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# THE RUNAWAY TRAIN

A Message to Methodists

An urgent call to think again  
about 'God In Love Unites Us'

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# INTRODUCTION

Two verses of scripture come to mind as I write. The first comes from the letter of Jude, whom many scholars believe was the brother of Jesus himself. Towards the beginning of his letter he explains to his readers that, although he had been 'eager to write ... about the salvation we share', there was a pressing concern he must address: 'I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people' (Jude 3). I have drawn much comfort from this verse. There are many things I would much rather have written about, but I too have felt a compulsion to address the denominational debate of the day and urge the people of the Methodist Church – not least their representatives to the Conference (the Methodist Church's ruling body) – to remain faithful to the teaching of the Christian church – 'the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people'.

This denominational debate is focused on the controversial report, *God In Love Unites Us*, and its proposals that the British Methodist Church should affirm cohabitation (that is, sexual intimacy outside the marriage of one man and one woman), change its understanding of marriage in order to extend it towards people of the same sex, and permit such same sex marriages to be solemnised, and civil partnerships blessed, on Methodist Church premises with authorised liturgies. The ratification of these resolutions, which have already been adopted provisionally by the Conference, would, I believe, constitute a departure from the traditional teaching of the Christian Church, would be contrary to the teaching of the Bible and, as I seek to demonstrate in what follows, would be unconstitutional within the Methodist Church.

The second biblical verse that comes to mind is found in Luke's introduction to his Gospel, where he states that he had 'carefully investigated everything from the beginning' regarding the person and work of Jesus, and so had 'decided to write an orderly account ... so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught'. As a contribution to these current debates, I have sought carefully to investigate everything from the beginning, through a painstaking – and often painful – search through the statements and the reports of the Conference over the past three decades since the Methodist Church embarked on its pilgrimage of faith, tracing the development of the Church's pilgrimage which has ultimately led to the proposals of *God In Love Unites Us*. I hope it will play a role in enabling Conference representatives and others within the Methodist Church to assess the certainty or otherwise of things that have been taught by *God In Love Unites Us* and through the process surrounding it.

Much reference is made throughout what follows not only to the doctrine of the Methodist Church – its teaching – but also to its discipline. I use that word in the formal sense with which it is officially used within the Methodist Church, and not in the common sense of being harsh or authoritarian. The discipline of the Church refers to its rules and regulations. It is the skeleton which gives shape and support to the body, enabling it to stand and move effectively and efficiently.

Jesus knew how to distinguish between theological debate and pastoral encounter, and he sets the prime example for us to follow. The clarity of his teaching concerning marriage and divorce in a debate with the religious teachers of his day – in which he reinforced the teaching of the Old Testament (Matthew 19:3-9) – took a very different tone, for example, from his pastoral encounter with the woman at the well (John 4:7-26), though he still remained true to his convictions and enabled her transformation.



The Methodist Church, it seems to me, on these matters has not been so successful in distinguishing between theological debate about principles, on the one hand, and pastoral considerations on the other. What I have written here, I offer as a contribution to theological debate within the Church. Those who seek to remain faithful to the Methodist Church's current position on marriage and relationships – the traditional teaching of the Christian church – have often felt that they have been intimidated into silence. That silence has then been portrayed, by some who argue for change, as approval, acquiescence or apathy. Surely this is not how it should be within the body of Christ.

My own stand for the Methodist Church's current teaching has not been without significant personal cost for myself and my family, as I explain a little in the following chapter. Indeed, I offer this contribution to the debates with some trepidation. Some have warned that, although what I have written is truthful – perhaps because it is truthful – it is likely to generate a great deal of ill will, not only towards the principles I set out, but also towards me personally. It is a sad state of affairs. It shows how real the intimidation felt by those on one side of the debate has been.

I am deeply grateful to those who have read the draft manuscript, for the encouragements they have offered to persevere, and for the insightful comments they have made. It would, in many ways, have been easier not to speak out, or to hide behind anonymity. Yet, I believe I have been given a message to share and the Bible is clear about the responsibility of speaking out, whatever the cost. This came powerfully to me at the Conference of 2019. I chaired a meeting of a group of Conference representatives who were split exactly 50/50 about whether or not they should support the *God In Love Unites Us* resolutions. I ended by saying that I was aware that, in my opposition to the resolutions, I was being an immovable object, and was equally aware that an unstoppable force may be coming against me, but all I could do was speak the truth as I see it.

I returned to my hotel room and, before I got on with my preparation for the next event, turned to my Bible reading for the day. It was to become one of the most profound moments of experiencing the Lord speaking to me directly. The reading set was from Ezekiel 3:

Go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them. You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and strange language, but to the people of Israel – not to many peoples of obscure speech and strange language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you. But the people of Israel will not listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for all the Israelites are hardened and obstinate.

Then, remembering the remarks I had just made about being an immovable object, I read: 'But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are' (Ezekiel 3:4-8). I knew without a shadow of a doubt that my task was to play my part in calling the Methodist people to remain faithful to the Lord and his Word – even though there was no guarantee that anyone would listen. I have had to learn that sometimes faithfulness is simply about speaking out, whether or not anyone listens.

This, then, is my urgent call to Methodists to think again about *God In Love Unites Us*. My message to Conference representatives is this: if you really believe that these proposals are right and that, in voting for them, you are truly representing the people who elected you, then that is clearly how you should vote. The last time they were asked, however, the Methodist people were clear that these proposals were not at all what they wanted. I believe that they depart from the traditional teaching of the Christian church, they depart from the teaching of the Bible and they are unconstitutional within the British Methodist Church.

In the conclusion, I therefore set out alternative resolutions. The first is the most radical for it represents, as far as I can see, the only constitutional way forward: a rejection of *God In Love Unites Us* and the resolutions which flow from it. I set out in the following chapters how the Church has been overly influenced by secular worldviews and political pressure groups. The second resolution therefore enables the Church to take stock, review what has happened and identify how to move forward in a deeply and distinctively Christian way. Given that the pilgrimage of faith has proved to be so divisive and hurtful, the third resolution calls upon the Conference – whatever its decisions – to declare that it will act graciously and generously to those who feel that they will not be able to continue in good conscience within the Methodist Church, or who will be unable by virtue of conscience to continue to uphold the doctrine and discipline of the Church – on whichever side of the debate they have found themselves.

In what follows, I trace the journey of the pilgrimage of faith, on which the Methodist Church embarked in 1993. Over the years, it has become increasingly clear that the train has run out of control. As the Conference comes to vote in the summer of 2021, I believe this will be the final opportunity to bring the Methodist Church's runaway train under control before it finally derails. It will involve nothing less than a change of the direction of travel the Conference has already adopted. In other words, it will involve what is known in the Bible as 'repentance'.



It was a pilgrimage on which we set out without, apparently, knowing the destination, though it seems to have become much more clear recently. Many of us have found ourselves a very long way from where we thought we were.

The British Methodist Church embarked on what it described as a 'pilgrimage of faith' in 1993 when the Conference – its highest ruling body – adopted resolutions on human sexuality, which I will consider more fully in the next chapter. This chapter gives an account of the journey from the perspective of one of the passengers, my own pilgrimage of faith within the Methodist Church. There have been three important landmarks on that journey: my ordination as a Methodist minister in 2006, my appointment as Chair of Methodist Evangelicals Together in 2013 and the curtailment of my role as chaplain to a Methodist school in 2019.

## Affirming Christian Teaching

When I candidated for the ministry of the Methodist Church, the Church's teaching on marriage and relationships was supposedly clear, encapsulated in the 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality. Resolution 4 stated:

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.<sup>1</sup>

Like all candidates at the time, I was therefore required to sign a form to affirm that:

I have received, read and understood the resolutions on human sexuality adopted by the Conference of 1993, and declare that there is nothing which in consequence will prevent me from proceeding to serve the Methodist Church in ordained ministry.<sup>2</sup>

Little could I have known at the time, despite the requirement to make such an affirmation, how far the Church would move away from the resolutions in less than two decades.

I joined the executive committee of Headway, a predecessor organisation of Methodist Evangelicals Together, shortly after being stationed as a probationer minister. Debates around marriage and relationships were on our agenda from my first executive committee meeting because the Methodist Conference was in the process of considering reports on the pilgrimage of faith. We recognised then that a move away from the 1993 Resolutions could place evangelicals in the Methodist Church in an untenable

<sup>1</sup> *The Constitution, Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, (2020), vol. 2 p. 805.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Pilgrimage of Faith* (2006), section C1, available at: [https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/Conf06\\_Pilgrimage\\_of\\_faith\\_pc.doc](https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/Conf06_Pilgrimage_of_faith_pc.doc). The 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality were then known as the Derby Resolutions, after the location of the Conference at which they were adopted.

position. Many senior ministers said that, should the Conference move away from the resolutions, they would have to answer ‘No’ when next asked if they continue ‘to teach our doctrines and administer our discipline’, as ministers are required to affirm each year; others said that they would resign. There was talk of churches making unilateral declarations of independence. A post-Conference gathering was organised to enable evangelicals to meet and consider what to do should there be a change to the Church’s position. I remember sitting in the meetings, being powerfully struck by the thought, ‘I haven’t even been ordained yet and we are already thinking that we may not be able to remain within the Methodist Church’.

When a report on the pilgrimage of faith was published before the Conference of 2005, Headway issued a response. We stated that:

In the light of our guiding principles, the [1993] Resolutions, taken in the order in which they were adopted and providing that a distinction is made between sexual orientation and practice, seem to outline an acceptable position for the church to take.<sup>3</sup>

We also noted with concern, however, that the report provided ‘anecdotal evidence that these resolutions are not always adhered to within the life of the church’ and we called ‘for a greater observation of these resolutions.’<sup>4</sup>

The debate continued at the Conference of 2006 which, in the end, re-affirmed the 1993 Resolutions. I was ordained on the Sunday of that Conference and the pilgrimage and faith report was debated soon afterwards. The former President of the Conference who ordained me was the Rev Prof. Peter Stephens. During the pilgrimage of faith debate, he said ‘Yesterday, on behalf of this Conference, I ordained people into our ministry. I asked them the question, “Do you believe the doctrines of the Christian faith as this Church has received them?” They each answered, “I do” and therefore,’ he said, ‘I ordained them.’

He went on to argue that it is not the task of the Christian Church to change doctrine, but to receive it, treasure it and faithfully pass it on to the next generation. So, he argued, the 1993 Resolutions which affirm the traditional teaching of the Church could not be changed. Being amongst those who had been ordained by him the previous day, the statement has remained clearly in my memory. It was, and is, a perfect summary of my own understanding.

## Reaffirming our Position

The next landmark, looking out through the window of the runaway train, came shortly after my appointment as Chair of Methodist Evangelicals Together. In 2007, Headway became Methodist Evangelicals Together (MET) and, having served on the executive committee in various roles since 2005, I was appointed Chair in January 2013.

By the time I entered a second term of office, debates around marriage and relationships had returned to our agenda. In 2016, the Methodist Conference established a new task group to assess whether the Church’s definition of marriage should be revisited. Opinion was divided within MET as to how we should respond. In an attempt to find a consensus, we convened a representative group of leading evangelicals to hold a consultation. In the meeting, it felt at times as if we were edging our way towards an agreement, but then it all started to unravel. In the end, it was said to me that a consensus was clearly not going to be possible and so, as Chair, I would have to decide with the executive committee how to lead MET: ‘make a decision and go for it!’

I felt disheartened by it all, but as I talked it through with colleagues, a sense of peace returned. I came to see that, although I would rather have led by consensus, as that was not going to be possible, I would have to lead by conviction alone. My conviction has always been that the teaching of the Bible is clear in these matters and we must remain faithful to it. I could only continue as Chair of MET if we remained faithful to the biblical understanding of marriage and relationships, as with all other issues.

That position was affirmed by the executive committee. By this stage, we were at the mid-point of my second term of office as Chair and we decided to bring forward the next elections by a year. The constitution requires a special resolution to enter a third term of office, which the executive committee prepared. It stated that, in re-electing me as Chair, MET would also be re-affirming the traditional, biblical understanding of marriage. I was very clear that, if the members did not want to be led in that direction, a different Chair would be needed.

The special resolution was adopted unanimously by the Annual General Meeting. Whilst individual members of MET may take a different view, the movement as a whole committed to remaining faithful to the biblical view of marriage and relationships – what the Methodist Conference has recognised as the traditional teaching of the Christian Church. We have therefore sought to play our part in the conversations within the Methodist Church, submitting our own position to the task group, providing resources to our members and occasionally making materials available to the wider Church through district synods.

Then came the Conference of 2018. It was an experience I found unexpectedly and extremely difficult. I can only describe what I felt as a sense of bereavement; it hung over me and was inescapable. It suddenly seemed to me that my time as a minister within the British Methodist Church might be coming to an end very shortly.

I had heard that weekend that there were moves to push through, there and then, a change to Standing Orders which would alter the Methodist Church’s definition of marriage in such a way as to permit same-sex marriages to be held on Methodist Church premises, conducted by Methodist ministers, which would be a fundamental change to our doctrine and discipline. Such a change would mean that, out of conscience, I would no longer be able to make the annual affirmation that I ‘continue to preach our doctrines and administer our discipline’. My wife and I talked at length and settled in our hearts and minds that we must remain faithful, even if that would mean risking home, stipend and station.

So it was that, with a strong sense of bereavement, I went to the Conference of 2018 as a visitor on the Monday to host the MET Reception. The scene that met my eyes as I walked into the exhibition area on arrival did nothing to ease my feelings. Everywhere I looked, there were images of rainbows: posters, banners, tablecloths, shoe laces, lanyards, bracelets, shopping bags, leaflets. The Methodist Conference’s exhibition area and a significant number of its representatives were emblazoned with an image that is supposed to symbolise the love and faithfulness of God and yet has been commandeered by a secular political lobbying movement. The doors appeared to have been thrown wide open to allow its ideology wholesale into the Church without the slightest discernment. Throughout the morning, I watched as fairly senior ministers had whispered conversations in corners; a lot of people were rushing around to see if they could achieve 51% of the votes to make the changes to Standing Orders. It all seemed to be behaviour that was utterly unbecoming of the body of Christ.

In the event, the vote to change Standing Orders at that stage was not put. However, another notice of motion was passed, entitled ‘Direction of Travel’, which directed the task group on marriage and relationships to ensure that those who feel called by God to solemnise same sex marriages will be enabled to do so. The due process of the task group’s work was thus circumvented and their hand was forced.

