SO 011A needed to be suspended if the definition of marriage was to be revisited. Firstly, the Task Group considered that suspending the Standing Order at this stage would be premature, as a revisiting of the definition of marriage may not lead to a change. Additionally, even if the Church did revisit the definition of marriage and, following consideration, if that led to a wish to ‘opt in’ to the marriage of same sex couples, the Church could do as the law does and operate separate definitions for the marriage of opposite sex couples and same sex couples. Therefore, SO 11A does not need to be suspended.

3.6.4 **Life Long Union**

- a) The current definition (in both the Statement and Standing Orders) states that marriage is a life-long union. However, a significant proportion of marriages conducted in the Methodist Church involve at least one person who is divorced and whose previous spouse is still alive. Arguably these two things are in conflict, especially as the definition also uses the text ‘the two shall become one flesh’ (Mark 10: 8), which is taken from Jesus’s teaching, apparently precluding divorce. However, both for pastoral reasons and consideration of other biblical texts, the Church permits the marriage of divorced persons. The Task Group considered this in relation to SO 011A which states that it is our belief that ‘it is God’s intention that marriage is a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman’. The Task Group considered whether the use of the word ‘intention’ allowed for other interpretations and/or for the definition of marriage to be ‘ideal’ not ‘absolute’. However, the Task Group felt that this was not the case. People seeking marriage should do so with the intention of it being a life-long union, albeit with the recognition that previous marriages may have ended. Other considerations included: recognising that there are situations where ending a marriage is necessary for the wellbeing of one or both of the people in the relationship. Abuse within relationships is unacceptable, and whilst people can change, and reconciliation is possible, there are circumstances where it is not safe or healthy for that relationship to continue. It was also recognised that matters such as increased life expectancy also affect some people’s attitudes towards life-long union. The Task Group also considered that for many people who have previously been married, the opportunity for new beginnings is core to the Gospel.
- b) The Task Group also considered whether more should be included in the definition of marriage in relation to the qualities of marriage rather than the status of marriage. This may include matters such as sexual consent (within marriage), free will (to marry), fidelity within marriage, mutual respect and a partnership of equals.

3.6.5 **One man and one woman**

The Task Group were not of one mind as to whether or not marriage should be between one man and one woman, or between two people, regardless of gender, or whether there should be different definitions of marriage for opposite sex and same sex couples. However, whilst holding those differences, the Task Group was of one mind that the matter of monogamy was crucial as a Christian understanding of marriage. This is a matter of the Christian understanding of a covenanted relationship between equals; whereas polygamy and polyandry do not provide gender justice, especially for women, in marriage.

3.6.6 **Divergence of view across the Connexion on the marriage of same sex couples**

Both from the consultation in 2013/14 and the conversations in 2015/16, it can be seen that there is a diversity of views on marriage and relationships across the Connexion. However, the Task Group itself is drawn from that diversity of views, and had been able to share and discuss that diversity in a safe and honest space. It was pleasing to see that this has been modelled by many throughout the Connexion. The Task Group believes that this diversity of views is essential in any future group working on these matters. In recommending revisiting the definition of marriage, the Task Group is not presuming a particular direction or conclusion for discussions, but a continuation of the openness and the scriptural and theological reflection modelled by the Task Group and the Methodist people in the recent discussions.

3.7. Recommendations on the 1992 Statement and the Definition of Marriage

The Marriage and Relationships Task Group recommends that:

- the Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*, 1992, should be updated and that as part of that process, the definition of marriage should be revisited.
- a new task group be appointed to update the Statement and to oversee the process of consulting with the Methodist people on revising the definition of marriage; the Task Group should include expert knowledge of matters of Faith and Order and marriage and relationships
- the new task group should report to the 2018 Conference with a draft statement(s). The task group in redrafting the statement shall :
 - a) consider all relevant reports produced and resolutions passed by the Conference as set out in paragraph 3.5.1 above;
 - b) consider whether the definition of marriage should be revised , in light of the views raised throughout section 3 of this report.

4. Additional reflection

4.1 Although not limited to matters of marriage and relationships, or directly related to the Task Group's considerations, the Task Group was concerned that there were many examples in the feedback from across the Connexion where there was a lack of understanding of how to use and reflect on Scripture, and the tools of scriptural interpretation. However, there is a wealth of knowledge, expertise and experience in the Connexion, which could and should be used more.

