

A response to the Marriage and Relationships Task Group: Interim Report for the Conference of 2018 (Conference Agenda, Report 27, Vol.2 p337-347)

Introduction

This briefing paper is an initial response to the Conference report raising some matters of concern, which we believe may be helpful to bring to the attention of Conference representatives to inspire their own thinking and inform the debate at Conference.

In offering these reflections, we recognise that the report is not in itself to be taken as the final position of the Task Group: the report acknowledges the breadth of subjects that have been entrusted to the group and thus 'that the group's task is great while its timetable is short.' This response should not, therefore, be seen as critical of the group for not yet having been able to complete a difficult and complex task. Rather, since the report will be the subject of considerable debate at Conference, these reflections are offered to inform this process.

These notes should be read in conjunction with the Conference report.¹ The headings and paragraph numbers of this response correspond with those of the report.

Progress towards fulfilling the group's task (pp 337-340)

9. The group's determination to ensure that any recommendations arising from its work are 'grounded in an agreed framework of the Methodist Church's theological understanding and teaching ('our doctrines')' is to be warmly welcomed and sets a standard to discern the effectiveness of its work and the appropriateness of its conclusions, once they are reached.

11. The suggestion that 'it is implicit in previous reports to the Conference (not least, that of 2016) that for a number of reasons the 1992 Statement... is no longer adequately guiding the thinking and practice of the Methodist people even in so far as it applies to heterosexual couples' needs considerable unpacking and a case being made *explicitly* by further work of the Task Group if it is allowed to stand, since currently no evidence is given for this blanket claim. Why is the 1992 statement no longer adequate?

A further question is whether our Conference Statements ought to reflect only what is currently happening in the church or whether they should set standards of belief and practice to which we should aspire even if our best efforts fall short. Is it the role of the church's *normative* theology² – that understanding of God and God's action in the world which is reflected in official Church teaching, authorized publications and Church policy – merely in some way to try to reflect the diverse *operant* theology found in the thinking and practice of the Methodist people? Such thinking and practice does of course diverge considerably in relationship matters as in many other areas of Christian living upon which the church has made statements over the years. However, it can be argued that there is a role

¹ <http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/8031/conf-2018-27-marriage-and-relationships-250518.pdf>

² Cameron, Bhatti, Duce, Sweeney and Watkins *Talking about God in Practice* (2010)

for such statements of the Conference to set up standards of belief and practice for the church, faithful to our doctrines, which remain valid even if some Methodists are not guided in their thinking and practice by them.

A proposed way of proceeding (pp 340-341)

15. One of our most significant concerns is the suggestion that the consultation period be reduced from two years to one year. We would argue strongly that the two-year period be retained in order to allow the Methodist people a full and free opportunity to contribute to the process and to air their views. It is rightly laid out in the report why the Task Group has found this complex task has taken longer than expected and reasonably requested more time; it is puzzling and somewhat contradictory that it should be suggested that the wider church in response now needs half the time originally allocated for its participation in the consultation. The Task Group has acknowledged 'the importance and magnitude of its task' (See para 5. p 338). Indeed so: decisions taken as a result of this consultation may have profound consequences for Methodist congregations and ministers whatever their views on human relationships and it is imperative that we give ample time to discern God's will. **It is thus to be hoped that Conference votes to retain the two-year consultation period and not to suspend SO 129 (3).**

Some preliminary issues (pp 341- 345)

18. The Task Group is to be commended in recognising and valuing 'the considerable energies already spent by many Methodists in coming to understand differing perspectives on these topics' and its understanding of the fear of exclusion felt by both advocates and opponents of the current Methodist Standing Order O11A which states our belief, '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.' That any developments resulting from their work need to affirm the inclusion of those who uphold the church's current teaching and practices along with those who would wish to see change underlines the enormity of their task and the importance of giving the time originally allocated to consultation with individual Methodists, Churches and Circuits.

20 It is important not to require the Faith and Order Committee's report to the 1998 Conference, *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path* to bear weight which it was not intended to do. The compilers of the report were keen to 'emphasize that this is not a definitive statement about the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church but rather an attempt to stimulate the serious exploration of this issue by members of individual Methodist congregations'.³

21. The reason the 1998 Conference, [or any subsequent Conference] 'did not choose to affirm only one of those ways of using Scripture as being correct' is because it was not asked to, but only to receive it and commend it for study. The fact that, in practice, individual Methodists hold 'a variety of views about the interpretation and use of the Bible' (our operant theology) does not alter our normative theology ('our doctrines'). These, we declare, 'are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures.'⁴ It is this definition 'which the Conference has affirmed' and continues to affirm unless it decides to change the Deed of Union through due process. It is here that any discussion of human relationships under God begins. It is thus to be welcomed that the Task Group will 'say more about biblical texts and insights that relate to marriage and relationships in general, including same-sex relationships' in its submission to the 2019 Conference.

³ <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-a-lamp-to-my-feet-1998.pdf> 2.4 p 5.

⁴ CPD Vol 2. 4.