## A Rejection of our Position

The final landmark through the window of the Methodist Church’s runaway train came as the fruit of the task group’s labour was brought to the Conference of 2019 in the form of the report, *God In Love Unites Us*. Amongst its resolutions, addressed more fully in later chapters, it proposed that the Methodist Church affirms cohabitation, expands the definition of marriage to include people of the same sex, and enables civil partnerships and same sex marriages to be solemnised and blessed on Methodist Church premises with authorised liturgies.

I watched online as the resolutions were passed provisionally by an overwhelming majority. The strong sense of bereavement, which I had felt the previous year, returned and I was surprised to be so affected a second time by what I had come to see as inevitable. Responding to the vote, MET issued a statement to the Christian press and I gave interviews as Chair to Christian radio stations. I said that I was saddened by the vote; that MET holds that the gospel is for all; that the good news includes God’s purposes for marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one woman and the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy; and that any other understanding undermines the gospel.

I was stationed as the chaplain to a Methodist school at the time. Although it should have come as no surprise to anyone that a Methodist minister serving in a Methodist school would hold the current doctrinal position of the Methodist Church, my comments, which were later quoted online, were subsequently circulated amongst the staff, pupil and parent bodies at the school. The response very quickly made my position within the school utterly untenable and, after much consideration and conversation, I agreed to seek an early curtailment to the appointment. The situation continued to go from bad to worse and, as a family, we faced an impossible situation in which we looked set to lose, not only our base for ministry, but also our income and home.

<sup>3</sup>Headway, *The Pilgrimage of Faith Report, (2005); available at: www.methodistevangelicals.org.uk/Articles/523602/The\_Pilgrimage\_of.aspx.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

I have been very grateful indeed to have since received the formal affirmation that I am – and have always been – a minister in good standing in Full Connexion with the Methodist Church and that there has never been a suggestion that I acted outside the discipline of the Church. However, the experience demonstrated to me that, although *God In Love Unites Us* proposes a ‘mixed economy’ in which those who hold differing views of marriage may coexist peacefully and respectfully within the Church, such a vision is unworkable. It already seems to have created ‘no go’ areas within the Church for those who entered Methodist ministry in good faith, seeking to hold to the tradition and teaching of the Christian Church, to which the Methodist Church at the time was itself committed. Indeed, some aspects of the experience surrounding the curtailment are yet to be resolved. I am left with the concern that the conditions have been created which enable those who wish to do so to marginalise and remove evangelicals within the life of the Methodist Church.

I should add by way of postscript that, in the midst of the difficulties of those days, I had a routine meeting with leaders of the Free Methodist Church who have sought to offer support and encouragement to MET within these debates. Naturally, we spoke of the trials I was facing. To my astonishment, they approached me a little later with the offer of a post and a commitment to enable me to continue to serve as Chair of MET. By that time, I had already arranged an appointment with the Methodist Church’s Stationing Advisory Committee in an attempt to find a way forward. With the offer from the Free Methodist Church, I was able to request permission from the committee to serve another denomination whilst remaining a minister in Full Connexion with the British Methodist Church. After a very supportive conversation, the committee recommended that I be granted the permission and the President subsequently wrote to me to ratify the decision.

My family and I have been immensely grateful both to the Free Methodist Church for their warm and generous welcome and to the Stationing Advisory Committee for their expression of support and Christian unity. I am delighted now to serve – as a minister in Full Connexion with the British Methodist Church – as Lead Pastor of Freedom Church, a Free Methodist church plant in Kingswood, Bristol, returning to a place so central to our Methodist heritage.

## Looking Forward

As I look through the window of the Methodist Church’s runaway train, in what has been at times a very bumpy journey, I look to the future both with a sense of inevitability, but also with a sense of hope that we might choose a better way forward.

My own message to the representatives of the Conference which will vote on the ratification of *God In Love Unites Us* is this: if you honestly believe that God is calling you to vote to move away from the Church’s current position on marriage – the biblical view, the traditional teaching of the Christian Church held by the overwhelming majority of Christians throughout history and around the world today – and that, in doing so, you are being faithful to the people you represent, then you should vote that way – for the ratification of *God In Love Unites Us*.

For myself, I believe that such a vote would go against God’s Word, God’s ways and God’s will and therefore, I must do what I can to sound a warning. As I will seek to show in the following chapters, the issue has become a runaway train, out of control within the Methodist Church and a decision to ratify *God In Love Unites Us* will, I believe, be perilous for the British Methodist Church and the people it seeks to serve. Such a move away from Christian tradition and teaching – more importantly, such a move away from the teaching of the Bible – will mean that I, and others like me, will no longer be able to affirm that we continue to teach our doctrines and administer our discipline. In those circumstances, I cannot see how I will be allowed to remain in Full Connexion with the British Methodist Church, but it must be for the Church to decide – should it ratify the proposals – what it will then do with the people in our position. There will be similar questions, not only for ministers, but also for Local Preachers, local churches, and members.

In the following chapters, I will set out what I believe to be very good reasons for retaining – remaining faithful to – the current position of the Methodist Church, which we have held, and which has held us together, for many years. That will mean a rejection of the proposals of *God In Love Unites Us*, especially those which affirm cohabitation, change our definition of marriage by expanding it to include same sex couples, and authorise liturgies for such marriage and civil partnership ceremonies.

This, then, is a call to the Methodist people to think again: to bring Methodism’s runaway train under control and to change our direction of travel – a call to what used to be known as ‘repentance’.



The debates of the present day, which have led to the proposals of *God In Love Unites Us*, can be traced back to three formational documents written in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> These form the track bed along which the Methodist Church’s runaway train has careered. I refer to them as formational rather than foundational documents because the Bible itself must be the foundation of the Christian Church’s teaching and practice: ‘Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them is like a man who built his house on rock’ (Matthew 7:24). I will consider the place of the Bible within these debates in a later chapter.

These three documents have formed the framework for the understanding of marriage and relationships within the British Methodist Church. They are the Conference Statement of 1992, *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage; The 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality*; and *Christian Preparation for Marriage*, a report of the 1998 Conference. In this chapter, I will present the framework for the Methodist Church’s understanding of marriage and relationships as it emerges from each of these documents in turn. As *God In Love Unites Us* proposes fundamental changes to the Methodist Church’s position, affirming cohabitation (that is, by implication, sexually intimate relationships other than marriage), changing the definition of marriage to include same sex couples, and permitting same sex marriages and civil partnerships to be blessed on Methodist Church premises with Methodist ministers officiating, I will focus particularly on the teaching of the documents relating to these matters.

## ‘A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage’ (1992)

The first formational document of the track bed on which the Methodist Church’s runaway train has careered is a Statement of the Conference. It is therefore a document with the highest degree of authority within the Methodist Church.<sup>2</sup> Statements are adopted by the Conference after a lengthy process and careful consideration and constitute ‘a considered Statement of the judgment of the Conference on some major issue or issues of faith and practice, and framed with a view to standing as such for some years.’<sup>3</sup> The status of this statement will be an important issue later, when its relationship to *God In Love Unites Us* is considered. This Statement of 1992 remains the most authoritative presentation on matters of marriage and relationships within the British Methodist Church.

The report affirms the value both of singleness and of marriage within the church and the world. Important aspects of the understanding of marriage within the Methodist Church emerge from the statement. It presents a three-fold understanding of marriage, a three-fold purpose for marriage and a recognition of the central importance of the image of marriage within the Bible’s

<sup>1</sup> Older documents which are beyond the scope of this chapter, but are nevertheless relevant to the subjects, include *The Nature of the Christian Church* (1937) which identifies the continuity of the Methodist Church with the church of the past and locates our denomination within the one church of God (available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/2040/fo-statement-nature-of-the-christian-church-1937.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/2040/fo-statement-nature-of-the-christian-church-1937.pdf)); and *The Christian View of Marriage and the Family* (1939), printed in *Methodist Conference: Declarations and Statements* (Division of Social Responsibility, 1981), pp. 64-74.

<sup>2</sup> This became an important point for the report brought to the Conference of 2018, *Marriage and Relationships Task Group: Interim Report* (2018), paragraph 10, as noted in the next chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Standing Order 129, *The Constitution, Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, (CPD, 2020), vol. 2, p. 331; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/18420/conf-2020-cpd-vol-2.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/18420/conf-2020-cpd-vol-2.pdf).

message as a whole. It reaffirms these commitments, particularly the conviction that sexual intimacy is intended to be confined to the marriage relationship, whilst being fully aware that societal norms are very different.

### *A Three-Fold Understanding of Marriage*

Recognising that the law of the land was, at the time, based upon the Christian understanding of marriage, the Statement observes from the relevant legislation that ‘marriage is intended to be a permanent relationship (the lifelong “union”) between a man and a woman’.<sup>4</sup> It observes that the Christian tradition adds greater depth to that understanding, implied by the biblical phrase ‘the two shall become one flesh’.<sup>5</sup> The *one flesh creating* nature of sexual intercourse, verified by reference to Genesis 2:24 and 1 Corinthians 6:16, leads the Statement to restrict sexual intercourse, in Methodist understanding, to within the marriage relationship.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, a three-fold understanding of marriage emerged and was made explicit within the doctrine and discipline of the British Methodist Church: marriage is the (1) *lifelong union* of (2) *one man and one woman* and (3) *the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy*.

### *A Three-Fold Purpose for Marriage*

The Statement emphasises various aspects of marriage in Christian understanding. In marriage, man and woman are equal partners;<sup>7</sup> sexual intimacy is affirmed as positive against the backdrop of some Christians traditions which have at times viewed such activity as very negative,<sup>8</sup> and the spiritual significance of marriage is emphasised. In such an understanding, the marriage relationship provides ‘a remedy for sin’ in that it is ‘the permitted setting’ for sexual activity, which can so easily be misused and abused.<sup>9</sup> Marriage is rooted in God’s nature, especially in his covenant love.<sup>10</sup> It is intended to be characterised by companionship, and is further understood to be the natural setting for the creation of children.<sup>11</sup> The Statement therefore encapsulates and affirms the traditional three-fold purpose of marriage: (1) *companionship*, (2) *a remedy for sin* and (3) *the procreation of children*.

### *A Central Image of the Bible*

The Statement recognises the great importance placed upon the image of marriage within the Bible, understanding it to be central to the whole message. It offers a picture of the relationship between God and his people in the Old Testament and Christ and his church in the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> The significance of marriage in Christian teaching suggests that, although it is not understood within the Methodist Church to be a sacrament (a term reserved for ‘the two great acts clearly commanded by Christ in the Gospels: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper’), it may indeed be understood as sacramental, in that, through such relationships, many experience God’s presence in the world.<sup>13</sup>

### *Standing Out from Societal Norms*

This 1992 Statement recognises that the understanding of marriage and relationships it presents is very different from the norms of wider society, particularly in its emphasis on spiritual significance, its confining of sexual intimacy to the marriage relationship, and its restriction of divorce to exceptional circumstances.<sup>14</sup> It nevertheless maintains these unique convictions and suggests that, in offering marriage services, the Church proclaims the Christian vision of marriage to all present.<sup>15</sup>

## ‘The 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality’

The second formational document of the track bed for the Methodist Church’s runaway train is *The 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality*, originally known as the Derby Resolutions, named after the location of the Conference at which they were adopted. Consisting of six resolutions which are printed in volume 2 of *The Constitution, Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, the most relevant resolutions for the questions considered here are numbers 3, 4 and 6.<sup>16</sup> These affirm the traditional teaching of

4 A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage (1992), paragraph 48; available at: [www.methodist.org.uk/media/2106/meth-statement-family-life-single-person-marriage-1992-0714.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/2106/meth-statement-family-life-single-person-marriage-1992-0714.pdf).

5 A Christian Understanding, paragraph 49.

6 A Christian Understanding, paragraphs 31, 42, 60, 66.

7 A Christian Understanding, paragraphs 57-59.

8 A Christian Understanding, paragraph 62.

9 A Christian Understanding, paragraph 63.

10 A Christian Understanding, paragraphs 67-68, 78-79.

11 A Christian Understanding, paragraph 73.

12 A Christian Understanding, paragraph 76.

13 A Christian Understanding, paragraph 81.

14 A Christian Understanding, paragraphs 42 and 66.

15 A Christian Understanding, paragraph 56.

16 CPD, vol. 2, p. 805.

the Christian Church, maintain a distinction between sexual orientation and sexual practice, stand in the order in which they were passed, and form part of the discipline of the Methodist Church.

### *Affirming the Traditional Teaching of the Christian Church*

Resolution 4 states, ‘the Conference reaffirms the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality; namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it’.<sup>17</sup> All Christians are called to chastity (celibacy) outside of marriage and faithfulness within it. In the particular context of sexuality, this refers to sexual intimacy – abstinence from sexual intimacy for all outside of marriage and exclusive sexual faithfulness within marriage. Attempts now to widen the meaning of ‘chastity’ to accommodate any other sexual behaviour are disingenuous. The Methodist Conference has recognised this as the teaching of the Christian Church and affirmed it as its own teaching. The same resolution continues with the expectation that all within the Church will uphold these standards in doctrine and lifestyle: ‘the Conference directs that this affirmation is made clear to all candidates for ministry, office and membership’ and indicates that the current disciplinary processes of the Church are adequate for addressing breaches of the resolution.

### *Maintaining a Distinction between Orientation and Practice*

The previous resolution, number 3, states that ‘a person shall not be debarred from the Church on the grounds of sexual orientation in itself’.<sup>18</sup> Thus, taken together, these two resolutions make a clear distinction between sexual orientation and sexual practice. No person is to be debarred from the Church on the grounds of sexual orientation under resolution 3 and all persons within the Church – that is, ministers, officers and members – regardless of sexual orientation, are expected to uphold the commitment to chastity outside of marriage and fidelity within.

### *Standing in Order*

The distinction between sexual orientation and sexual practice that is clearly articulated in resolutions 3 and 4 resolves what may be perceived as a contradiction introduced in Resolution 6. It is here that the concept of a ‘pilgrimage of faith’ is first introduced:

The Conference recognises, affirms and celebrates the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men in the Church. The 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.<sup>19</sup>

The President of the Conference made a statement in 1996, printed in the Daily Record of that Conference, to clarify that the resolutions stand in the order in which they are passed. Therefore, a later resolution cannot contradict an earlier one. Rather, earlier resolutions help to interpret later ones. He quoted concluding remarks from the 1993 debate:

Both 4 and 6 were adopted, and in that order, in the one session of Conference. The Conference voted on Resolution 6 on the basis that Resolution 4 was not contradicted by it. The six resolutions must be taken together.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, in Resolution 6, the Conference recognises, affirms and celebrates the participation and ministry of people who were lesbian or gay by orientation (as established in Resolution 3) and who choose to abstain from sexually active relationships (as required by Resolution 4).