4.2 **The Task Group recommends that the Conference encourages Districts and Circuits to utilise existing resources to support and encourage the Methodist people to make space and time to engage in Bible study and scriptural literacy.**

5. Conclusion

The Task Group has sought to undertake this sensitive and demanding task in an atmosphere of mutual respect and fellowship. It has not been an easy process and we recognise that discussion of these issues always comes with a potential for misunderstanding, upset and even deep hurt. In putting forward recommendations, the Group is very aware that some will think they represent a step too far, whilst others will be disappointed that the recommendations do not go far or fast enough. The Group asks that the report and the recommendations that arise from it be read carefully and prayerfully and in a spirit of generosity and that readers ask themselves the serious question of whether this fairly represents what they know of the Methodist Church. More than this, the recommendations seek to provide a map for the next stage of our pilgrimage together.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

- 29/1. The Conference received the Report.**
- 29/2. The Conference commended to the Methodist people the statement, set out in section 1.5.1 of the Report, as the basis upon which discussions on matters where contradictory views are expressed should be held.**
- 29/3. The Conference thanks the EDI Committee for the definition and guidance on homophobia set out in paragraphs 2.1.2 and 2.1.3 and directs that it be included within the guidance section of the *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church.*'**
- 29/4. The Conference directed the Methodist Council to make recommendations, in consultation with the Law and Polity Committee, to the 2017 Conference on the question of whether a Standing Order would be appropriate to clarify that homophobia is contrary to the discipline of the Methodist Church.**
- 29/5. The Conference directed the Methodist Council to consider whether there is a need for new marriage preparation resources and, should the Council conclude that there is, to undertake such work if considered necessary.**
- 29/6. The Conference directed the Methodist Council to ensure that work be progressed to identify the key issues for the Methodist Church to consider in order to ensure that people who are intersex or transgender are included in the life of the Church.**
- 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 as set out in paragraph 3.5.1 above;**
 - b) consideration of the definition of marriage, including the matters raised throughout section 3 of this report.**
- 29/10. The Conference encouraged Districts and Circuits to utilise existing resources to support and encourage the Methodist people to make space and time to engage in Bible study and scriptural literacy.**

Additional Report (Daily Record 6/14)

When the Methodist Council met in April 2016 the final report of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group was not available. However, the Council was informed of the likelihood of the need to bring proposals to the Conference for the membership of a new group appointed to undertake new work. The Council appointed a scrutiny group consisting of Ms Gill M Dascombe, The Revd Eleanor G Jackson, and The Revd Peter D Sheasby to consider the membership of any such group. In undertaking its work the scrutiny group has given close and careful attention to the recommendation (see page 286 of the

Agenda) that the new task group should include expert knowledge of matters of Faith and Order and marriage and relationships.

Alongside this the Scrutiny Group has been aware that the new group is being appointed to undertake a very different task from that given to the two previous groups appointed by the Conference in 2013 and 2014. Consequently, attention has been paid to a set of skills that, while reflecting different viewpoints within the life of the church, also reflects knowledge of earlier processes; prior experiences of drafting statements; and the expertise envisaged by the recommendation.

The Conference adopted as Resolution 29/8a:

The Conference appoints the membership of the new task group as follows:

Professor David Clough (Chair), The Revd Dr Roberta R Topham (Convener), The Revd Naomi Cooke, The Revd Ashley R Cooper, The Revd Geoffrey F J Farrar, Ms Ruth Hall, Ms Ann P Leck, The Revd Dr Paul Nzacahayo.

Reasoned Statements

Professor David Clough (Chair)

Professor of Theological Ethics at the University of Chester, Local Preacher, a member of the Joint Advisory Committee on the Ethics of Investment, and a former member of the Faith and Order Committee. He was part of national ecumenical working groups that produced the reports 'Peacemaking: A Christian Vocation' (2006) and 'Hope in God's Future: Christian Discipleship in the Context of Climate Change' (2009). He has published on the ethics of Karl Barth, Christian pacifism, and social and political issues in the Methodist Church.

The Revd Dr Roberta R Topham (Convener)

Presbyter in the Nidd Valley Circuit. Her background is in social anthropology and theology and she is interested in the diverse ways in which people make meaning through social groups and in positive interactions between faith and public issues. She was a member of the Faith and Order Committee from 2003 - 2008, latterly on the Faith and Order Executive, and is a member of the Faith and Order Network.

The Revd Naomi Cooke

Presbyter in the Gloucestershire Circuit. She spent 25 years working in the world of theatre as the Artistic Director and Chief Executive of a women's theatre company, and as an independent performer, writer and teacher. She lived and worked in Canada during the 1990s and helped to oversee the process of her local church becoming the first Affirming Congregation in the United Church of Canada.

The Revd Ashley R Cooper

Superintendent minister of the Burslem Mission Circuit with particular oversight for Swan Bank Church. Ashley is a member of Methodist Evangelicals Together and on the Executive of ECG Conference. He is currently working on his dissertation to complete an MA in Theology and Leadership at Moorlands Bible College.

The Revd Geoffrey F J Farrar

Presbyter in the West Hertfordshire and Borders Circuit. He was one of his District's co-ordinators for the recent Marriage and Relationships Consultation and helped prepare the final report for his Synod. He previously worked as a civil servant at the House of Commons and has considerable experience of drafting statements and reports.

Ms Ruth Hall

A member of Brunswick Methodist Church in Newcastle, Ruth is an undergraduate studying Animal Science at Newcastle University. She was elected to represent 3Generate on the Methodist Council.

