

METHODIST EVANGELICALS TOGETHER

STATEMENT ON MARRIAGE & HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

*An open submission to the Connexional Marriage and Human Relationships Task Group
May 2017*

SUMMARY

1. The MET Executive Committee welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Connexional Marriage and Human Relationships Task Group on such important themes for the Methodist Church. We seek to do so whilst emphasising both grace and truth.
2. A renewal movement which is Bible-based and prayer-focussed, MET has historically represented the three streams of conservative evangelicalism, prayer for revival, and charismatic renewal. It is a fellowship for every Methodist who shares a desire to uphold the authority of scripture, seek spiritual renewal, pray for revival, spread scriptural holiness, and emphasise the centrality of the cross. We welcome and cherish our position at the heart of Methodism as the church seeks to be a discipleship movement shaped for mission, with prayer undergirding everything we do. To this end, we contribute to this process prayerfully recognising the significance of this debate for the unity of the church, acknowledging our evangelical roots and our commitment to mission within today's society.
3. The MET Executive Committee has concluded that, whilst a variety of views are held both amongst evangelicals and more broadly across the various theological spectra of the Church, it is incumbent upon us to stand firm in holding to and representing the traditionally-held evangelical perspective on matters of marriage and human relationships. This is, broadly speaking, expressed in the British Methodist Church's current position, namely that marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman and that Christians are called to fidelity within marriage and chastity outside it. It is our conviction that this is the teaching of Jesus, as well as of the Bible taken as a whole, and the position of the Christian Church for two thousand years.
4. The MET Executive Committee, therefore, seeks to affirm the Biblical teaching on marriage contained within the Standing Orders of *The Constitution, Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, Conference Statements and *The Methodist Worship Book*: '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' (SO 011A (1)). It is our contention that this statement, rooted in Biblical teaching, should not change.

5. We believe the teaching contained within *A Methodist Statement on a Christian Understanding of Family Life, The Single Person and Marriage*, adopted by the Methodist Conference of 1992 is consistent with the Biblical teaching on marriage. From the creation ordinance (Genesis 2:24) to the eschatological vision of Christ taking the church as his bride (Revelation 21:9), the Bible portrays marriage as being between a man and a woman.
6. We hold to the evangelical reading of Scripture and the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality, namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it¹. Whatever a person's sexuality and whether single, divorced or widowed, many Christians follow a life of chastity. For some, this is a call to lifelong celibacy and for others, a provisional commitment to the single life and sexual abstinence. It is important that these people are supported and encouraged in their lifestyle.
7. MET encourages the Task Group to value the gift of lifelong union between one man and one woman and tell the positive story of marriage, providing marriage preparation, support, and reconciliation ministries.
8. MET recognises that successful families which deliver good outcomes for children come in all shapes and sizes. A society that values healthy, stable relationships encourages children to value forgiveness, faithfulness and long-suffering and provide a secure environment in which to grow. The household of God should seek to provide parenting courses and practical help for those who find parenting difficult.
9. Where there is a breakdown in married or cohabiting partners with children, the household of faith must help and encourage both parents in continuing to develop the relationship with and take responsibility for their children. Ministries should grow to provide role models for parenting, for example in toddler and parent groups and groups for fathers and children, which are often held on Saturdays. Children's and youth ministries, church and uniformed organisations are places which provide essential role models for all children, especially those who do not find them within the home. The household of faith has a key responsibility within society for upholding family life in all its forms and providing a safe place for children.
10. We believe that singleness is a gift of God, equal to the gift of marriage. The household of faith must recognise and value this. The single person has gifts and graces for the

¹ *The 1993 Conference Resolutions on Human Sexuality* (CPD, Book VII C Part 11(3)).

whole body of Christ. The fellowship should support single people and not pressurise them into relationships. The use of language such as, for example, ‘family services’, can often cause hurt to single people.

11. We believe that people in civil partnerships and same-sex marriages should be welcome in the household of faith to experience God’s love, compassion, and grace. In serving and loving all people, we love and serve Christ.
12. In considering transgender issues, we would be wise to take the time to review the emerging research and move forward having examined the issues rationally and theologically, not based on experience alone.
13. We recognise that for many the offering of same-sex marriage is an issue of social justice. We would want to temper that call for social justice with a call to holiness, recognising and proclaiming the Biblical moral view for marriage and family life. The move towards the offering or blessing of same-sex marriage may appear to be an act of grace, but the moral boundaries created by God are his gracious gift for the well-being of individuals and society. We should continue to tell the positive story of the marriage between one man and one woman while offering love, compassion, and grace to all.
14. MET’s own Commission on Marriage and Human Relationships is willing to be a critical friend of the Task Group whilst the report is being prepared for Conference.
15. We ask the Task Group to seek a way through the current deliberations which both promotes unity and also upholds our current position.
16. We assure the Task Group again of our prayers in this work.