As will be noted in the following chapter, the pilgrimage of faith is not defined in precise terms, other than a general commitment ‘to combat repression and discrimination, to work for justice and human rights and to give dignity and worth to people whatever their sexuality’. However, following the principle that earlier resolutions cannot be contradicted by later ones, it is clear that:

- the pilgrimage of faith cannot be interpreted as a determination – or even a possibility – to move away from, or change, the Methodist Church’s commitment to the traditional teaching of the Christian Church – chastity (celibacy) for all outside of marriage and fidelity for all within.

17 Ibid. The resolution adopted the common contemporary meaning of ‘chastity’ to denote sexual abstinence, what has been known as ‘celibacy’ or, to be more strictly accurate, ‘continence’ within the traditional teaching of the Christian church. That such a meaning of ‘chastity’ is intended is clear in the way it is contrasted with ‘fidelity’ within marriage. This has been the longstanding usage of the term within the Methodist Church; see, for example, *The Christian View of Marriage and the Family* (1939), which states: ‘The Christian religion has always sought to confine physical intercourse within the married state, and has enjoined complete abstinence or chastity outside it’; *Methodist Conference: Declarations and Statements (Division of Social Responsibility, 1981)*, p. 72. *Sexually intimate relationships outside of marriage, including all those between people of the same sex, have always been excluded from ‘chaste’ behaviour with the traditional teaching of the Christian church. See, for example, Herbert McCabe, The Teaching of the Catholic Church: A New Catechism of Christian Doctrine (London: Incorporated Catholic Truth Society, 1985), pp. 43-44.*

18 Ibid

19 Ibid

20 Daily Record, Representative Session, June 1996, 10/9.

- Resolution 6 cannot be understood to suggest that a commitment to chastity outside and fidelity within marriage is a denial of justice and human rights, or of individual dignity and worth, and that the Conference therefore committed to changing its teaching.
- Resolution 6 also cannot mean that it is repressive or discriminatory not to admit someone to ministry, office or membership because they are sexually active outside of marriage – or because the Church cannot be reasonably satisfied that their lifestyle accords with Resolution 4 – and that the Conference therefore committed to opening all such positions to people regardless of sexual practice.

It is fundamental to the Methodist Church's understanding of human sexuality that Resolution 6 must be understood in the light of Resolution 4. The resolutions stand to this day in the order in which they were passed.

### *Part of the Discipline of the Methodist Church*

It is important to note that these resolutions form part of the doctrine and discipline of the Methodist Church. This should have been clear from the moment they were passed but, for the sake of clarity, was made explicit in the Daily Record of the Conference of 1996. The President quoted the affirmation given by the Chairs of District:

The doctrine, practice and discipline of the Methodist Church is based on the Deed of Union, Standing Orders and the Resolutions of the Annual Conference. This applies as fully to the field of human sexuality as to any other.<sup>21</sup>

As will be noted later, this has been further confirmed in subsequent Conference reports. It has been most significant in the decision to remove the requirement to draw specific attention to the resolutions in the statements candidates are required to sign on the understanding that they are included within the more general commitment to our doctrine and discipline, and to print them in the guidance section of CPD. Therefore, despite assurances that the Doctrinal Standards are not being changed in the proposals of *God In Love Unites Us* – a technicality to which I will return in the concluding chapter – a change to these resolutions, or a decision to disregard them implicitly or explicitly – would constitute a change to the doctrine and discipline of the Methodist Church which ministers are required to affirm each year.

### ‘Christian Preparation for Marriage’ (1998)

The third and final formational document of the track bed for the Methodist Church's runaway train is the 1998 Conference report, *Christian Preparation for Marriage*.<sup>22</sup> Its remit was to focus particularly on issues of remarriage within the Methodist Church after divorce, but to do so within the context of a broader consideration of marriage. It therefore reaches a number of conclusions, not only regarding remarriage, but principally concerning a greater emphasis on Christian preparation for marriage, as reflected in the report's title.

Most significantly for the purposes of the contemporary debates, it is from this report that the Methodist Church's current definition of marriage emerges. The report sets out the Bible's teaching on divorce and also introduces into the Church the concept of a conscience clause, in this instance concerning the remarriage of divorcees. Having considered each of these aspects of the report in turn, I will address a question that is sometimes raised within the contemporary debates about the acceptability of such conscience clauses.

#### *Definition of Marriage*

The definition of marriage which first emerged in this report is now contained within Standing Order 011A as follows:

The Methodist Church believes that marriage is a gift of God and that it is God's intention that a marriage should be a lifelong union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman.<sup>23</sup>

Thus it includes two aspects of the three-fold understanding of marriage noted above: marriage is a *lifelong union of one man and one woman*. The third element – of marriage being the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy – is omitted in this context, as it has little bearing on the purpose of the Standing Order which is to set out the Methodist Church's policy regarding the remarriage of divorcees within the Church.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>22</sup> *Christian Preparation for Marriage (1998)*; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/2107/conf-christian-preparation-for-marriage-1998.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/2107/conf-christian-preparation-for-marriage-1998.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> CPD, vol. 2, SO 011A (1).

### *The Bible's Teaching about Divorce*

The Bible's teaching about divorce is clear: whilst divorce is always deeply regrettable and mostly prohibited, it is permitted in particular circumstances, with the implication that remarriage is also permissible in those situations. The 1998 report itself highlights the relevant passages:

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus contrasts Moses' commandment with God's original intention in creation [see Genesis 2:24; this verse is also quoted in Ephesians 5:31], prohibits anyone from separating what God has joined, and declares that if either spouse divorces their partner and marries another, they commit adultery [Mark 10:2-12; cf. Luke 16:18]. In Matthew, however, Jesus makes an exception: the man who divorces his wife for unchastity does not commit adultery when he marries again [Matthew 5:31-32; 19:1-9]. In 1 Corinthians, Paul refers to the Lord's command that neither wife nor husband should separate from their spouse. He then goes on to say (on his own authority) that, although believers should remain married to unbelieving partners (assuming the latter are willing), if the unbelieving partner separates, believers should 'let it be so' [1 Corinthians 7:10-16].<sup>24</sup>

### *Conscience Clause*

The other significant development presented in the report is the introduction of a conscience clause. It is stated later within the same standing order:

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.<sup>25</sup>

Those who are so prevented by conscience from conducting such a marriage are required to refer the couple to a colleague not so prevented.

The question is sometimes asked within the contemporary debates: why is the conscience clause proposed in *God In Love Unites Us*, offering protection to those committed to remaining faithful to the Bible's teaching, not acceptable when the conscience clause relating to the remarriage of divorcees is acceptable? As demonstrated above, the Bible's teaching on divorce is clear: divorce and remarriage are permitted in particular circumstances. I will explore the Bible's teaching on sexual intimacy in a later chapter; here, it is sufficient to note that each and every form of sexually intimate same sex relationship is prohibited in the Bible. I will consider the conscience clause proposed in *God In Love Unites Us* in chapter 7. It should, however, already be clear to those familiar with the proposals that the two conscience clauses are very different. In the light of the Bible's teaching, the one regarding divorce is acceptable; the one regarding same sex marriage is not.

### The Framework of Marriage within the Methodist Church

Such is the track bed along which the Methodist Church's runaway train has careered. From the three formational documents, the following framework has emerged of the Methodist Church's understanding of marriage and relationships.

The Methodist Church holds a **three-fold understanding of marriage** as the *lifelong union of one man and one woman and the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy*, and a **three-fold purpose for marriage** of *companionship, a remedy for sin and the procreation of children*. The image of marriage is **of central importance in the message of the Bible**. The Church's understanding of marriage is **unique within wider society**. In holding to this view of marriage, the Methodist Church affirms **the traditional teaching of the Christian Church** and, in so doing, maintains an important **distinction between sexual orientation and sexual practice**. This understanding of marriage is contained within Standing Orders and is **part of the doctrine and discipline of the Church**. As will be further considered later, there is a fundamental difference between the **conscience clause** for divorce, which is in line with the teaching of the Bible, and the one proposed for same sex marriages which is not.

Having identified the framework of marriage within the Methodist Church which emerges from the three formational documents – the track bed – I turn next to the rails laid upon that bed; first, the pilgrimage of faith and, second, the Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion agenda. It is along these rails that the runaway train has careered. I consider each, in turn, in the following chapters.

<sup>24</sup> *Christian Preparation*, paragraph 1.10. For a fuller treatment of this topic, see the work of Richard Hays, whose writing on homosexuality I will consider more fully in the next chapter; on divorce and remarriage: Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation – A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1996), pp. 347-378.

<sup>25</sup> CPD, vol. 2, SO 011A (3).



3.

## THE FIRST RAIL & THE FIRST SHUNTER: THE PILGRIMAGE OF FAITH & THE REQUEST FOR EVIDENCE

There are two parallel rails along which the Methodist Church's runaway train has careered: the pilgrimage of faith on one side, and the Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion agenda on the other. These rails will be the focus of the next three chapters.

The train has been shunted along the pilgrimage of faith by two engines: the first, a Notice of Motion proposed at the Conference of 2003 and the second, a Memorial brought to the Conference in 2012.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I will consider the effect of the first shunter and the work it set in motion.

### The First Engine: Requesting Evidence

In 2003, Notice of Motion 49 asked that evidence of the pilgrimage of faith be brought to a future Conference, 'that we might better articulate to others our commitment to justice as revealed in our calling'.<sup>2</sup> The Conference established a working party to gather the requested evidence and report back to the Conference. It emphasised that this work should be done in the light of all six of the 1993 Resolutions.

The working party subsequently brought reports to the Conferences of 2005 and 2006, concluding its work with a final report to the Conference of 2008. I will consider these reports together and identify the significant principles arising from them which are relevant for the contemporary debates. The reports present the requested evidence in terms of experiences of repression and the views held across the Connexion and show that there is not a clear understanding of the meaning of the pilgrimage of faith across the Connexion. They confirm that the Church's present position on marriage and relationships – as set out in the 1993 Resolutions – is part of the discipline of the Church. They also, however, present evidence which implies that the Church's discipline is not consistently adhered to across the Connexion. They highlight the diversity of views within the Methodist Church, call for further work to address the ways in which Methodists may be enabled to live with contradictory convictions, and encourage open dialogue and a respect for the 'Christian integrity' of opposing views. They consider the relevance of new legislation to the life of the Church and determine that Methodists may enter into civil partnerships, but that those relationships may not be blessed on Methodist Church premises, nor could there be authorised liturgies for such blessings. Finally, they address the question of whether the 1993 Resolutions ought to be revisited. Having considered each of these aspects of the reports in turn, I will then reflect on their overall tone. Other issues arising which are common to a number of the ensuing reports, I will address together in a later chapter: the narrative nature of the reports which simply describe the diversity of the Methodist Church without evaluation and their reliance on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

<sup>1</sup> A Notice of Motion is simply a proposal, made by any two members of the Conference, on which the Conference votes (CPD, (2020), vol. 2, Standing Order 132). According to the Methodist Church website, A memorial is simply a question from a circuit or district to the Conference. It asks the Conference to take an action, or change a policy, or make a statement on an issue.' See [www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-conference/conference-2018/about-the-conference/memorials-to-the-conference/about-memorials/](http://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-conference/conference-2018/about-the-conference/memorials-to-the-conference/about-memorials/).

<sup>2</sup> The text of the Notice of Motion is reproduced in the later Conference report, Pilgrimage of Faith (2005), paragraph 1; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/co\\_17\\_pilgrimageoffaith\\_0805.doc](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/co_17_pilgrimageoffaith_0805.doc).

### Experiences of Repression

From its review of the evidence, the 2005 report draws a remarkable conclusion which surely deserves further reflection and yet is stated without comment: 'there is no evidence of non-acceptance of people with a homosexual orientation who choose not to be sexually active'.<sup>3</sup> This is a very significant finding which demonstrates that the Methodist Church has implemented the commitments of the 1993 Resolutions. The ministry of gay and lesbian people (by orientation and not by practice) is celebrated within the Methodist Church and no one is debarred from the life of the Church on the grounds of sexual orientation in itself. Such evidence may be taken to suggest that the Methodist Church had, in some respects at least, reached the destination of its pilgrimage.

The report does, however, find evidence that other forms of repression continue: of lesbians and gay men on the one hand and, on the other, of people who believe that sexual activity between two men or two women is wrong.<sup>4</sup> The latter is easier to evaluate: it is clearly not appropriate for people who hold to the teaching of the Methodist Church to experience repression in the Church on the grounds of holding to that teaching.

The other form of repression – of lesbians and gay men – is made a more complex matter to evaluate for the two reasons that, firstly, 'repression' is not defined and, secondly, the report has already noted that people who are lesbian or gay by orientation and who choose not to be sexually active do not face non-acceptance.

What, then, is meant by lesbians and gay men continuing to experience repression in the Methodist Church? Given the first conclusion regarding no non-acceptance, this repression must be experienced by lesbians and gay men who are sexually active. Such lifestyles, of course, are not in line with the doctrine and discipline of the Methodist Church.

If the repression they experience refers to being treated rudely and ungraciously then clearly that is unacceptable within the Methodist Church and there would still be progress to be made on the pilgrimage of faith. If, however, they were being prevented from holding office because the Church could not reasonably be assured that their lifestyle accorded with the 1993 Resolutions – namely the commitment to chastity outside and fidelity within marriage – then that is a different matter; it would be entirely appropriate to debar them from office on those grounds and that should not be classed as repression. The ambiguity makes it difficult to progress, and avoid retrograde steps, in the pilgrimage of faith and may even be misleading.