Ms Ann P Leck

Vice-President of the Conference, 2001-2002, RELATE trained counsellor, sex therapist and trainer; Chair of RELATE National Executive, 1990-94; appointed MBE for services to RELATE, 1995. Served on various Methodist connexional working parties and other groups where RELATE training has seemed relevant, such as Christian Preparation for Marriage, the Human Sexuality Commission, and "Pilgrimage of Faith" (co-chair). Formerly consultant to the ecumenical Churches' Ministerial Counselling Service, and served on Churches Together for Families sub-committee on marriage preparation. Has a local church ministry with young people and in pastoral work.

The Revd Dr Paul Nzacahayo

Presbyter with 29 years of experience of ministry both in Rwanda and in the UK. His experience also includes cross-cultural ministerial practice; he served on the World Methodist Council from 2001 to 2006. He is member of the University of Edinburgh Centre for Theology and Public Issues. Paul is currently a tutor at the Queen's Foundation.

Resolutions of the 2014 Conference, relating to the work of

the Marriage and Relationships Task Group

(from the report of the Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships)

- 40/2. The Conference recognised with gratitude that, over the years since the debate on human sexuality in 1993, God's grace has been at work in the hearts and minds of the Methodist people to enable us to hold together in the bond of unity. It now urged the Methodist people, under the guidance of the Spirit, to engage with each other honestly, prayerfully and graciously in a process of deep reflection and discernment about the issues which this report raises.
- 40/3. The Conference adopted the recommendation contained in paragraph 148 and directed the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion committee, in consultation with the group appointed under resolution 40/4 below, to work, as a matter of priority, on the production and dissemination of clear guidance on what is, or is not, to be regarded as homophobia and, if thought appropriate, on a formal statement for the Conference to adopt on this matter.
- 40/4. a) The Conference adopted the recommendation contained in paragraph 157 and appointed a task group on marriage and relationships to be responsible for the implementation of the work. It recognised the significance and therefore the need for adequate resourcing and support of this work.
- b) The Conference directed that the tasks which the group shall work to implement shall be as follows:
- (i) to seek to engage the Church more widely in exploring the two major themes of
 - i. living with contradictory convictions, and
 - ii. the nature of the authority of the Bible by drawing upon the existing material produced connexionally and identifying other ways of resourcing and encouraging these conversations throughout the Church;
 - (ii) within that context, to encourage and facilitate across the Connexion the process of reflection and discernment referred to in Resolution 40/2;
 - (iii) to explore in depth the implications arising from the divergence between the Methodist Church's teaching on marriage and the legal definition and concept of marriage now applying in England, Wales and Scotland. These explorations should include
 - i. the missional challenges involved
 - ii. the tradition and experience of the Christian Church in living in contexts where its values, teaching and practice as to marriage have not been shared with those of the surrounding society
 - iii. the considerations for and against the continued involvement of the Methodist Church in the solemnisation of (opposite sex) marriages;
 - (iv) to find ways to encourage Local Churches (and if thought necessary, equipping them with pastoral and teaching resources) to welcome same sex couples and their families and to enable their participation in the life and worship of the Church;

- (v) drawing as appropriate upon the theological material already produced by the Faith and Order Committee and in collaboration with that committee, to develop resources to help people to explore the teaching and practice of the Church in relation to cohabitation;
- (vi) to look at the range of other issues raised by paragraphs 92 to 101, to investigate what material is already available or could, within the financial and personnel resources available, be produced in order to encourage wider discussions about marriage and other relationships;
- (vii) to work with the EDI committee on the task directed by Resolution 40/3 above;
- (viii) to consider further the implications of the same sex marriage legislation for shared buildings not held on Methodist trusts and for those working in wider ecumenical contexts, and report to the Conference of 2015 on any action recommended to be taken;
- (ix) to carry out the work recommended to be done in paragraph 179 and report to the Conference of 2015 about any Standing Order amendments required;
- (x) in the light of its explorations and experience of working on all these issues, to bring a general report to the Conference of 2016 on the key issues and proposals for any further work to be done, and including recommendations upon:
 - i. whether the 1992 Conference Statement A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage should be updated
 - ii. whether to revisit the question of embarking upon a process of revising the Methodist Church's definition of marriage.

c) The group's task shall be primarily to oversee and coordinate the work listed in b) above, and it is anticipated that it will identify sub-groups or individuals to undertake particular tasks.

d) The group shall work wherever possible collaboratively with the relevant members of the Connexional Team, and in consultation with the relevant connexional committees, in particular the Faith and Order Committee.

e) It shall also seek to work as far as possible with ecumenical partners who are engaged in similar explorations at this time.

f) It shall report regularly to the Methodist Council upon how its programme of work is being implemented, seeking the advice of the Council as to priorities where necessary.

Notice of Motion 2015/219 – Cohabitation

The Conference, recognising that a response to cohabitation is a critical part of the whole debate and not something to be considered in isolation: directs the Marriage and Relationships Task Group, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee, to ensure that amongst the resources to be identified or produced, to facilitate and support further discussion on the wide-ranging nature of human relationships, the issues around cohabitation are not overlooked; directs the Task Group and the Faith and Order Committee to ensure that, should the Conference decide to revisit the question of embarking upon a process of revising the Methodist Church's definition of marriage, consideration of cohabitation should form part of this process.