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INTRODUCTION

The Methodist Church in Great Britain seeks to ‘serve the present age’ in its faithful witness to Jesus Christ. Along with all other Christian denominations it thus finds itself in turbulent times in a context in twenty-first century Britain where society’s views of sexuality, relationships and marriage are in a state of great flux and where changing attitudes are reflected not only in changing behaviour but also in changes to the law to enable same-sex marriage.

1. Unity in Diversity

The response of Christians in Britain to such developments has been fragmented. LGBTQI+ Christians and Christians who experience same sex attraction can be found in organisations like Living Out who uphold traditional views of marriage, gender and relationships, believing that Biblical teaching supports such an understanding, as well as in groups like Outcome who make the case for a change in the Church’s position on such matters. Evangelicalism is similarly divided, and while the position of the Evangelical Alliance (to which MET is affiliated), in holding to the established view of the churches on sexuality and relationships, represents the broad swath of evangelicals in Britain, there are nevertheless a significant number who have moved away from that position in recent years. Traditional Methodists also express concern about same-sex marriage and seek to uphold the present Standing Orders on marriage.

For its part, whilst acknowledging that there will be those amongst its membership who hold a different view but endorse the Basis of Faith² and continue to be valued members, MET is committed to giving voice to the traditionally-held evangelical position on matters of marriage and human relationships. This is unanimously held by its Executive Committee and has been endorsed by its AGM. MET is also committed to remaining wherever possible at the heart the Methodist Church, speaking and acting graciously, truthfully and Biblically, and maintaining the bonds of connexion with those who disagree with its views, with love and mutual respect.

MET acknowledges that some consider the move towards the acceptance of same-sex marriage as a movement defined by the British Metropolitan elite. There is a need to consider the international context, expressed within multi-ethnic congregations in Great Britain and the worldwide Methodist Church. We must not consider a strong position on the Biblical view of marriage, to reflect a less ‘mature’ view of Scripture or equality and

² <http://methodistevangelicals.org.uk/about/basis-faith>

diversity, but seek to maintain a Wesleyan Catholic Spirit across the Methodist and Wesleyan family. People have found it hurtful when in local, circuit or district discussions, the view has been expressed that they will grow into the acceptance of same-sex marriage. It is worth noting that whilst Wesley held that those who truly have the catholic spirit extend love to everyone, ‘neighbours, and strangers, friends and enemies’, he refused to accept teaching that was contrary to scripture for the sake of unity.³

The discussion on Marriage and Human Relationships is a matter of justice, holiness and biblical interpretation. The interplay of the role of the Bible within contemporary social issues is fraught with difficulties. In discussing the issue of sexuality and SSM, some prioritize the role of personal experience or perceived injustice, others will emphasize a traditional interpretation of Scripture and its role within the ordering of interpersonal relationships. These tensions are sometimes experienced within an individual or a family.

Aware of these tensions, nevertheless, MET upholds the validity of the traditional evangelical understanding and asks the Task Group to ensure that this interpretation, included in the Biblical teaching contained within the Methodist Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, The Single Person and Marriage* adopted by the Methodist Conference of 1992, is maintained.

2. Interpretation of Old Testament Texts

Evangelicals are often questioned about their interpretation of the Law in the Old Testament. Three classifications have been identified:

- Civil laws relating and limited to ancient Israelite society;
- Ceremonial or cultic laws fulfilled by Jesus in his sacrificial death upon the cross;
- Moral law upheld by Christ and so in force in the church.

Jesus’ declaration, ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them’ (Matthew 5:17) needs to be taken into account in the interpretation of the moral code.

The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-21) illustrated and upheld this principle of interpretation. When Gentiles entered the church, they did not need to become Jews (1 Corinthians 7:19) but in keeping God’s moral laws, they did have to leave sexual immorality behind (1 Corinthians 5:11,6:18,10:8). The food laws, preventing needless offence to Jews throughout the empire, have with time been relaxed.

Jesus showed this principle in John 7:53 – 8:11, where Jesus mitigated the laws which prescribed the punishment of stoning, but in so doing he did not deny that the actions

³ *The Wesley Study Bible*, Abingdon, Nashville, p.465

condemned by the Law were wrong. Whilst Jesus removed the condemnation, he did not remove the moral prohibition: ‘go and sin no more.’ Jesus, in both his life and death, offers grace, removing the condemnation of sin, but releasing each of us to a life of holiness. That principle is valid in all areas of our individual and corporate witness as temples of the Holy Spirit.

3. **Homophobia**

With these aspirations in mind, MET believes, with the wider Methodist Church, that ‘homophobic attitudes, words, and behaviours are inconsistent with the nature of Christian conduct and a violation of the worth and dignity of all people.’⁴ MET acknowledges with sorrow that evangelicals, sometimes in its membership, have on occasions exhibited such homophobic attitudes, words and behaviours that require repentance and the asking of forgiveness from God and from individuals. MET also affirms, with the wider Methodist Church 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.’⁵

4. **Marriage**

We believe, under God, that MET must continue to uphold the definition of marriage as expressed in Standing Order 011A of *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*:

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.