### Changing Views

Other evidence is presented relating to views held within the Methodist Church. The 2005 report states that there is evidence that some are 'moving towards the full inclusion of lesbians and gay men in stable and committed relationships', 'some are moving from a position of acceptance of lesbians and gay men in sexual activity to a belief that it is not acceptable Christian conduct', and others 'hold substantially the same view as in 1993'.<sup>5</sup>

Such conclusions, presented without further comment and with no explanation of how they relate to the pilgrimage, may give the impression that the pilgrimage of faith is concerned primarily with changing such views. The views are not evaluated, and yet clearly a move towards full inclusion of people who are sexually active outside of marriage is not in line with the doctrine and discipline of the Methodist Church. Furthermore, if the pilgrimage of faith was indeed concerned primarily with changing views, it would be a futile task: policing the beliefs people hold is impossible – on a par with George Orwell's Thought Police; all that can be judged successfully is whether a person's behaviour aligns with the doctrine and discipline of the Church.

### The Meaning of the Pilgrimage

This confusion is not helped by the fact that, as was noted in the previous chapter, the pilgrimage of faith is not closely defined in the 1993 Resolutions and no further definitions are offered in these reports. There are at least two consequences to this: firstly, it must make the gathering of evidence of something so loosely defined very difficult and, secondly, it means that the purpose of the pilgrimage could be easily misunderstood.

<sup>3</sup> Pilgrimage of Faith (2005), paragraph 15.

<sup>4</sup> Pilgrimage of Faith (2005), paragraph 15.

<sup>5</sup> Pilgrimage of Faith (2005), paragraph 15.



The 2005 Report highlights that there was no clear understanding of what was meant by the ‘pilgrimage of faith’ across the Connexion.<sup>6</sup> Yet there is no attempt to clarify the definition or correct misunderstandings and therefore no discernible intention to uphold the authority of previous decisions of the Conference.

Instead, the 2005 report asserts that ‘to talk of “pilgrimage” is to envision a journey the exact nature of which is unknown’. However, the fact that the exact destination may not be known does not mean that any and all destinations are possible or permissible. The previous chapter shows that the 1993 Resolutions certainly do not permit any and every destination. In chapter 6, I will show that this is also not the case with regard to the Doctrinal Standards, not least in their commitment to the authority of scripture. Yet, all of this is left unaddressed within the reports, which allow the ambiguity – and the harm and pain that accompanies it – to continue.

## The Discipline of the Church

The 2005 and 2006 reports confirm the observation made in the previous chapter that the Methodist Church’s teaching on marriage and relationships – particularly the 1993 Resolutions – forms part of the discipline of the Church. The reports conclude that it is not necessary to ask candidates explicitly to declare that they have read the 1993 Resolutions and that there is nothing which in consequence will prevent them from proceeding to ordination. This is because, the reports observe, the resolutions are included within the general commitment candidates make to upholding the doctrine and discipline of the Church.<sup>7</sup> The Conference of 2006 further resolved to include the text of the resolutions in the guidance section of *CPD*.<sup>8</sup>

For the avoidance of doubt, it is worth noting that the reason for including the resolutions in the guidance section of *CPD* was to make clear that they do indeed form part of the discipline of the Church. Confusion may be caused by the title of ‘Guidance’ given to the relevant section. It cannot be taken to imply that this material is less authoritative than the earlier section of *CPD* – that it offers only *guidance* rather than *rules*, perhaps in the sense that Barbossa described the pirate’s code, in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, as ‘more like “guidelines” than actual rules’. The Conference has been clear, as recorded in the previous chapter, that the resolutions form part of the Church’s discipline and that was the reason for their inclusion in *CPD*. Their status has never been downgraded.

## Evidence of Non-Adherence

Evidence is, however, presented within the 2005 Report – though not identified as such – that there is not consistent adherence to the 1993 Resolutions throughout the Connexion. By way of example, it quotes feedback received by the working party, including: ‘we should ... stop pretending that ministers and deacons are not already living in loving relationships with same sex partners.’<sup>9</sup> Given the teaching of the resolutions, it would seem to be clear that such relationships were sexually active, or at least it was not clear that they met the requirements of chastity outside and fidelity within marriage – otherwise there would have been no need for the suggested pretence. The non-adherence is more explicit – though still veiled – in the comment made by one minister, ‘I am a gay presbyter. I have mostly kept my sexuality quiet ... I regarded my relationship with my partner as a marriage and I am therefore able to accept the Derby resolutions.’<sup>10</sup>

It is remarkable that such flagrant disregard for Conference resolutions should be recorded in a Conference report without further comment. Whilst appearing to be an impartial presentation of evidence, it might also have the effect of implying a degree of endorsement to the position and, furthermore, of shunting the train away from the resolutions by a method which is not constitutional. It is difficult to think of any other issues in which flagrant disregard of the Conference’s authority has been recorded without comment in Conference reports.

## Living with Contradictory Convictions

It is, perhaps, in the light of this non-adherence that both the 2005 and 2006 reports emphasise the variety of views held relating to marriage and relationships across the Methodist Church. This is reflected in the narrative nature of the reports, which often simply describe the diversity of the Methodist Church without evaluation. The report of 2005 called upon the Faith and Order Committee to ‘reflect upon the theological implications of being a Church that has to live or contend with different and mutually contradictory

convictions.’<sup>11</sup> This introduced a very influential concept into the ensuing debates through the report *Living with Contradictory Convictions*, brought to the Conference of 2006. I will consider this report more fully in chapter 6.

## Preserving Unity and Respecting Christian Integrity

The necessity of finding a way to live with different and mutually contradictory convictions emerges out of a desire to preserve Christian unity, though it is in danger of overlooking the fact that Christian unity cannot be at any cost and is found primarily in unity in the truth. The 2006 report asks whether these are issues about which the Conference needs to make a decision, utterly ignoring the fact that the Conference had already made a clear decision in 1993. The strategy proposed: ‘to defer a decision until a later date, even indefinitely, rather than to try to impose at this time a false appearance of uniformity’ simply has the sense of perpetuation about it. It also seems to be a recipe for removing the saltiness from the salt (Matthew 5:13): to decide not to provide clear teaching to Methodists on issues of Christian ethics is to invite them to draw their teaching from elsewhere. Whilst some will draw their insights from Christian thinkers from across a wide spectrum of backgrounds and commitments, if the Church itself fails to provide clear teaching, many others will be formed instead by the pervading values of surrounding culture. Allow the process to continue for long enough and there will most likely be a much larger degree of uniformity across the Connexion: a uniformity around the values of society. Thus, the Church will become no different than the surrounding culture and its Christian distinctiveness will be lost.

Rather than providing clarity about the Church’s teaching, the reports promote conversation and – again uniquely in Conference business – the sharing of diverse views. Inspiration for such conversation is drawn from Acts 15 in the 2005 report and Romans 14 in the 2006 report. However, the reports seem to overlook the fact that, following the Council at Jerusalem in which the early church leaders considered which laws the new Gentile believers should be required to keep, they specifically concluded that all Christians must abstain from sexual immorality (Acts 15:20, 29). Equally, the reports overlook the fact that Romans 14, in which Paul reflects upon how Christians are to coexist regarding disputable matters, is followed by instructions, to ‘keep away’ from ‘those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned’ (Romans 16:17). No explanation is given as to why the diversity of opinion over marriage and relationships – and the dissent from the Conference’s decisions – falls within the category of disputable matters and not within the clear prohibition of sexual immorality and the stark warnings about those who act ‘contrary to the teaching you have learned’.

Instead, the report of 2006 is anxious to ‘respect the Christian integrity of those who hold different convictions.’<sup>12</sup> The phrase ‘Christian integrity’ points to the heart of the debate. To hold each of the diverse views within the Church as possessing equal ‘Christian integrity’, which must be respected as such, is in itself to reach a position (of relativism) on the issues. The statement not only recognises the existence of diverse views within the Church, but also validates each as being an equally acceptable view to hold within the Church.

To question the Christian integrity of a view is not the same as questioning the personal integrity of the individuals who hold those views. It is, however, to ask whether the views themselves hold Christian integrity, that is, are they *integral to* – or do they *integrate with* – Christian belief and teaching? Etymologically, the words have the same root.

Surely, this is the question that must be settled if we are to make any progress in this pilgrimage of faith, and yet it is continually avoided. The reports ignore the fact that the Conference has already resolved that it ‘reaffirms the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality; namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it’ and that no subsequent resolution can contradict or undermine that affirmation. Therefore, any view which falls outside that affirmation must surely lack Christian integrity. Regardless of the personal integrity of the person who holds the view, the view itself is not integral to, nor does it integrate with, Christian teaching.

## Relevant Legislation

The 2006 report included the additional task of considering the way in which recent legislation concerning discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation related to the Methodist Church.<sup>13</sup> The report observes that, unlike the Church, the law does not

<sup>6</sup> *Pilgrimage of Faith (2005)*, paragraph 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Pilgrimage of Faith (2005)*, paragraph 33; *Pilgrimage of Faith (2006)*, section C.

<sup>8</sup> *In the present edition, CPD (2020)*, vol. 2, p. 805.

<sup>9</sup> *Pilgrimage of Faith (2005)*, paragraph 20.

<sup>10</sup> *Pilgrimage of Faith (2005)*, paragraph 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Pilgrimage of Faith (2005)*, paragraph 37. *The Faith and Order Committee encourages ‘reflection on the theological implications of all the work undertaken by the Connexional Team, shall seek to stimulate theological reflection and study throughout the Church, and shall disseminate the results of its work as widely and accessibly as possible’. It has responsibility to ‘consider and report upon all matters remitted to it by the Conference touching the faith or order of the Church, and bring to the notice of the Conference any matter of faith or order to which it should give attention.’ CPD (2020)*, vol. 2, Standing Order 330 (3 and 4).

<sup>12</sup> *Pilgrimage of Faith (2006)*, paragraph E11.

<sup>13</sup> *Pilgrimage of Faith (2006)*, paragraphs D1-D12.

distinguish between sexual orientation and sexual practice. It does, however, make provision for there to be a genuine occupational requirement ‘for the purpose of religion’ that employees are of a particular sexual orientation (and thereby, by implication, sexual practice). Although such provision is entirely in line with the discipline of the Methodist Church, the report seems to be very nervous about utilising it. This attitude towards the provisions in legislation is one to which I will return below and again in chapter 5.

## Civil Partnerships and Blessings

The most significant development to emerge from the 2006 Report is the policy towards civil partnerships. It reaches two very important conclusions: firstly, that there is no reason *per se* to prevent anyone within the Methodist Church from entering into a civil partnership<sup>14</sup> – the reasons for this ruling are particularly significant within the context of the contemporary debate – and, secondly, the ruling that authorised liturgies should not be produced for the blessing of same sex relationships and that such blessings may not be held on Methodist premises.<sup>15</sup>

The reason for the ruling that there is nothing *per se* to prevent Methodists from entering into a civil partnership is based on the understanding that civil partnerships are fundamentally different from marriage. They are for couples of the same sex, rather than opposite sexes, and entered into by signing a legal document which provides legal rights, rather than by the making of vows as in marriage. The most significant difference concerns sexual intimacy: ‘unlike marriage, civil registration is not predicated on a sexual relationship and does not confer any sexual entitlement; thus a civil partnership may not be annulled for non-consummation nor dissolved for adultery’.<sup>16</sup>

This is central to the conclusion regarding Methodists entering into civil partnerships. Because a civil partnership does not require or necessarily imply a sexually intimate relationship, there is nothing within the discipline of the Methodist Church – namely the 1993 Resolutions which affirm chastity outside of marriage and fidelity within it – which would *per se* prevent anyone within the Church from entering into such a legal arrangement. In adopting this resolution, the Conference also affirmed that the 1993 Resolutions ‘apply to every Methodist, whether married, in a civil partnership, or single’.<sup>17</sup> Thus it was expected that any civil partnership into which a Methodist – ordained or lay – had entered would be a celibate relationship.

## Authorised Liturgies

Having reached such a conclusion, however, the report also concludes that authorised liturgies should not be produced for the blessing of same sex relationships and Methodist premises could not be used for that purpose. This resolution arose out of the consideration within the report of the theology of blessing. Within this context, the report emphasised that ‘there is a difference between the spontaneous “of the moment” prayers (such as arise naturally in response to an immediate pastoral need) and those that are pre-arranged and formal’. This is particularly true, the report observes, of authorised liturgies which imply a greater weight of endorsement by the Church.<sup>18</sup> The report therefore concludes that, ‘it is difficult to see how the 1993 Resolutions (particularly the fourth resolution) can be interpreted in a way which would allow the Methodist Church to give its “official” blessing to a same sex relationship’.<sup>19</sup>

An important step in the argument seems to have been left unstated within the report. Why is it permissible for a Methodist to enter into a civil partnership but not for that relationship to be blessed with an official liturgy on Methodist premises? Is it because a civil partnership is purely a legal contract and the Methodist Church is not in the habit of blessing legal contracts? That would, of course, be a valid argument. On the other hand, is it that the decision to allow Methodists to enter into a civil partnership rests on a technicality – that is, on the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law? Because civil partnerships do not *necessarily* involve sexual intimacy, the Conference could not prevent Methodists from entering into them whilst remaining a Methodist. However, it seems to be most likely that there is here a recognition that civil partnerships will *often* involve sexual intimacy and that, therefore, it would be inappropriate to bless such relationships with Methodist liturgies and on Methodist premises.

## Revisiting the 1993 Resolutions

As a result of the 2006 Report, the Conference directed the Methodist Council ‘to consult widely throughout the Connexion and, in the light of this consultation, to report to the Conference of 2008 as to whether the 1993 Derby Conference resolutions on

<sup>14</sup> Pilgrimage of Faith (2006), recommendation 6; Resolution 40/7.

<sup>15</sup> Pilgrimage of Faith (2006), recommendation 7; Resolution 40/8.

<sup>16</sup> Pilgrimage of Faith (2006), paragraph E5.

<sup>17</sup> Pilgrimage of Faith (2006), recommendation 6; Resolution 40/7.

<sup>18</sup> Pilgrimage of Faith (2006), paragraph E9.

<sup>19</sup> Pilgrimage of Faith (2006), paragraph E12.