The Conference adopted the Motion.

Definition of Marriage in the Methodist Church

From the Statement on A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage, 1992

The current definition of marriage in the Methodist Church is set out in paragraphs 48 to 50 of the Statement:

- 48 'According to the laws of this country, marriage is the life-long union of one man and one woman'. These words, to be found on wall plaques in many marriage Register Offices, define the two essential features of marriage. Marriage is intended to be a permanent relationship (the life-long 'union') between a man and a woman, and a social institution (based on a contract regulated by 'the laws of this country').
- 49 The institutional aspect of marriage is marked by a public ceremony as well as described in a contract. Taken together, the ceremony and the contract create the status to which the parties are entitled within their own families and in society at large. In many cases representatives, at least of the two families and two sets of friends, will be present at the initiating ceremony of marriage – adding further public significance to the event.
- 50 What as a status is formal, may or may not be based on a relationship as potentially demanding and rewarding as is implied by the Biblical phrase 'the two shall become one flesh'.

Standing Order 011A

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

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

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

(4) A minister, probationer or member who is authorised to conduct marriages but who for reasons of conscience will never officiate at the marriages of couples in particular circumstances shall refer such couples to an authorised colleague who is not so prevented.

(5) The Methodist Church opposes discrimination on the basis of 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.

1993 Conference Resolutions on Human Sexuality

1. The Conference, affirming the joy of human sexuality as God's gift and the place of every human being within the grace of God, recognizes the responsibility that flows from this for us all. It therefore welcomes the serious, prayerful and sometimes costly consideration given to this issue by the Methodist Church.
2. 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.
3. A person shall not be debarred from the church on the grounds of sexual orientation in itself.
4. The Conference reaffirms the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality; namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it. The Conference directs that this affirmation is made clear to all candidates for ministry, office and membership, and having established this affirms that the existing procedures of our church are adequate to deal with all such cases.
5. The Conference resolves that its decisions in this debate shall not be used to form the basis of a disciplinary charge against any person in relation to conduct alleged to have taken place before such decisions were made.
6. Conference recognises, affirms and celebrates the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men in the church. Conference calls on the Methodist people to begin a pilgrimage of faith to combat repression and discrimination, to work for justice and human rights and to give dignity and worth to people whatever their sexuality.

Quotes from the feedback on conversations

Examples of **open or general quotes** from the conversations
(grouped under general sub-headings)

Living with Contradictory Convictions

- We had a difference of opinion about this – withdrawal of church marriage might solve the problem but might just duck the issue.
- This a contentious issue with sincerely held beliefs on both sides”.
- Not everyone will get the outcome they hope for - whichever way the church decides - and for some on either side of the debate there could be deep disappointment and therefore the need for grace and graciousness were paramount.
- We need to interpret the Bible but we must be careful that this is within a biblical and not simply societal context.

Church and society

- Is the Methodist Church frightened of sticking up for Christianity?
- The church has not fully discussed civil partnerships; there is a lot of catching up to do.

The status of marriage

- Marriage is simply a declaration of something that already exists – love and commitment.
- It is one thing to talk in general terms but knowing people personally often changes one's perspective and attitudes. Although in principle against same sex marriage, seeing how a presbyter working in a local hospice has been used by God changed my mind.
- Love without the basis or procreation should be the basis of any relationship.
- Is legal marriage the same as ecclesiastical marriage?
- Is marriage (institution) made for man rather than man for marriage?
- What is marriage in God’s eyes?
- What is marriage for? Love, commitment.
- Many people do not know what the current definition is.
- Love and commitment is part of God’s plan.
- People who don’t get married in church are not married in the eyes of God.
- Marriage is a construct of political suppression.

Pastoral considerations

- Why does sexuality get us so worked up? Note that Jesus talked about money more than sex.
- Consideration must always be given to individual consciences.
- Many ministers would find it unacceptable to solemnise same sex marriages within the church and their opinions must be respected.
- We need to find a way to support a same sex partnership without nit-picking definitions of what is a blessing, prayer or service.
- Beware of reducing relationships to a ‘family’ definition.
- If this is not already impacting on our pastoral and missional work, then we are going wrong somewhere. This should always be part of our pastoral and mission work.
- If the definition is revisited then there is a risk the church will split. Equally, if the definition is not revisited, there is also a concern the church will split.

- I am torn between the pastoral concerns of those who we might alienate if we don't change and those we might hurt if we do change.
- Heterosexuals have dominated the debate.
- There is a danger if opting in is only done at national level, and local churches are allowed to effectively not opt in, then there could be a split in the church (like Church of England 'Forward in Faith' churches who won't have women vicars).