MET has reached this conclusion prayerfully and with three considerations in mind:

Scriptural Teaching

MET continues to believe, as stated in the Methodist Church’s response to the government’s consultation on equal marriage in 2012, that our definition of marriage is ‘in line with Scripture and Church tradition’⁶, and that neither changes in the law nor societal trends alter that truth. Marriage as a public declaration of vows between a man and a woman before God has been a part of church practice since at least the 12th Century⁷ and Methodism’s first authorised liturgy *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America (1784)* was an abridgement of the Anglican 1662 Prayer Book which recognised the same

⁴ <http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/1951717/Homophobia%20-%20EDI%20Committee%20Guidance.pdf>

⁵ *op cit*.

⁶ <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/pi-equal-civil-marriage-consultation-response-0612.pdf>

⁵ Elwell, Walter A. *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1998, p. 510.

⁷ MacCulloch, Diarmaid *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. London: Penguin 2010, p. 371-373

understanding.

Whilst specific biblical texts can be cited, not least those contained within the Methodist Church's own marriage liturgies, MET's position is not based upon so called proof-texts, but upon a reading of scripture in its totality.⁸ From beginning to end, the overarching biblical pattern for marriage is one of a lifelong union of one man and one woman, and as such is therefore the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy. It is a pattern built into creation itself and is symbolic of God's own relationship with his people, depicted as the culmination of God's creating and redeeming work. Any deviation from this pattern of the lifelong union of one man and one woman within the pages of the Bible results, without exception, in lives that are less than flourishing.

This holistic understanding of scripture reaches its summation in the person, life and teaching of Jesus who affirmed the vocation to and lifestyle of singleness, permitted divorce in particular circumstances whilst upholding the Judaeo understanding of marriage as part of the created order, and reaffirmed God's original purpose in marriage, namely the lifelong faithfulness of a man and a woman united by God himself.

Thus marriage, written into creation as the lifelong union of one man and one woman and as a symbol of the union between God and his people in the new creation, is a gift from God himself to be cherished and celebrated.

MET's constituent membership

Reaction to the debate on marriage and human relationships within MET's membership has demonstrated that whilst there are both those who are unhappy with its continual defence of the 'status quo' and those who disagree with MET even engaging in a debate over matters that they regard to be non-negotiable in terms of Scriptural authority, the overwhelming view of the membership is that MET should continue a gracious and truthful engagement with the debate within Methodism, offering the established evangelical viewpoint to the wider church. This position is also endorsed unanimously by MET's Executive Committee and AGM.

The need for a plurality of voices

In the response by the Methodist Church in Britain to the consultation on Equal Marriage in June 2012, when asked the question regarding the position on marriage of the church to the question 'In the light of changes in British society do you think the Methodist Conference should be asked to look again at this position?' 62% of all respondents to the question said no.⁹ MET believes that in the clamour for change within the church it is vital

⁸ MET has compiled a reading list of useful resources to explore Biblical teaching on marriage:
<http://methodistevangelicals.org.uk/resources/marriage-and-relationship-consultation-resources>

⁹ <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2014-40-marriage-and-civil-partnerships.pdf>

that those people who continue to believe in and endorse our current understanding of marriage have a voice, whether they are MET members or not.

5. RELATIONSHIPS AND CO-HABITATION

In the light of the Scriptural witness and given its continuing commitment to SO 011A, MET continues to affirm the decision of 1993 Methodist Conference meeting in Derby which ‘reaffirms the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality; namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it.’¹⁰ MET realises that this is an unpopular view in modern Western society but believes that the followers of Jesus Christ are called to be counter-cultural in many matters of personal and social ethics and that Methodism’s mission to ‘spread Scriptural Holiness through the land’¹¹ is ill-served by diluting, or denying the demands of the Gospel.

6. MISSIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The missional implications of the Church’s approach to issues of marriage and human relationships is correctly highlighted as a matter of essential concern. The Methodist Church is right to emphasize the priority of mission and evangelism. These are not only gospel imperatives, but are also important to a lesser extent given that the most recent statistics demonstrate that the Methodist Church is the fastest declining denomination in England.¹²

These statistics also show that, other than Fresh Expressions, the only growing denominational groups are those which have maintained the Church’s traditional positions on marriage and human relationships, namely evangelical, Orthodox and Pentecostal churches.¹³ As the term Fresh Expressions is relatively new and covers a wide variety of ecclesiological positions and practices, it is too early to determine characteristics of sustained growth.

Whilst there must be caution against drawing too many specific conclusions from such broad statistical evidence, growth within the wider Christian Church demonstrates that a clear stand for the traditional teaching of the Church regarding marriage and human relationships in no way hinders mission and evangelism.

MET thus encourages the Marriage and Human Relationships Task Group to call upon the Conference to reaffirm its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith.

¹⁰ <http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/views-of-the-church/human-sexuality>

¹¹ ‘Doctrine’ Clause 4, *The Deed of Union of the Methodist Church*.

¹² Peter Brierley, *UK Christian Statistics 2:2010 - 2020*; whilst this statistic is concerned only with church decline within England, the report notes that the Methodist Church of Great Britain also encompasses both Wales and Scotland.

¹³ *ibid* p. 6