Human Sexuality should be revised and, if so, what changes should be made’.<sup>20</sup> The working party therefore continued its work and reported back to the Conference in 2008.<sup>21</sup> In short, this final report concludes that the Methodist Church should not revisit the 1993 Resolutions. Half of the respondents to the consultation did not wish to revisit the resolutions, the other half did, but in widely diverging ways.<sup>22</sup> The report does note, however, ‘the most common reason given for not wanting to revise the Resolutions was that they continue to be an appropriate and helpful framework to understand and work out issues relating to human sexuality’ and observes that ‘the Methodist Church holds a great deal of respect and admiration for the resolutions’.<sup>23</sup>

## The Tone of the Reports

The overall tone of the reports seems to be one of nervousness and hesitation, and an unwillingness to ensure that the Church’s discipline in the area of marriage and relationships is consistently adhered to throughout the Connexion. This can be discerned in the reports’ reluctance to define the pilgrimage more clearly and in their emphasis on (a possibly false notion of) Christian unity over truth. It is also apparent in the hesitation about the protections for religious groups within legislation, and the curious decision to distinguish between the letter and the spirit of the law in allowing Methodists to enter into civil partnerships, whilst not allowing such relationships to be blessed on Methodist premises or with authorised liturgies. Perhaps it is most clearly seen in the reluctance to reach a decision over matters of marriage, relationships and human sexuality – or, more accurately, in the reluctance to recognise and implement consistently the previous resolutions of the Conference. The alternative solution adopted by the reports was to welcome disregard for those resolutions of the Conference through an open discussion and sharing of views, an invitation unique amongst all the business of the Conference.

The nervousness, hesitation – and perhaps even embarrassment – about that teaching conveyed in the reports ultimately led to the decision to hold a consultation as to whether the 1993 Resolutions should be revisited. The consultation revealed, however, that this nervousness and embarrassment was not reflected across the wider Methodist people, but rather that they had great respect for the resolutions and desired to retain them.

## The Framework Applied

Thus, significant insights regarding the application and implications of the Methodist Church’s framework of marriage, identified in the previous chapter, emerged from these pilgrimage of faith reports which were produced in the first decade of the millennium. It was confirmed that **the 1993 Resolutions form part of the discipline of the Church**. There was **no evidence of non-acceptance** of those whose lifestyles were in harmony with the resolutions. The evidence that **other forms of repression are experienced** is deeply concerning, though with no examples nor explanation given it is not possible to determine from the reports how this should be addressed. There is also evidence that **the resolutions are not consistently applied across the Connexion**. Although a certain hesitancy seems to be implied, the reports demonstrate that the understanding of marriage and relationships within the Methodist Church – requiring ministers, officers and members to be committed to chastity outside and fidelity within marriage – **is fully in line with the law of the land** under the protections for religious groups. Very significantly for the contemporary debates, the reports show that, although **Methodists may enter into civil partnerships** because, technically, the law does not require a sexual element to the relationships, the resolutions mean that **same sex relationships may not be blessed on Methodist premises and/or with authorised liturgies**. Furthermore, the **Methodist people have not wanted to move away from the 1993 Resolutions** and hold them with respect and admiration.

However, the engine of Memorial 49 in 2003 shunted the train along the rail of the pilgrimage of faith. The working party, in its reports, does not seem to have sufficiently applied the brakes in line with the authority of the Conference’s resolutions. It was the wider Methodist people who did that. The reports stoked the engines of ambiguity and discontent. This had the effect of encouraging further disregard for the Conference resolutions and added to the momentum that was beginning to gather across the Connexion to move the denomination away from the teaching of the Christian Church. The engine was enabled to shunt the train in such a way as it began to run out of control.

This 2008 Report brought to a close the work relating to the pilgrimage of faith which had been triggered by Notice of Motion 49 in 2003. Thus the engine was decoupled whilst the train rumbled on.

<sup>20</sup> Pilgrimage of Faith (2006), Resolution 40/9. The Methodist Council is the body which has authority to act on behalf of the Conference in its sessions. It ‘is charged with responsibility to keep in constant review the life of the Methodist Church, to study its work and witness throughout the Connexion, to indicate what changes are necessary or what steps should be taken to make the work of the Church more effective, to give spiritual leadership to the Church and to report annually to the Conference, bringing to the notice of the Conference matters to which it believes the Conference ought to give urgent attention.’ CPD (2020), vol. 2, Standing Order 211 (1a and 2).

<sup>21</sup> 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality (2008); available at: [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf08\\_51\\_1993\\_Resolutions\\_report210808.doc](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf08_51_1993_Resolutions_report210808.doc).

<sup>22</sup> 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality (2008), paragraph 9.

<sup>23</sup> 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality (2008), paragraph 10.



# 4.

## THE SECOND SHUNTER: THE PILGRIMAGE OF FAITH & THE REQUEST FOR BLESSINGS

The second shunter, which gave further momentum to the Methodist Church's runaway train along the rail of the pilgrimage of faith, came in the form of a Memorial to the Conference of 2012. Brought by the Birmingham District, it asked the Conference to revisit the ruling against the blessing of same sex relationships, 'in the hope that we will allow the blessing of civil partnerships of gay or lesbian couples on Methodist premises'.<sup>1</sup>

In its reply, the Conference noted that the government was, at that time, engaged in a consultation regarding 'equal marriage' and so referred the Memorial to the Methodist Council, directing it to consider both the request in the Memorial and any issues raised by the government consultation.<sup>2</sup> The following year, on the Methodist Council's recommendation, the Conference established a working group to consider whether the Methodist Church's definition of marriage – the lifelong union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman (Standing Order 011A) – should be revised in the light of changes in society.<sup>3</sup> The group brought reports to the Conference in 2014 and 2016. A new working group was then established which brought an interim report to the Conference of 2018 before presenting the report *God In Love Unites Us* to the Conference of 2019.

In this chapter, I will consider the issues which arise from the 2014 and 2016 reports together and then turn to the 2018 report separately. The final report, *God In Love Unites Us*, will be the focus of chapter 7.

The earlier reports note that they face a question that the Methodist Church has never before had to address. They chart the journey from asking the Methodist people, through a formal consultation, whether they wished to revisit the definition of marriage – to which a clear majority answered, 'No' – to the proposal, reached on the basis of a series of more informal conversations, that the definition should indeed be revisited. They identified the need for work addressing homophobia and extended the previous ruling regarding entering into civil partnerships to same sex marriage, which had by then become legally recognised.

Having been established to produce a new Conference statement on marriage and relationships, and to revisit the Methodist Church's definition of marriage, the new task group reported to the Conference of 2018 that it had been unable to meet its original deadline. The timetable was revised, the status of the document it was producing was downgraded, and the group set out the direction it intended to take in its work.

<sup>1</sup> Memorials to the Conference (2012), M29; available at: [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf2012-pc-59-memorials.doc](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf2012-pc-59-memorials.doc).

<sup>2</sup> Memorials to the Conference (2012), M29.

<sup>3</sup> Methodist Council (2013), paragraph 2.1; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2013-44-methodist-council.doc](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2013-44-methodist-council.doc).

### A New Question

Same sex marriages became recognised in law under the *Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013*.<sup>4</sup> The Act permits religious organisations to opt in to performing same sex marriage ceremonies, though they may also continue only to solemnise marriages of couples of the opposite sex. Within the Methodist Church, to offer same sex marriage ceremonies would first require a decision of the Conference to give general consent and then for local church councils to apply, should they wish to opt in.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the question of same sex marriage was brought into focus for the Church by government legislation. The 2014 report noted that the Church was facing the question for the first time.<sup>6</sup> This may be taken to call into question the relevance of previous reports: the reports were simply products of their time, it could be argued, and so reflect the situation of their day, in which there was no possibility of same sex couples entering into marriage. Simply because the reports understand marriage to be between one man and one woman, the argument may continue, it does not necessarily follow that marriage can only be between one man and one woman and could not be *extended* to include marriage between people of the same sex.

Such a suggestion, however, would not present the full picture. Far from the reports being products of their time, based upon and limited by the state's understanding of marriage, it was the state's understanding of marriage that was based upon the teaching of the Christian Church, as observed in chapter 2. The state was now departing from Christian teaching and did not require the Church to follow.

Just because the question *had* been brought into focus by government legislation doesn't mean that it could *only* have come into focus in that way; just because the reports *did not* extend their understanding of marriage to same sex couples, does not mean that they *could not* have done so. The Church has always been at liberty to develop its own understanding of human relationships, even if not all relationships it recognised would be treated with equal rights within the eyes of the law. Yet, in spite of such liberty, the Church has consistently reaffirmed its teaching that marriage is the *lifelong union of one man and one woman and the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy*.

### A Leading Question

Nevertheless, the Conference decided to embark upon a consultation, asking the Methodist people whether they wished the Church to revisit its definition of marriage in the light of these changes in wider society. The working group launched an online consultation, presenting the results in their 2014 report. They noted that they had received almost double the number of responses of any previous comparable exercise.<sup>7</sup> Over 90% of respondents identified themselves as currently attending a Methodist place of worship and, the group noted, 'we have no reason to suspect any widespread misdescription'.<sup>8</sup>

Significant concern was expressed over 'a very significant "surge" in responses' in the last 24 hours before the deadline. The group noted that it seemed to be attributable 'to activity by one or more organisations to raise awareness of the consultation amongst their supporters or subscribers' and added the following comment:

The surge had a noticeable effect on the answers to the consultation questions, with a preponderance of replies which indicated a rejection of a change in the definition of marriage. This surge also saw the percentage of respondents who did not attend a Methodist church rise from 5.66% to the final figure of 10.15%.<sup>9</sup>

The final sentence is significant. The group was primarily interested in the views of current attendees of Methodist places of worship. These were separated out, in the report, from other views and, as noted above, the group had already stated that there was no reason to suspect widespread misdescription. Therefore, the point in the process at which attendees of Methodist worship responded is irrelevant. The sudden surge of non-Methodists responding did not influence the important results as their feedback was filtered out.<sup>10</sup> The level of concern expressed within the report therefore appears to be significantly overstated. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the group wished to call into question the validity of the results of the consultation in a way that was unwarranted.

<sup>4</sup> This act was effective in England and Wales. Similar legislation became effective in Scotland the following year in *The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014*.

<sup>5</sup> Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships (2014), paragraphs 9-13; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2014-40-marriage-and-civil-partnerships.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2014-40-marriage-and-civil-partnerships.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraph 16.

<sup>7</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraph 48.

<sup>8</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraphs 44 and 45.

<sup>9</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraph 51.

<sup>10</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraph 140.

The consultation requested views on a range of issues related to the Methodist Church's understanding of marriage, relationships and human sexuality,<sup>11</sup> and asked the key question: 'In the light of changes in British society do you think the Methodist Conference should be asked to look again' at the Church's current position on marriage?<sup>12</sup> The result was clear: 60.66% of Methodist attendees answered, 'No'.<sup>13</sup>

In light of these responses, the working party concluded that 'this is not the time to recommend to the Conference that a group be appointed to work on a revision of our teaching on marriage'.<sup>14</sup> That was, however, not the only conclusion. The group also recommended that:

there should be a two-year period of listening, reflection and discernment about relationships on a much wider basis, based upon thinking about living with contradictory convictions and the nature of the authority of the Bible ... The question of whether to readdress the Church's definition would then be returned to in the light of this process.<sup>15</sup>

It is, perhaps, hard to avoid a hint of disappointment in the tone of the report and a suggestion of hope, in its statement that 'this is not the time', that the time will come. Perhaps disappointed by the answer, the group suggested that the Methodist people should think again before being asked a second time. The Conference adopted the resolution and appointed a task group to oversee the process.<sup>16</sup>

This task group reported to the Conference in 2016.<sup>17</sup> Their report presents a wider consideration of issues connected to marriage within the Methodist Church, particularly with a view to determining whether the 1992 Statement, *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* should be updated.<sup>18</sup> It was also specifically concerned with the issue of whether 'to revisit the question of embarking upon a process of revising the Methodist Church's definition of marriage'.<sup>19</sup>

The most important aspect of the report, for the purposes of this chapter, is its presentation of the 'process of listening, reflection and discernment' and the proposals it makes in the light of it. The task group emphasised that this process had been one of *conversation*, rather than *consultation*, which had been the previous method. Now, the task was 'to listen to each other rather than to answer specific questions'.<sup>20</sup> However, the feedback from the conversations was used to answer a specific question, and the group reported: 'most conversations indicated that the balance of views were towards revisiting the definition of marriage', though it was also noted that the reasons for wishing to revisit the definition were varied – some wished to revisit it in order to enable the marriage of same sex couples; others wished to revisit the definition in order to reaffirm it.<sup>21</sup>

It was considered necessary to update the 1992 Statement in order to take account of a number of reports which had since been produced on related issues and also to give fuller consideration to issues such as cohabitation; pornography; adoption, fostering and surrogacy; and the changes in law relating to civil partnerships and same sex marriage. Each of these issues, it was felt, needed to be addressed regardless of the questions around the definition of marriage. However, updating the statement would also present the opportunity for reconsidering the Methodist Church's definition of marriage and so the Conference therefore established a new task group to update the 1992 Statement and, as part of that process, revisit the definition of marriage.

Thus, following an astonishingly unusual and inventive process, the Methodist people were given what they had emphatically said they did not want. The formal consultation produced a majority of more than 60% *against* revisiting the definition of marriage. It is extraordinary that the result was not respected and that, instead, the formal consultation was ignored and replaced with a series of less formal conversations. On the basis of those conversations – and with far less objective evidence – the task group concluded that *on balance*, the *views expressed were towards* revisiting the definition of marriage.

It is not difficult to understand why there are people within the Methodist Church who feel that the whole process has been dishonest and manipulative, utterly unfitting within the body of Christ. Whilst it was stressed that *revisiting* the definition of

<sup>11</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), sections C and D.

<sup>12</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraph 138.

<sup>13</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraph 140.

<sup>14</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraph 145.

<sup>15</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), Summary.

<sup>16</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), resolution 40/4.

<sup>17</sup> Marriage and Relationships Task Group (2016); available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2016-29-Marriage-and-Relationships-Task-Group.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2016-29-Marriage-and-Relationships-Task-Group.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> For a consideration of the 1992 Statement, see chapter 2.

<sup>19</sup> Marriage and Relationships (2016), Summary.

<sup>20</sup> Marriage and Relationships (2016), paragraph 1.1.2, see also paragraph 3.3.3.b.

<sup>21</sup> Marriage and Relationships (2016), paragraph 3.3.4.c.

marriage did not necessarily mean *changing* it, the doors were opened – against the expressed majority will of the Methodist people – to the *possibility* of a change. The brakes were fully released and the train began to hurtle towards potential derailment.

## Guidance on Homophobia

The 2014 report noted with concern the tone and content of some of the replies received through the consultation and called for urgent work to be done to address such attitudes, 'by the production and dissemination of clear guidance on what is, or is not to be regarded as homophobia'.<sup>22</sup> The 2016 report noted the work done in this area and further work concerning the welcome of same sex couples and their families within the Methodist Church.<sup>23</sup> This was done in conjunction with the Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion committee whose work will be considered in the next chapter, as the second rail of the track for the Methodist Church's runaway train.