Personal reflections

- Our sons both co-habited. It was their choice but we were quite unhappy about it at the time. Eventually, we came to terms with the situation and accepted what had happened. We were pleased they were both married before they had any children”.
- It is better to live together before marriage. It gives you a chance to find out what the other person is like.
- Where does singleness fit in to this given the study of Genesis 2 which suggests a need for people to be in relationship?
- I would have liked to discuss gender and sexuality first – I feel that influences our view and needs discussion.
- I thought this was a conversation about ‘human relationships’, where is the ‘single’ in all this?
- Could we please have more conversations like this? Particularly about family relationships and how to be ‘Christian’ in them.
- This evening has helped me to re-think and clarify my ideas – conversations might help us move forward together, whereas top-down Connexional changes, from Conference, will prove divisive and hurtful.

Examples of quotes **opposing revisiting the definition of marriage** (grouped under general sub-headings)

Not conforming to Society

- This is a slippery slope to conceding to secularity.
- We shouldn't choose to change just because society thinks something is acceptable
- Why should the church have to fall in line with what the State is doing?
- I would suggest that a change of civil practice and a change in the legal definition of marriage should not change our whole understanding of Christian marriage and the associated Biblical revelation.
- My fear is that the Church is adapting to the surrounding culture instead of being counter-cultural.
- Do not conform to the pattern of the world.
- We should not try to follow society but be distinctive.
- Revisiting would be the thin end of the wedge.
- I know the world is changing and in many ways the church has to change with it but I do feel we must stand out as Christians for what we believe is right.
- The church attitudes and policies should not be changed to conform to society and that things should stay as they are without any further discussion.

Alternatives to marriage

- I don't mind same sex partnerships having a blessing.
- I remain opposed to performing a marriage ceremony in church for same sex couples but would

welcome a blessing or confirmation of the union.

- While not allowing same sex marriage we must show God's love, by our actions, to everyone.
- The problem is the word marriage. Partnership would be fine but marriage is a step too far.
- I can accept civil partnerships but not civil marriage between same sex couples.
- I'm OK with same sex couples service in church – a blessing but not marriage. Marriage is for heterosexuals.
- We should not revisit the definition but should find ways of defining loving relationships.
- Does not Civil Partnership fulfil needs adequately without 'marriage' being necessary?
- Marriage is between a man and a woman. Same sex relationships are o.k. Blessing of same sex relationships o.k. Same sex marriage in church is not o.k. We must not water down our faith in Jesus to fill our churches. God will provide.

Division and Conflict

- We should not discuss this as the results may prove to be divisive.
- People will leave if we change our definition.
- There are still strong views held by Methodists and looking at this issue would cause more conflict. where people hold strong views.
- Any revision would leave some people feeling hurt and angry.

Not a Priority

- This is not a priority.
- There are better things to talk about like mission and sustaining Methodism in the locality.
- Are people bothered? Is there a will to change?
- It's not broken, don't fix it.

From an understanding of Scripture, from a conservative perspective

- I am unable to approve same-sex relationships because God's Word says that homosexual sex is wrong.
- I believe it is at our peril that this has gone this far. God is not mocked. When the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, God's grace lifts us to a "higher" life.
- This risks undermining the Gospel.
- God has decided what marriage is and we cannot change it.
- We should be guided by the Bible.
- The Bible says clearly marriage is between a man and a woman. We have to have compassion but I would draw the line on marriage. God's word says it should be between a man and a woman. I understand things have changed. It does bother me a bit that the number of people who are coming out as gay and lesbian seems to be increasing and it may be the Devil's work. I do not think we should re-visit the definition. We should be compassionate about other relationships and welcome them, but not in terms of marriage.
- I do not see marriage as a man-made ordinance, but a creation ordinance.
- I'm worried that if we do revisit we'll end up with something fudged and not biblical.
- Being biblical is what really matters.
- I am of the view that marriage is strictly between 1 man and 1 woman as described in the Bible, and believe that this should be upheld by the Methodist Church. For me this is something that is very black and white, and something that every Christian should promote.
- Cohabitation and divorce are the management of valid biblical relationships whereas (Same Sex Marriage) is outside of the discussion altogether. God said let us make a man in our own image male, and female created them. To change this changes the whole character of God.

Personal reflections

- I struggle with the concept of revising the definition, and how that affects my relationship with the church.
- Marriage is for a man and a woman only, and is the foundation for a happy family.
- The purpose of marriage is procreation.
- The church too often fudges issues, as in 1993.
- I want to say that the Methodist Church has looked at this very carefully over a number of years and what we are being asked to do is look at how we define marriage. All the way through it has always come with the view of one man and one woman. I am very nervous about saying we will re-visit, because there are pressure groups in the church and I am nervous of the outcome because I don't believe we should say marriage is anything other than one man, one woman.
- The (current) definition captures my understanding that marriage is between one man and one woman as given by God.
- The scriptural definition of "one man and one woman" is good enough for me and therefore it does need revisiting.
- God is not revisiting his definition of marriage, we should not.
- The definition is an ideal which we strive for, by redefining we risk moving it away from the gospel which is about striving to be closer to Christ.
- The definition is fine and good.
- I have been married for 60 years; if the definition of marriage was to change then I feel that this is disrespectful to marriage as I understand it.