22. Whilst recognising that this is an interim report, this section in particular suggests that the Task Group has much work to do if it is to 'say more about biblical texts and insights that relate to marriage and relationships in general' to the 2019 Conference. The treatment here of Genesis 2.24 is puzzling and arguably contradictory. The 'many people' who use the text in defining marriage do of course include Jesus⁵ as well as the compilers of our official liturgy for marriage⁶. Furthermore, if many people who responded to the 2014 consultation still seem to agree that 'the Biblical reference to husband and wife becoming 'one flesh' is partly a reference to the most intimate aspect of marriage: physical attraction and sexual intercourse'⁷ then perhaps the 1992 report, *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, The Single Person and Marriage* is still influential for more Methodists than it is given credit for in section 11 above.

26. The Task Group has rightly discerned that 'Whilst the focus of discussion since 1993 about the application of that resolution has tended to be on homosexual relationships, the first phrase of it in particular ('chastity for all outside marriage') refers to human sexuality in general, and to all forms of sexual relationship, not least heterosexual ones'. This acknowledgment of the church's failure to give the holistic aspect of the resolutions on sexuality due attention in its teaching and discipline is to be welcomed. If such a failing has led to more stringent demands being placed upon the behaviour of those of a homosexual orientation than upon heterosexuals, then this should be a cause for repentance and change in order that a fair and full expression of the intention of the resolution is expressed in the church's teaching and life.

29. In the light of this, the Task Group's declaration that they 'are minded to see them in a stronger light, as more than private aspirations. They are in this sense teaching about how gospel values apply in particular contexts and situations' is to be warmly welcomed and affirmed.

31. Whilst not wishing to deny the role of 'holy relating' in relationships, our understanding of marriage cannot be reduced to this concept. It is rather to be reaffirmed that 'Christian reflection on marriage is grounded in our understanding of God and particularly in the conviction that as God covenants himself to humankind, so husband and wife are 'covenanted' to one another – committed to one another in a free, full and permanent relationship'⁸ To this end, passages such as Jesus' teaching on adultery⁹ and Paul's reflection on the nature of marriage¹⁰ suggest that marriage also encompasses themes such as dying to self, faithfulness and exclusivity.

Workshops pp 346-347

33. A. Sexual intimacy and cohabitation Because of the Biblical picture of such an analogous and rich relationship in marriage, cohabitation arrangements can never be seen as 'alternatives to marriage, [or] complementary to it' but only a poor reflection of it. The church should never attempt to downplay the depth of what Christian marriage offers as outlined in Scripture by suggesting otherwise.

33. B. Marriage under the law and in the Church Whilst the Church, should 'as part of the vision of marriage it offers... look for and encourage the qualities of holy relating in every couple' it should surely also outline to couples seeking marriage that only the analogous and rich relationship in marriage offered by God fully echoes the commitment given by God in Christ to humanity in the union

⁵ Mark 10.6-9

⁶ The Methodist Worship Book p372

⁷ *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, The Single Person and Marriage* (1992) 60. P36

⁸ 'A Christian Understanding...' 68 p37.

⁹ John 8. 1-11.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 7. 1-9.

of two becoming one flesh. In considering civic/legal marriage on the one hand and the church position on the other, we should remember that marriage is not a construct of the state, but part of God's creation covenant.

33. C. Heterosexual marriage and same-sex marriage

The Task Group is right to identify that there will be 'practical implications should it choose to affirm same-sex marriage as part of its understanding and practice of marriage' and the consequences for maintaining a common discipline and a workable stationing process for the church's ministers are substantial. It is incredible that in a report presented to Conference in a year when we are again considering our Covenant relationship with the Church of England there is no mention of the implications of such a development for the Covenant or for the relationships with other Free Church partners, with the Roman Catholic Church or with the global Methodist Church. Indeed, it is to be hoped that this is remedied in the final report to Conference. Furthermore, the suggestion of the possibility that 'principles of connexionalism and equality mean that any Local Church that wishes to conduct heterosexual marriages should also be required to be open to conduct same-sex marriages' would contradict assurances previously given by the Connexion to ministers and congregations in this regard:

8. Will Methodist Churches have to permit and ministers have to conduct same sex marriages?

No. Even if the Methodist Conference chose to opt in to marrying people of the same sex, individual churches and ministers would not have to do so unless they chose to.¹¹

*****RESOLUTIONS**

27/2. The Conference adopts the proposed way of proceeding and timetable set out in paragraphs 12, 13 and 14 in the Report, and directs Districts and Circuits to ensure that appropriate arrangements are made for the relevant church bodies to fulfil them.

As stated in 15. above, in order to allow the Church to confer fully in discerning God's will in this difficult and divisive matter which will have profound effects on the unity and witness of the church, it is to be hoped that Conference will vote **to amend Resolution 27/2 in order to reject the truncated timetable set out in paragraphs 12, 13 and 14** and, rather than suspend SO 129 (3), retain the two - year consultation period.

¹¹ <http://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/views-of-the-church/talking-of-marriage-and-relationships/talking-of-marriage-and-relationships-frequently-asked-questions/>