## Guidance on Blessings

The Memorial of 2012 which had originally set this work in motion called on the Conference to revisit the ruling which prohibited the blessing of civil partnerships on Methodist Church premises, in the hope that such blessings may be permitted in the future. This request was addressed in the 2014 report. It noted the need for new guidelines, partly because 'the point at which the line was drawn in 2006 and the guidance in *CPD* which accompanied it does not reflect what has actually been happening in the intervening period' and presented evidence of Methodist ministers and Local Preachers conducting blessings in secular buildings and churches of other denominations.<sup>24</sup> Such actions were clearly far from the 'informal, spontaneous prayer' that was permitted in order to meet pastoral needs. However, rather than addressing the breach of discipline, the report recommends that the guidelines should be changed. It is another instance of the astonishing disregard for the discipline of the Church and the authority of the Conference's resolutions which is not tolerated in any other area of the Church's life.

The way in which the new guidelines are presented in the 2014 report appears ambiguous. They are introduced with the explanation that it is hoped they will 'help individuals and local churches to respond to requests [for blessings by same sex couples] appropriately, including the possible use of their premises'.<sup>25</sup> What is meant by the phrase, 'including the possible use of their premises'? Does it mean that the new guidance is intended to open up the possibility of the use of Methodist premises for such blessings, or that the guidance is intended to help churches respond (negatively) to requests to hold a blessing on Methodist premises? It was, of course, the aim of the original Memorial to enable the use of Methodist premises for these purposes.

The guidance does not mention at all the use of Methodist Church premises. It does, however, state that knowledge is presumed of a number of Methodist Conference documents and decisions.<sup>26</sup> Given that the guidance is intended to have a practical purpose, it would have been helpful to highlight the relevant principles from the listed documents. Nevertheless, the list includes the *Pilgrimage of Faith* reports of 2005 and 2006, the latter of which explicitly prohibits the use of Methodist Church premises for the blessing of same sex relationships.

It is unclear whether the ambiguity was deliberately intended to blur the boundaries, or simply inadvertent and unhelpful. However, it had the effect again of undermining the authority of the resolutions of the Conference.

Without directly answering the question, this aspect of the report was adopted as the reply to the Memorial of 2012. The Conference resolved that the new guidance should be printed in *CPD*.<sup>27</sup>

## Ruling on Same Sex Marriages

The other significant development to emerge from the 2014 report is the decision to extend to same sex marriage the same ruling as had been adopted regarding civil partnerships in 2006, namely that there was no reason *per se* within the discipline of the Methodist Church to prevent anyone from entering into such a relationship. The 2014 report states that 'the 2006 ruling focussed upon the legal status, not any particular conduct which might or might not be involved'. This is, of course, not strictly accurate. As shown in the previous chapter, the 2006 ruling was based upon a legal technicality, that civil partnerships do not *necessarily* involve

<sup>22</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraph 148.

<sup>23</sup> Marriage and Relationships (2016), sections 2.1 and 2.3.

<sup>24</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraph 168.

<sup>25</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraph 171.

<sup>26</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraph 171.

<sup>27</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), Resolution 40/5; the guidelines are printed in the current edition of *CPD*, (2020), vol. 2, pp. 803-804.

a sexually intimate relationship. It was a ruling, therefore, that was focussed on conduct and the ruling reiterated that the 1993 Resolutions – which are, at least in part, also concerned with conduct – apply to every Methodist.

The ruling of the 2014 report, extending the provision to same sex marriage, is based on the same understanding: that same sex marriage, unlike the marriage of couples of the opposite sex, does not *necessarily* involve a sexually intimate relationship. The report states that same sex marriage ‘is about creating a legal status’ and that, ‘unlike the situation for opposite sex couples, non-consummation is not in itself a ground upon which a same sex marriage can be annulled’.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, in the light of the 1993 Resolutions, which prohibit all sexual intimacy outside the marriage relationship (which, in Methodist understanding is still the lifelong union of one man and one woman), and on the understanding that same sex marriage does not require sexual intimacy, the Conference of 2014 ruled that there is no reason *per se* to prevent a Methodist from entering into a same sex marriage. In making the ruling, the Conference reaffirmed that the 1993 Resolutions still apply to all relationships.<sup>29</sup> It follows that it is the expectation that all same sex marriages which include a Methodist will, like civil partnerships, be celibate relationships.

## Downgrading the Status

The task group, established by the Conference of 2016 to prepare a new statement on marriage and relationships and to revisit the definition of marriage, reported to the Conference of 2018 on its progress in these areas of work.<sup>30</sup> Whilst noting that much progress had been made, the report states that the group was unable to present the draft text of a statement that year. It set out a revised process and timetable which would mean that the new statement could still be agreed in 2020, as originally intended.<sup>31</sup> It clarified its task, and the Conference, in the light of the report’s reflections, downgraded the document the group was producing from a statement to a report. The group also set out the direction it intended to take in the document.

The revised timetable proposed in the report involved the suspension of Standing Order 129. This had the effect of reducing the consultation period for the new document across the Connexion from two years to one. It was a proposal Methodist Evangelicals Together resisted, on the grounds that a formal document on such a significant issue – and potentially proposing profound changes to the Church’s doctrine and discipline – required the maximum time possible for consultation. Dismissing the concerns, the Conference subsequently adopted the proposal of the report, and suspended Standing Order 129.

Of course, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the national restrictions that followed, has meant that the consultation was not completed within that one-year period. The Conference of 2020 was therefore unable to vote on the ratification of *God In Love Unites Us* and the consultation was permitted to continue for another Connexional year. However, the continuing national restrictions have meant that there has been ongoing disruption to the consultation. Districts have planned to conduct synods through online video conferencing. At the time of writing, the experience has so far proved to be far from satisfactory, with inadequate notice and briefings owing to the pressure of time and with inevitable difficulties resulting from the operation of the technology by people still trying to learn how to use it.

Through its report to the Conference of 2018, the group clarified its task, outlining the distinction between a Conference statement and a Conference report. It observed that the group’s ‘task is great while its timetable is short’ – and that there was a perceived urgency to the practical questions of how the Methodist Church should respond to the changes in the legal definition of marriage.<sup>32</sup> This report states that ‘if such questions are seen in practical terms, decisions about them are often dealt with by a report containing recommendations’ which are ‘grounded in an agreed framework of the Methodist Church’s theological understanding and teaching (“our doctrines”)’.<sup>33</sup> If, on the other hand, the Conference desired to make changes to that framework, a new statement would be required. Such statements have a different nature from reports.<sup>34</sup> The Conference concurred with the proposal and downgraded the task group’s objective, from producing a statement to producing a report.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), paragraph 174.

<sup>29</sup> Working Party on Marriage (2014), Resolution 40/6.

<sup>30</sup> Marriage and Relationships Task Group: Interim Report (2018); available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2018-27-Marriage-and-Relationships.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2018-27-Marriage-and-Relationships.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Marriage and Relationships (2018), paragraph 1.

<sup>32</sup> Marriage and Relationships (2018), paragraphs 5 and 9.

<sup>33</sup> Marriage and Relationships (2018), paragraph 9.

<sup>34</sup> Marriage and Relationships (2018), paragraph 10.

<sup>35</sup> Additional Report from the Marriage and Relationships Task Group, (Daily Record 7/17/2), paragraph 5, printed at the end of Marriage and Relationships (2018); available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2018-27-Marriage-and-Relationships.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2018-27-Marriage-and-Relationships.pdf).

The task group also set out the direction it intended to take within the document: ‘we believe that the Church can provide afresh, spiritual and ethical insights into marriage’.<sup>36</sup> It set out its emerging thinking about the ‘Methodist Church’s vision of marriage’ as follows:

Such marriage is a socially recognised deepening of committed relating, which usually has a sexual dimension. It is primarily about companionship rather than sex, procreation and economics (although at times these latter aspects are not insignificant). Its purposes are for the honouring of God through the flourishing of the person, the couple, the family and the wider social group. It bears the hallmarks of Christ-like relating. It is, above all, part of God’s creative ordering of the universe through which God’s grace and love may be experienced and shared.<sup>37</sup>

The way in which the group fulfilled this commitment in its final report, *God In Love Unites Us*, is the focus of chapter 7. It is sufficient here to note that the group committed to developing its understanding of marriage – as ‘a socially recognised deepening of committed relating, which usually has a sexual element’ – within the Methodist Church’s existing framework of marriage (set out in previous chapters), with a fresh emphasis on ‘the qualities of holy relating’.<sup>38</sup>

## Redirecting the Pilgrimage

Thus the pilgrimage of faith took an unexpected turn, not only shunted by the Memorial of 2012, but also redirected by the government’s introduction of same sex marriage. The groups directed by the Conference to undertake this work followed a very dubious route which arguably lacked respect for due process, ignoring the clear result of a formal consultation and embarking on less formal engagement in search of a different answer. Important facts seem to have been obscured in the reports they presented to the Conference, perhaps unnecessarily calling into question the relevance of the earlier Conference statement and other related reports, questioning the validity of the consultation results, and misrepresenting the reasoning behind the Conference’s earlier ruling on civil partnerships.

Because the original task was too great and the overriding desire was to provide quick answers to practical questions regarding same sex marriage within the Methodist Church, the resolution to produce a new Statement of the Conference was dispensed with, and the document in production was downgraded to a report. However, this must have the effect of strictly limiting the resolutions the Conference can now adopt, for it has elected not to change the framework of marriage within the Methodist Church and, as the 2018 report itself makes clear, it must now only adopt resolutions which flow from that framework in practical application.

The framework is clear, as detailed in chapter 2: marriage is the *lifelong union of one man and one woman and the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy*, with the purposes of *companionship, remedy for sin*, and the *procreation of children*. Some practical applications flowing from this have already been adopted by the Conference over the years. In line with the teaching of the Bible, *divorce and remarriage* are permitted *in exceptional circumstances* (i.e. in accordance with the ‘exception clauses’ of the New Testament). The commitment to *chastity outside of marriage* and *fidelity within marriage* applies to all Methodists. Because, owing to a legal technicality, civil partnerships and same sex marriages do not necessarily involve sexual intimacy, Methodists are permitted to enter into such relationships. However, because, it seems, such relationships will *often* involve sexual intimacy (in line with the observation of the 2018 report, ‘marriage ... usually has a sexual dimension’), they may not be blessed on Methodist premises and/or with authorised liturgies, for the marriage of one man and one woman, in Methodist understanding, is the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy, *creating a one-flesh union*. In line with its constitution, the Conference must adopt practical answers to the questions of the day which are in line with this framework and the earlier resolutions which flow from it.

Although the shunting engine of the 2012 Memorial was decoupled from the train through the response of revised guidelines in the 2014 report, it generated such momentum that it has caused the runaway train to career dangerously along the track to this day. Before turning, in chapter 7, to consider the content and proposals of *God In Love Unites Us*, it is necessary first to address two other aspects of the life of the Methodist Church which have contributed to the loss of control of the runaway train. First, in the following chapter, I will set out the work of the Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion agenda, the second rail along which the runaway train has careered and then, in chapter 6, I will explore the way in which the foundations of the track have been eroded by work relating to the authority of the Bible.

<sup>36</sup> Marriage and Relationships (2018), paragraph 30.

<sup>37</sup> Marriage and Relationships (2018), paragraph 32.

<sup>38</sup> Marriage and Relationships (2018), paragraphs 30 and 32.



5.

## THE SECOND RAIL: EQUALITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

The second rail along which the Methodist Church's runaway train has careered is formed by the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) agenda which has been developed within the Church over almost two decades.<sup>1</sup> It can be traced back to the Conference of 2004 at which an Equality and Diversity Project was launched.<sup>2</sup> A project worker was appointed within the Connexional Team and four areas of work were identified: the production of biblical and other theological material; an equal opportunities and diversity policy; an accessible resource to help churches develop their own policies; and a guide to the relevant legislation.<sup>3</sup> An update on the work was presented to the Conference in 2008 and a further report was brought to the Conference of 2010.<sup>4</sup> EDI has regularly been on the agenda of the Methodist Council and has featured, usually briefly, in its reports to the Conference.<sup>5</sup> It is of deep concern that this agenda has itself shaped the Inclusive Church Strategy which is proposed as a key driver for denominational life over the coming years.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, I will set out the developments under each area of work to which the Conference committed in 2004, before drawing some conclusions. These suggest that the EDI agenda has been used significantly to manipulate and coerce the Church in its pilgrimage of faith towards a predetermined destination. It has bypassed, undermined and prevented the proper outworking of the authority of the Conference across the Connexion by repeatedly delaying and failing to seek the scrutiny and authorisation of its work by the Conference; eroding the distinction between sexual orientation and sexual practice; equating sexual practice with characteristics of race, sex, age, and disability; blurring the legal requirements of statutory legislation and obscuring the exemptions for religious organisations.

### Biblical and other Theological Material

The history of the production of a theological approach to and understanding of EDI within the Methodist Church has been one of woeful delay and inadequacy. This has meant that all the other work of the agenda has been developed without a proper theological basis and has therefore been shaped by a profoundly secular vision of EDI, rather than a deeply and distinctively biblical and Christian one. It is therefore of great concern that such work now has such a significant influence on denominational life.

1 For the phrase 'Equalities and Diversity agenda' see *Equalities and Diversity* (2008), section 53; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf08\\_50\\_Equalities\\_and\\_Diversity\\_report210808.doc](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf08_50_Equalities_and_Diversity_report210808.doc). 'Inclusion' was added to the work in the Methodist Council's report to the Conference of 2013: *Methodist Council* (2013), paragraphs 9.2 and 9.3; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2013-44-methodist-council.doc](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2013-44-methodist-council.doc).

2 The report is not available online, but its main points are summarised in *Equalities and Diversity* (2008), section 2a.

3 *Equalities and Diversity* (2008), section 2.

4 *Equalities and Diversity* (2008) and *Towards an Inclusive Church* (2010); available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/confrep32-towards-an-inclusive-church-250510.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/confrep32-towards-an-inclusive-church-250510.pdf).

5 Most of these reports, with a few exceptions noted in later footnotes, are available on the Methodist Church website: reports to the Conference are available at [www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-conference/conference-reports/](http://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-conference/conference-reports/); reports to the Methodist Council are available at [www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-conference/methodist-council/](http://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-conference/methodist-council/).