Examples of quotes **supporting revisiting the definition of marriage** (grouped under general sub-headings)

The purpose and status of marriage

- What constitutes marriage in the 21st Century?
- Marriage has been redefined ... do we need a new word for it?
- Love and respect are more important than law and gender.
- The Methodist Church should move forward – discuss the meaning of marriage between 2 people – and take into account that things are changing in the world.
- As long the relationship is a loving one, there should be no problem.
- The nature of marriage is multi-layered and we need to reflect this.
- If marriage is a state to be welcomed, then we should welcome it for all.
- Should have happened years ago! Church needs to be inclusive of and sensitive to all monogamous relationships.
- In the light of a change in the 'legal' definition of marriage, should we not at least consider our definition as a Church?
- The definition should be revisited, but Christian values retained.
- Change happens: we now accept divorcees (in spite of the teaching of Jesus), those who cohabit and those in civil partnerships. Why not go further?
- I want to engage in a conversation about co-habitation. I think marriage is preferential to co-habitation, I am not fully sure why ... and would like space to explore my thoughts and have them challenged.
- Society has changed so we need to consider if the definition still reflects current Methodist understanding.
- We should question whether it is wise for the church to hold a position on the institution of marriage and human sexuality at all.

- We need to rethink the concept of marriage.
- Revisit to include loving and healthy marriages of all sorts.
- Should the definition recognise cohabitation as a form of marriage?
- “Union of body, mind and spirit”? Husbands and wives can have different views!
- Yes let’s re-visit the definition but let’s not define or legalise it in any more but instead pledge to support and bless loving committed, faithful relationships of all kinds. (The law and society’s views will keep changing anyway!) Let’s revert to the early Methodists’ understanding that sharing the Gospel is our task and leave the state to work out the legalities of relationships.
- It needs to be revisited and wording carefully altered but the marriage will be recognized between a man and a woman. We must be careful not to cause a ‘stumbling block’ to our brothers and sisters or future converts.
- Review cohabitation and divorce due to modern life – are we sure of the definition now? Regardless of gay relationships, we need to understand our current understanding of for example sex before marriage.
- Marriage is a choice to make a self-conscious, committed, public declaration. A positive statement from the MC on the value of co-habitation would be helpful. “
- Church should offer no discrimination to those who want to get married.
- Both same sex and heterosexual marriage are ‘partnership for life’.”
- Marriage is still marriage if there are no children. Procreation is separate.

Living with Contradictory Convictions

- The consultation should be embracing and over a sufficient period of time for people to be comfortable and familiar with the consultation issues, and for the nature and direction of the consultations to be assimilated, but not necessarily universally accepted.
- We have to discuss it even if we do not agree.
- Churches should be free to decide whether or not to provide gay marriage. Commitment and loving, lasting relationships should be strongly encouraged.
- We can hold difference beliefs and if this is done properly we can acknowledge and work on the definition and statements may come out which can be used pastorally - with grace and humility, currently we are not expressing love for all.
- Not having the discussion will divide the church. Maybe when we ‘ask the question’ then people will engage rather than at this stage. We need to do this properly.
- We do have a strand of practice that can ‘live with contradictory convictions’ in Methodism. That could be seen as a sign of a mature church – not everyone can or does agree on everything. Yet, we can stay united as one church and respect differences.
- Personally I would want us to redefine marriage (to include same sex couples) ... but I am willing to enter a loving conversation about this with those who disagree and those who are not sure”
- There is a need to provide ‘safe’ spaces within our own church contexts for the ‘dissenting’ voices to be heard.
- Encourage everybody to discuss these issues. It’s never easy to discuss such issues where people can hold strong views either way. To not talk can lead to such issues being buried and only emerging when a situation comes along which raises it.
- It is my earnest wish that the church will once again act in a spirit of compassion and justice, this time to same –sex couples who, out of a deep and lasting commitment to each other, seek the blessing of the church as they look to be married in church. Even if the church remains divided over the issue, I hope that the Conference will now act to give permission to ministers and churches to welcome same-sex people to be married.
- Reconsider the definition of marriage being between a man and woman ie consider same sex

marriage. We think it should be reconsidered because we have different views. We don't all agree on the answer.

- It was clear from the meeting that people hold many differing views and opinions and we need to respect individual views. It was agreed it was important to have this conversation and that we may have to be prepared to adapt to a changing world.
- The Methodist Church is required to go to a vulnerable place, a place where people can feel connected.

From an understanding of Scripture from a progressive perspective

- Is this a Kairos moment?
- There's been an increase in scientific understanding ... sexuality isn't two opposite poles but rather a continuum all of which is our God-given identity.
- This is an opportunity for theological reflection on the Church's inclusion/exclusion.
- Only tradition gets in the way of saying 'yes' to revising / revisiting the question. There is no strength of argument in scripture, reason or experience in today's culture and understanding
- There is no single definition of marriage in the Bible.
- For many centuries we have placed reason alongside scripture and experience and I don't think this is the time to stop doing that. We are a people of grace and, to say we can't even talk about it would not be a good thing."
- We live in a different context to that of Biblical times, therefore the (current interpretation of) scripture should be revisited.
- In Christ there is no difference between male and female, bond or free, Jew or Gentile (Galatians 3:28) – so surely no heterosexual or homosexual.
- Don't let us be the 'Pharisees' of our day!
- The current position of the Methodist church towards LGBT people is an embarrassment and, in my opinion, is not compatible with the gospel.
- I would like to say that I strongly feel that it is time the Methodist Church has another look at its definition of marriage. There have been a lot of advances in various branches of science eg genetics and psychology that give us a greater understanding of what makes us who and what we are. Also biblical interpretations have progressed during this period too. If only to prove that Methodists are not asleep in their pews (or comfy chairs), I think our church needs to re-open the box.

Pastoral considerations

- Not changing the definition is already making some people feel hurt and angry.
- I fully hope conversation will continue but hope there will be a conscience clause for individual ministers.
- People tend to be uncomfortable with things they are unfamiliar with. By having the discussion people will be empowered to make choices.
- We need to find ways to show God's love for all, gay people are not a "mistake" by God.
- We need to look at a whole range of relationships including co-habitation.
- Christians in same sex relationships should be able to affirm that relationship before God.
- Gay Methodists should be able to get married, like I am – in a service like mine in my church.
- If two people who are part of a congregation wish to celebrate their union with that congregation, why would that congregation oppose them?
- This is an opportunity to offer guidance to same sex couples towards a fulfilling and loving marriage.
- Value the love and integrity of same sex couples.
- The definition needs discussing because there are committed same sex couples and we are

denying, and excluding people with deeply held Christian beliefs from our church.

- Look at it and Church's attitude to mixed marriages (a comment from a Methodist married to a Muslim).
- Open discussion would challenge prejudice.
- If we don't revisit – are we rebuffing how some people feel.
- It will help us keep relationship with those same-sex couples who currently 'walk away' because we can't marry them.
- The debate gives us opportunity to hear all voices.
- This is a pastoral opportunity.
- At 3Gen for the last two years lots of young people have voiced that things need to be re-visited and the young people don't want to be forgotten or left out. We are the future so please listen.
- There's an anomaly between gay Christian couples being refused marriage when non-believers are usually allowed to marry in church.
- This is an opportunity to ask forgiveness for the way LGBT people have been treated
- We need to focus on what 'love of God and neighbour' means in our culture today. We also need to recognise that 'tradition' is a moving feast and different people are at different stages of their tradition journey.

Engaging with wider society

- I would like the Methodist church to continue to encourage discussion on marriage and relationships, taking into account views of all ages, but paying particular attention to the views of young people. We heard within our discussion a reference to 'a lost generation'. The church must do something to change this trend if it is to continue as a family representing all ages.
- It is a good opportunity for us to discuss issues that society really cares about.
- Our missional engagement in the world is negatively affected by not moving forward.
- The legal system changed because understanding of homosexuality increased. The Church cannot remain set in the past.
- This is an opportunity to reach a wider range of people, including people and communities who already feel rejected by the Church.
- If we can sort this out then we can put life and energy into other areas rather than (concentrating) on who people love.
- Other churches are revisiting the issue.
- Our understanding of sexuality has changed; we now know that gender identity is not a simple matter.
- We need to at least reconsider the Church's definition to hear the views of a changing society.
- The church is in danger of isolating itself if it does not engage with this debate.
- Methodists need to discuss this regularly to keep line with modern society.
- Re-visiting will engage with the wider community and it will benefit our own understanding.
- Many young people feel that the church's position on sexuality makes it difficult to witness to their peers.
- A full discussion should be held and that the church needs to look long and hard about society values and the way that lifestyle and choices have changed.
- To avoid this question would let the Methodist people down and fail to engage with issues in the society they actually live in.
- This is an expression of ministry beyond our comfort zone.

Personal reflections

- I joined the Methodist Church seeing the 1993 resolution as progressive and encouraging and expected travel down that road. I cannot be alone in my disappointment.

- This morning I would have said I would stand by the present definition. However, I have now done a lot of reading and it was a massive eye-opener. Those who are of a different orientation have not chosen to be in a homosexual relationship. If we say to them: You are not as much of a human being, not loved as much by God, we are making them second-class citizens. We are making it incredibly difficult for good people to have an equal part in the church. I have no idea how that works in practice. But, yes, we should re-visit.
- I have a gay colleague who grew up in a Christian family and (being treated as second class) was damaging. It is immensely damaging to people psychologically to class them as second-class people. We must see as something very positive a part of society that wants marriage and it could be something to revitalise us as a church.
- I feel that regardless of the fact that Conference have asked that we discuss if we want a conversation about a conversation - it has helped many people to have this volatile subject aired in a safe and compassionate space – perhaps we need more opportunities regardless of the outcome of Conference because in some cases it is dividing families and friends. Ultimately it is likely to divide church communities unless there is opportunity for sharing and listening to each other's views.
- It would be a huge mistake for the church to bury its head in the sand and hope that the subject might go away. In fact I don't think we should be having discussions about whether we should be having discussions, but be getting on with consulting with the membership. There are some important matters to consider which may well be controversial, but Christ never shied away from controversy and neither should we.
- Who knows the answer, or the pain, of the journey but it is worth doing.