6 See [www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/the-inclusive-methodist-church/the-inclusive-methodist-church-strategy/](http://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/the-inclusive-methodist-church/the-inclusive-methodist-church-strategy/).

To give a sense of the delay: the 2008 report committed to the production of a theological paper or series of papers, in collaboration with the Faith and Order Committee, which it promised would be brought to the Conference of 2009. In 2009, all matters of EDI were deferred to the Conference of 2010.<sup>7</sup> A report was brought to the Conference of 2010, entitled '*Towards An Inclusive Church*'.<sup>8</sup> Rather than being the promised theological document, this report set out the structure for the next stages of the EDI agenda. It stated that part of the work of this new structure would be the articulation of a theology to underpin 'the values, principles and objectives' of the Church's EDI work.<sup>9</sup> It proposed a two year interim period to allow the theology 'to begin to emerge'.<sup>10</sup> This formally extended the period in which the EDI agenda was being developed without an adequate theological foundation to eight years.

The delay continued: in 2011, the Methodist Council stated that the Equality and Diversity Resource Group intended to bring a report to the Conference of 2012, 'setting out the broad principles and the theology underlying its work'.<sup>11</sup> However, in 2012, the Methodist Council recommended that, whilst theological work continued, the draft theological statement should be given time to 'be lived' by the Church. It committed to bring the final Equality and Diversity Theological Statement to the Conference 'no later than 2015'.<sup>12</sup> The 2015 Conference came and went without any mention of the promised theological statement, other than a brief note in the report of the Faith and Order Committee stating that it had continued to work with the Equalities and Diversity Adviser 'to provide a theological underpinning' and that the theological work would 'be further developed during the piloting of the EDI Toolkit'.<sup>13</sup> With that, all reference to a theological statement disappeared without trace from the Conference's radar.

Without any formal ratification by the Conference, a document entitled 'Theological Reflections on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion', dated 2018, finally appeared as part of a module in the EDI Toolkit, fourteen years after the Conference had approved the development of an EDI agenda on the basis of a promised theological statement.<sup>14</sup> These theological reflections deal in broad brushstrokes with the nature and purpose of the Church, and only superficially with issues of equality, diversity and inclusion. Having commented dismissively on the use of the Bible in forming a theology of EDI – 'Issues of equality, diversity and inclusion ... cannot be derived easily from the Bible' – it then makes no attempt to consider in any depth the richness of the Bible's teaching about race, sex/gender, disability, age, and sexuality.<sup>15</sup> It therefore would seem to form an utterly inadequate theological base on which to build a deeply and distinctively biblical and Christian approach to matters of equality, diversity and inclusion.

Thus, for many of those years, the Methodist Church's EDI agenda developed independently from a comprehensive theological understanding of the issues, meaning that the work seems to have been shaped by a secular, rather than a biblical and Christian vision. The finalised statement was never brought to the Conference for approval, and so what has continued to shape the work throughout the Methodist Church has not been appropriately authorised by the Conference in line with the process which was originally promised.

### Equal Opportunities and Diversity Policies

A similar approach of bypassing the scrutiny and authority of the Conference seems to have been adopted for the work of producing EDI policies. The 2008 Report stated that the data, which had emerged from the Equality and Diversity Project launched in 2004, would be used to develop an Equal Opportunities policy for use throughout the Methodist Church. It promised that this policy would be brought to the Conference of 2009 for adoption and that a further Equality and Diversity Policy would be presented to the Conference at a later, unspecified date.<sup>16</sup>

As noted above, all EDI matters were deferred from the Conference of 2009 to 2010. The 2010 report, *Towards an Inclusive Church*, made reference to the general development of policies through the new structures it proposed, but referred specifically neither to an Equal Opportunities Policy nor to an Equalities and Diversity Policy. There was no further reference to EDI policies in Methodist Conference or Council reports until 2016, when an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy was presented to the Council and subsequently approved.<sup>17</sup> It referred to 'the existing Equal Opportunities Policy' which, it stated, needed to be updated to align

7 *Methodist Council* (2009), paragraph 20.2; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf09-29-council-241109.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf09-29-council-241109.pdf).

8 *Towards an Inclusive Church* (2010); available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/confrep32-towards-an-inclusive-church-250510.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/confrep32-towards-an-inclusive-church-250510.pdf).

9 *Towards an Inclusive Church* (2010), paragraph 17 xiii.

10 *Towards an Inclusive Church* (2010), paragraph 26.

11 *Methodist Council* (2011), paragraph 71; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf2011-pc-59-methodist-council-report-0812.doc](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf2011-pc-59-methodist-council-report-0812.doc).

12 *Methodist Council* (2012), 'Equality and Diversity'.

13 *Faith and Order Committee* (2015), paragraph 2.4.

14 'Theological Reflections on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion' (2018), *EDI Toolkit, Module 1.2*; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/9010/edi-toolkit-1-2.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/9010/edi-toolkit-1-2.pdf).

15 'Theological Reflections on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion' (2018), paragraph 2.

16 *Equalities and Diversity* (2008), sections 3e, 5f, 9b, and 9c.

17 *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy* (2016); available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/1658/coun-mc16-30-edi-policy-january-2016.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/1658/coun-mc16-30-edi-policy-january-2016.pdf). Note that the *Equalities and Diversity* reports to the Methodist Council meetings in January and March 2012 were not available on the Methodist Church website at the time of writing, the site reporting a server error when accessing the links.

with the Equality Act 2010. The new policy was intended to apply to all lay employees of the Methodist Council and was offered to the wider Church as a model policy, contained within the Lay Employment Advisory Pack.

The work of general policy development relating to EDI within the Methodist Church has continued with little reference to Conference. It seems to have adopted an alarming trajectory. In October 2019, for example, the EDI Task Group presented a report to the Methodist Council which proposed four goals for the Church's EDI strategy, contained within its definition of an inclusive Church. The language in places is deeply concerning, appearing at times to reflect the totalitarian tone of secular pressure groups: 'those who act or speak (however subtly) in ways which deny the equality of all people before God *or fail to delight* in the diversity of the human race should expect there to be consequences for their right to hold office or even membership in the Church'.<sup>18</sup>

The proposals would suggest that the group driving the development of the EDI agenda within the Methodist Church has very little commitment to living with contradictory convictions within a mixed economy and, instead, seeks to exclude from the Church all those who, in their subjective judgement, fail to delight in diversity as they themselves define it. There appears to be a determination to press ahead with their own direction of travel within the pilgrimage of faith, with very little regard to Conference decisions, scrutiny or authorisation.

In the end, the four goals proposed by the EDI Task Group were adopted by the Methodist Conference in a much reduced form.<sup>19</sup> The seemingly totalitarian wording of the EDI Task Group was simply a proposal and was never *adopted* by the Methodist Council. However, despite a clear lack of mandate, anecdotal evidence suggests that these goals – in the form in which they were *proposed* by the task group – have been used by those who hold high office within the Church as a means for quashing debate and preventing the 1993 Resolutions from being observed. As just one example, I recount in the opening chapter my own experience of this policy having already taken root within the Methodist Church.

## An Accessible Resource

The commitment in 2004 to produce an accessible resource to help churches develop their own policies culminated in the publication in 2018 of the Methodist Church's EDI Toolkit, available for use across the Connexion via the Church's website.<sup>20</sup> It represents a substantial amount of work; a vast amount of resources have been expended in its production. It now seems to be widely used across the Church, at every level, and therefore has a significant influence over denominational life. Module 1.2, 'Theological Reflections', has already been considered above. Covering a range of EDI concerns, the modules that are particularly relevant here are 7.1, 'Sexual Orientation', and 7.2, 'Welcoming Same-Sex Couples'. Module 1.3, 'The Law', also reveals important insights to the way in which the EDI agenda has progressed within the Church, which I will consider in the next section. Before turning to modules 7.1 and 7.2, it is important first to consider another important resource which was published in 2015, *Homophobia: Definition and Guidance*.

### *Homophobia: Definition and Guidance*

As noted in the previous chapter, the Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships noted with concern the need for further work to be done addressing homophobia within the Methodist Church. In light of this, a booklet entitled *Homophobia: Definition and Guidance* was produced jointly by that working party and by the EDI Committee.<sup>21</sup> Like other reports on the pilgrimage of faith and matters of EDI, it emphasises Resolution 6 of the 1993 Resolutions over Resolution 4, and further emphasises the diversity of views across British Methodism, pointing to the reports *Living with Contradictory Convictions* and *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, to which I will turn more fully in the next chapter.

It offers the following definition of homophobia:

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.<sup>22</sup>

A number of examples and case studies are presented. The report also confirms what homophobia 'is not': holding a view that same sex activity is wrong; asking lots of questions; getting the language wrong.

<sup>18</sup> EDI Task Group (October 2019), paragraph 13.2; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/15136/counc\\_mc19-87\\_edi-task-group\\_oct\\_2019.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/15136/counc_mc19-87_edi-task-group_oct_2019.pdf); italics added.

<sup>19</sup> Methodist Council (2020), part 2, section K.

<sup>20</sup> Methodist Council (2020), part 2, section K.

<sup>21</sup> *Homophobia: Definition and Guidance* (2015); available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/2089/7-1-1-sexual-orientation-homophobia-guidance.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/2089/7-1-1-sexual-orientation-homophobia-guidance.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> *Homophobia: Definition and Guidance* (2015), Definition.

Whilst there is much in the booklet with which most Christians would agree, the booklet is utterly ambiguous in terms of policies that would be consistent with the discipline of the Methodist Church. It makes no distinction whatsoever between sexual orientation and sexual practice, which is at the heart of the Methodist Church's understanding of human relationships. The report states that it is homophobic to discriminate against someone because of actual or perceived sexual *orientation*. It does not, however – even in its consideration of what homophobia 'is not' – clarify that it is not homophobic to require members, office holders and ministers, to be celibate in terms of sexual practice outside the marriage of one man and one woman, regardless of sexual orientation. This has, arguably, had the effect of introducing ambiguity in such matters – whether deliberately or otherwise – within the life of the Church.

### *Module 7.1, 'Sexual Orientation'*

The stated aim of the sexual orientation module is 'to consider how to continue in the "pilgrimage of faith"'.<sup>23</sup> It does not, however, appear to be an impartial consideration of the subject. Rather, it presents a heavily biased view of the issues which seems to seek to change the views of people within the Church and to undermine the present position of the Conference.

Specific reference is made to Resolution 6 of the 1993 Resolutions. The only reference to Resolution 4 comes when all six resolutions are printed in the Living with Contradictory Convictions section.<sup>24</sup> The opening exercise culminates with the participants working 'as a team' to identify issues where 'views once commonly held have changed over time' and where 'there is no agreement on what is right, so people have agreed to disagree'.<sup>25</sup> Whether intentionally subversive or not, it would seem to set the psychological conditions to promote one particular view and thus undermine the resolutions of the Conference.

Eleven case studies are provided, mostly presenting the stories of people in gay and lesbian relationships. Only two present the stories and views of those who align with the fourth of the 1993 Resolutions. One is of Matt, who is described as having 'a very conservative view of the Bible' and who worries that if the Church agrees to same sex marriage and 'his understanding of the Bible is not respected', then 'his relationship with God may suffer'.<sup>26</sup> The other is of Jessica who feels that, if same sex marriage is allowed, 'it will reduce the status of all marriages, including her own'.<sup>27</sup> It is hard to escape the patronising tone of these two stories, or the sense that there is misrepresentation and that they do not present a proper understanding at all of those who seek to remain faithful to the teaching of the Bible and the current teaching of the Church.

### *Module 7.2, 'Welcoming Same-Sex Couples and their Families'*

The module, 'Welcoming Same-Sex Couples and their Families', was produced in response to a need identified in the 2014 report, *Marriage and Relationships*, as noted in the previous chapter.<sup>28</sup> Whilst the module states that it does not seek to alter the diversity within the Methodist Church, it does seem to be heavily biased away from the current position of the Conference.

This module contains many characteristics of the sexual orientation module. The emphasis is on diversity, both within scripture and within the life of the Church. It is suggested that even scripture itself presents diverse perspectives on marriage and relationships, contrasting Mark 10:1-12 and Matthew 5:31-32, both of which record Jesus' response to questions about divorce. These are further contrasted with Jesus' response to the woman at the well in John 4:1-42. The implication is that such passages are mutually contradictory.<sup>29</sup>

The situation within the Methodist Church is obscured within the module. Resolution 6 is highlighted in isolation from the other resolutions adopted in 1993. Indeed, the other resolutions – including Resolution 4 – are not mentioned in this module at all. Regarding the Church's position on same sex marriages, on one page it is stated, 'The Methodist Church has *chosen not to* opt in to the solemnisation of same sex marriage, or the formal blessing of same sex marriage'.<sup>30</sup> On the next, it states, 'The Methodist Church has *not chosen to* opt into the authorisation of same sex marriage in Church'.<sup>31</sup> There is a subtle, but important, difference in meaning. The former is correct, as documented in the previous chapter.

Whilst the emphasis throughout is on welcoming the unwelcomed and excluded, there is no grappling with the purpose of Christian

<sup>23</sup> 'Sexual Orientation' (2018), EDI Toolkit, Module 7.1, p. 6; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/9018/edi-toolkit-7-1.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/9018/edi-toolkit-7-1.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> 'Sexual Orientation' (2018), pp. 6, 8.

<sup>25</sup> 'Sexual Orientation' (2018), p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> 'Sexual Orientation' (2018), p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> 'Sexual Orientation' (2018), p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> 'Welcoming Same-Sex Couples and their Families' (2018), EDI Toolkit, Module 7.2; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/9019/edi-toolkit-7-2.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/9019/edi-toolkit-7-2.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> 'Welcoming Same-Sex Couples and their Families' (2018), pp. 5 – 6.

<sup>30</sup> 'Welcoming Same-Sex Couples and their Families' (2018), p. 7; italics added.

<sup>31</sup> 'Welcoming Same-Sex Couples and their Families' (2018), p. 8; italics added.

community and the place of challenge and change. Welcoming people to public worship is different from enabling their deeper involvement in the life of the church without further commitment. Surely, the important question, therefore, is not whether all should be welcomed to worship within the Methodist Church, but whether or not sexually intimate same sex relationships are to be encouraged or discouraged, and it was incumbent upon the writers of the document to answer the question in light of the 1993 Resolutions of the Conference – the current discipline of the Church. The answer to the question should not affect the *quality* of the welcome, but ought to affect its *nature*. This vital question is entirely ignored within the module with the result that its treatment of the subject of welcome is very superficial.