Briefing statement on the discussions of 3Generate

Following 3Generate (the Methodist Children's and Youth Assembly) 2015, the first-ever age stream manifestos were published for the coming year. These documents highlight the priorities that each age stream would like the Church to focus on for the coming year.

The 11 – 18s manifesto included the following priority:

“Discussions about same sex marriage: in particular reflecting on Biblical perspectives and exploring the Church's understanding.”

This recommendation resulted from a workshop that took place in the 11 – 18s stream, entitled *Same-Sex Marriage- I'm getting married in the morning?* This session explored the issue through scripture, tradition, reason and experience to help the young people to develop a considered Christian response.

The priorities for the 11 – 18s manifesto were decided through a voting system. Of the 400 young people who attended the 11 – 18s stream at 3Generate (some of whom abstained from the voting process), 257 chose this as a priority, meaning it came out as the absolute top priority for 11 – 18 year olds (as an indication of just how important the young people considered this priority, the next most popular manifesto item received just 183 votes).

Also in the programme for the 2015 11 – 18s stream of 3Generate was a session entitled *Let's talk about sex...and relationships...*, looking at what young people thought they should be discussing in sex and relationships education (SRE) at school, when it should happen and what influence and involvement churches should have in developing the ways people learn about sex and relationships in schools, families and the Church.

This session led to two recommendations:

Suggestion 1: We want the church to equip, resource and train our youth workers and ministers to create safe spaces to talk about relationships and sex within them.

Suggestion 2: We want to encourage open discussions about sex inside and outside of marriage.

In past years there has also been a strong indication from the delegates at 3Generate that they would welcome open conversations about the Church's thinking on marriage and relationships. Namely:

- In 2012 the 14 – 17 year olds attending the event had the opportunity to attend a session entitled *Mating, dating and waiting*, including (among other things) discussions on the issue of same sex relationships. The majority view was that the blessing of civil partnerships and same sex unions should be permitted on Methodist premises and the decision of the 2012 Conference to ask the Methodist Council to consider the issues around the blessing of civil partnerships as raised in M29 (2012) - *Blessing Civil Partnerships* was welcomed. The following recommendation came from this latter session and was included in the report to Conference: “We would like 3Generate 2013 to provide space to debate the biblical context and interpretation of language around sexuality.”
- Also in 2012, the 18 – 23s programme included a session on the subject of co-habitation, building on what had been discussed at 3Generate in 2009 (which led to a resolution shaping work done by the Faith and Order committee). Outcomes from this session were fed back to

Faith and Order. In 2012, the following resolution was also taken to Conference: “The Conference directed the Methodist Council to ensure that the views of young people on understandings of chastity be taken into account as part of the ongoing Pilgrimage of Faith as well as in any consideration of M29 (2012).”

- In 2013 the 15 – 18 year olds took part in a session entitled *‘F’ words: Friends, Family and Faith*, looking at relationships. 95% of delegates expressed that they would like the Church to provide quality teaching on the issue of same sex relationships and also to help people to understand all of the aspects of the debate. Ninety-six percent also articulated that they would like the Church to be helped to develop a realistic view of relationships and family life in 21st century Britain.
- Also in 2013, the 18 – 23 age stream looked at the subject of same-sex marriage and, in this session, it became very clear that the 18-23 year olds care very strongly about this issue and that young people want to be more involved in talking about it. There was also a clear request from this session to review the Church’s current definition of marriage and either affirm or update it.
- In 2014 the 11 – 18 age stream held a session entitled *Hitchhiker’s Guide to Christianity: Some basics about Christianity and Methodism*. One recommendation from this session was: “The Church should consider accepting same sex marriage.” A further session, attended by 11 – 15 year olds, entitled *R.E.S.P.E.C.T - Find Out What It Means to Me*, looked at the question of “What does respect in relationships mean and what does it look like?” One recommendation from this session was: “To have more discussions on the subject of homosexuality and same sex marriage within the Methodist Church.”

Membership of the Task Group

Chair:

(until May 2015) The **Revd Ruth M Gee**, Chair of the Darlington District, past President of the Conference

(from May 2015) The **Revd R Graham Carter**, supernumerary presbyter in the York Circuit, past President of the Conference

The Revd Olufemi R W Cole-Njie - Superintendent, Forest Circuit

The Revd Angela J Long, Presbyter, Durham and Deerness Valley Circuit

***The Revd Samuel E McBratney**, Director of the Global Christianity Programme at the Queen's Foundation, Birmingham

***The Revd Dr Stephen Mosedale**, Superintendent, Milton Keynes Circuit (appointed to the Task Group, November 2015)

***The Revd D Paul C Smith**, Supernumerary Presbyter, Tavistock Circuit

Mr Eric Watchman, Local preacher, Darlington Circuit (resigned September 2015)

***Mrs Louise C Wilkins**, Conference Officer for Legal and Constitutional Practice

Those marked with an asterisk (*) also served on the previous Marriage and Civil Partnerships Task Group, 2013-14