## A Guide to the Relevant Legislation

The guidance on relevant legislation, which the Conference committed to issuing in 2004, was fulfilled primarily in Module 1.3 of the EDI Toolkit, ‘The Law’. However, legislation has also been considered in other reports and documents. Although the protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010, and the requirement not to discriminate on those grounds, have been highlighted, the exemptions for religious organisations have almost entirely been ignored. Where those exemptions have been mentioned, it seems to have been done with nervousness and an implied urging of extreme caution in their exercise.

The 2015 *Homophobia: Definition and Guidance* booklet, for example, notes that ‘Religious organisations may opt into some very limited exemptions from this, only in relation to the performance of a religious function’.<sup>32</sup> The emphasis on ‘very limited exemptions’ is interesting, because the exemptions are entirely sufficient for the Methodist Church’s needs if the distinction it maintains within its discipline between sexual orientation and sexual practice were to be applied with authenticity and integrity within its denominational life.

The booklet adds that ‘the Methodist Church has largely chosen not to operate these exemptions, in order to be consistent with the 1993 Conference Resolutions on Human Sexuality’.<sup>33</sup> This overstates the situation considerably. It was the authors of the various reports who, deliberately or otherwise, were uncomprehensive in their work regarding relevant legislation and therefore prevented the Conference from making an informed choice. To argue that this is ‘in order to be consistent with the 1993 Conference Resolutions’ is disingenuous. It would also be entirely consistent – and, indeed, more completely consistent – with the resolutions to make full use of the exemptions in order to distinguish between orientation and practice.

### *EDI Toolkit, Module 1.3, ‘The Law’*

Module 1.3 of the *EDI Toolkit* focuses on the need for leaders at all levels within the Methodist Church to understand equality and human rights laws.<sup>34</sup> However, it seems to blur the legal requirements and obscure the exemptions for religious organisations; it is difficult to see how this has not been done deliberately. It begins its summary of the exemptions regarding Marriage and Civil Partnerships, for example, with the confusing statement, ‘There are no exceptions or exemptions, but a religious organisation does have some limited exemptions’.<sup>35</sup>

The example given of the way exemptions may apply within the Methodist Church is curious. For other denominations, examples are given of situations in which discrimination would otherwise be illegal under the Equality Act 2010, but where exemptions apply for religious organisations (the requirement for Roman Catholic clergy to be unmarried and for Church of England clergy not to enter same sex marriage). Similar examples could helpfully have been given for the Methodist Church, and yet the example given is, ‘the Methodist Conference in 2014, whilst not changing its definition and understanding of Christian marriage, recognised the legal and civil right of Methodists to enter legally formed same sex marriage’.<sup>36</sup> It is a disingenuous and misleading example which does not require the use of the legal exemptions at all. Furthermore, it ignores completely the requirement the Conference made explicit in adopting that resolution, that the 1993 Resolutions continue to apply to all. This is precisely where a consideration of the application of the legal exemptions within the Methodist Church would have been particularly helpful.

The module, however, fails to make a distinction between sexual *orientation* and sexual *practice*, as is required within the Methodist Church by the 1993 Resolutions. It states that ‘the Methodist Church does not consider sexual orientation to be a barrier to candidating for ministry or for stationing’ and then adds: ‘If a person who is responsible for candidating or stationing decisions

chose to ignore the discipline of the Church because of their own personal theological position they would be breaking the law’.<sup>37</sup> However, it overlooks the fact that the discipline of the Church requires a distinction to be made between sexual orientation and sexual practice and that the legal exemptions permit the Church to preclude from membership, office and ministry, those whom it does not have ‘reasonable grounds’ to be satisfied that their lifestyle corresponds to Resolution 4 of the 1993 Resolutions.<sup>38</sup>

The module is therefore of very limited use within the Methodist Church. It is, perhaps, difficult not to discern a wilful disregard for the discipline of the Conference, deliberately blurring the legal requirements and obscuring the exemptions that were intended precisely for the type of situation within the Methodist Church which distinguishes between sexual orientation and sexual practice, in line with the traditional teaching of the Christian Church.

## Conclusion

Whilst laudable in many of its aims, rooted in work to combat racial and sex discrimination, the EDI agenda seems to have developed in a way that has significantly influenced the pilgrimage of faith, imposing a destination that is not consistent with previous Conference resolutions. This agenda has thus **bypassed the authority of Conference**, repeatedly delaying promised reports and then failing to seek the scrutiny and authorisation of its work, not least regarding the theological basis and the development of policies. The much delayed and inadequate theological reflections have resulted in the agenda being shaped by a secular, rather than a biblical and Christian vision. By eroding the distinction between sexual orientation and sexual practice, and thereby equating sexual practice with characteristics of race, sex, age and disability, the agenda has **undermined the authority of the Conference**, the resolutions of which require that such a distinction be made. Furthermore, it has sought to **prevent the proper outworking of the discipline of the Conference** by blurring the legal requirements of statutory legislation and obscuring the exemptions for religious organisations.

The prominence of an unnuanced concept of sexuality within the EDI agenda and the influence of that agenda across the Connexion at every level has meant that it has had a very considerable effect upon the pilgrimage of faith, undermining and moving the Church away from the previous resolutions of the Conference. It is difficult to see how this could not have been the deliberate intent of those driving the agenda. Such an approach to EDI has contributed to and is now perpetuated by the Inclusive Church Strategy which is being proposed as a key driver of the denominational life of the Methodist Church over the coming years. Unless significant decisions are made by the Conference to bring this runaway train under control, it seems that the denomination will continue to be shaped by an agenda driven by a profoundly secular, rather than a deeply and distinctively biblical and Christian vision. In the following chapter, I turn to the ways in which the foundations of that vision within the Church have been consistently undermined over the years.

<sup>32</sup> *Homophobia: Definition and Guidance (2015), Background.*

<sup>33</sup> *Homophobia: Definition and Guidance (2015), Background.*

<sup>34</sup> ‘The Law’ (2018), *EDI Toolkit, Module 1.3*; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/9011/edi-toolkit-1-3.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/9011/edi-toolkit-1-3.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> ‘The Law’ (2018), p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> ‘The Law’ (2018), p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> ‘The Law’ (2018), p. 25.

<sup>38</sup> Equality Act 2010, Schedule 9 Part 1, 1, (1); available at [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/schedule/9](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/schedule/9).





6.

SPADES & PICKAXES:

# UNDERMINING THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

Whilst the Methodist Church's runaway train has careered along the twin rails of the pilgrimage of faith and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion agenda, it has been further hastened on its journey because the foundations of the track have been chipped away and become increasingly shaky. In chapter 2, I described three formational documents which form the track bed on which the rails have been laid. The foundation is more fundamental still, for the only foundation of the Church's life and teaching must be the Bible. As Jesus himself said, 'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them is like a man who built his house on rock' (Matthew 7:24).

Despite the vital importance of building on the rock of Jesus' teaching, a number of Conference documents have been used as spades and pickaxes to chip away at the foundations and to undermine the authority of the Bible within the Church. This can be traced back even to the Church's basic constitutional document, the Deed of Union and, more recently, it has been the effect of two Conference reports, *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path* and *Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church*.

## The Deed of Union

The Methodist Church's most significant constitutional document is the Deed of Union, adopted by the Conference which brought together three separate Methodist denominations (the Wesleyan Methodist Church, the Primitive Methodist Church, and the United Methodist Church) in 1932. Having set out the necessary historical information and 'small print', it turns to the doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church and 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. These evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church are pledged are contained in Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons.<sup>1</sup>

The references to the Bible might be regarded as slippery terms. 'Our doctrines', according to these standards, are only 'based upon' the Bible or, to be more precise, not upon the Bible, but upon 'the divine revelation' which is 'recorded in' the Bible. That might open the door to claiming that some parts of the Bible are part of the divine revelation and other significant parts of it are not. The ambiguity was deliberate, reconciling theological differences between the leading figures of the different streams of Methodism which came together. Clarity can, at least, be reached by reference to the writings of John Wesley, specifically his *Notes on the New Testament* and the first four volumes of his sermons to which the doctrinal clause also refers. Any understanding of the Bible which is formally held within the Methodist Church must be consistent with the theology Wesley set out in these.

<sup>1</sup> *The Constitution, Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, (CPD, 2020), vol. 2, p. 213; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/18420/conf-2020-cpd-vol-2.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/18420/conf-2020-cpd-vol-2.pdf).

Wesley makes his view of the Bible clear in the Preface to his *Notes on the New Testament*:

The Scripture therefore of the Old and New Testament is a most precious system of Divine truth. Every part is worthy of God; and all are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the foundation of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste prefer to all the writings of men, however wise, or learned, or holy.

An exact knowledge of the truth was accompanied in the inspired writers with a corresponding series of arguments, a precise expression of their meaning, and a genuine vigour of suitable affections.<sup>2</sup>

It seems, however, that the spades and pickaxes which have been used to chip away at the authority of the Bible within the Methodist Church were in the hands of the leading figures of the Methodist denominations at the point of union in 1932. They deliberately introduced ambiguity into the understanding of the role of the Bible, placing the united denomination of the British Methodist Church on a slippery slope from its inception. In the intervening years, the Church has increasingly slid further away from the foundation of the authority of the Bible.

## 'A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path' (1998)

In the light of the debate around the Resolutions on Human Sexuality the previous year, a notice of motion was brought to the Conference in 1994, requesting a report which considered 'the nature of biblical authority and how it is implemented in the life of the Methodist Church'.<sup>3</sup> The work resulted in the report, *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to my Path* which the Conference received in 1998 and commended to local churches, circuits and districts for study.<sup>4</sup>

The report establishes the authority of scripture within the Methodist Church – that 'there is such a thing as a supreme rule of faith and practice for the Church', which is 'the divine revelation ... recorded in the Holy Scriptures'.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it recognises that the authority of the Conference is limited within the authority of scripture. Referring to the doctrinal clause of the Deed of Union, it states:

This statement implies that the authority of the Methodist Conference ... is subject to the authority of God's revelation recorded in the scriptures. Its authority is not independent of, nor superior to, the revelation recorded in scripture.<sup>6</sup>

Rather, the Conference is the final authority in the *interpretation* of scripture.<sup>7</sup>

The general tone of the report, however, seems to undermine the role of the Bible within the Methodist Church. The tendency from the beginning is to detract from the reliability of the Bible, rather than presenting reasons for having confidence in it.<sup>8</sup> Positive statements are made, but are then followed by a counterbalance. It is stated, for example, that 'Christians believe that God was at work, inspiring not only those who wrote the books that became our Bible, but those who collected them, recognized them as scripture, copied them, edited them and translated them.' Such a statement is entirely consistent with Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament*, to which the Methodist Church is committed. However, the sentence which follows adds: 'But the men and women through whom God works are inevitably fallible and limited'.<sup>9</sup>

The report culminates in presenting the range of views held within the Methodist Church regarding the Bible – seven views across a spectrum, ranging from the belief that the Bible is 'inerrant (free of all error and entirely trustworthy in everything which it records) and has complete authority in all matters of theology and behaviour' to 'a diverse and often contradictory collection of documents which represent the experiences of various people in various times and places' and is simply one useful resource amongst others in living the Christian life.<sup>10</sup> The report itself recognises that not all these positions may be compatible with the Deed of Union's commitment to the authority of the divine revelation recorded in holy scripture, though it makes no comment about which are and which are not.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, *The New Testament with Explanatory Notes*, (Halifax: William Nicholson and Sons, 1869), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path* (1998), paragraph 2.1; available at: [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-a-lamp-to-my-feet-1998.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-a-lamp-to-my-feet-1998.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, Resolution 3/1.

<sup>5</sup> *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, paragraphs 4.2.1 and 4.2.2.

<sup>6</sup> *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, paragraph 4.3.

<sup>7</sup> *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, paragraph 4.3; see also paragraph 5.2.

<sup>8</sup> *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, paragraphs 2.5 – 2.10.

<sup>9</sup> *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, paragraph 2.9.

<sup>10</sup> *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, paragraphs 7.9.1 – 7.9.7.

<sup>11</sup> *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, paragraph 7.10.

The Conference received the report, commended it for study across the Connexion, inviting comments, and directed the Faith and Order Committee to report back in 2001.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Section C of the Faith and Order Committee's report to the Conference of 2001 was entitled, 'The Nature of Authority'.<sup>13</sup>

In this report, the committee noted that 'as it is not clear that all Models are to be viewed as equally compatible with the Deed of Union, there is an argument for reducing the range of possible Models which Methodists should be encouraged to support' and added:

To fail to opt for a normative Model, or narrower range of Models, would merely acknowledge that all Models are held to by some Methodists. To opt for a narrower range would seem to be more in keeping with the Deed of Union.<sup>14</sup>

This work, however, has never been done. Instead, the report recommended (and the Conference subsequently resolved) that 'these seven [Models] simply be acknowledged as different ways in which Methodists do in fact use the Bible today'.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear that the Conference reports on marriage and relationships have, over the years, placed increasing weight on *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*. *The Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships (2014)* report refers to it, stating: 'The Conference did not choose to affirm only one of these ways of using Scripture as being correct', though it does not add that neither did the Conference affirm all of them.<sup>16</sup> The *Marriage and Relationships Task Group (2016)* report describes it as 'an important resource'.<sup>17</sup>

A more significant, and utterly false, use of the report appears in the *Marriage and Relationships Task Group: Interim Report (2018)*. This states, not only that the 1998 Conference 'did not choose to affirm only one of those ways of using Scripture as being correct', but also that *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path* presents a range of views 'each of which the Conference has affirmed'.<sup>18</sup> This is simply wrong. The Conference categorically did not affirm each of the views; it simply recognised that each of the views was held by at least some Methodists, even though some such views may be incompatible with the Deed of Union.

The 2018 report sets out the basic thinking behind *God In Love Unites Us* which would be brought to the Conference the following year and is now subject to consultation across the Connexion. That report is the particular focus of the following chapter, but here it is important to note that, given the way it uses *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, the whole report relies on a catastrophically false premise which must call into question each of its resolutions. If it is based on the assumption that it can draw its conclusions from any of the views of scripture described in *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, then there is a very real danger that its conclusions may not be consistent with the Deed of Union and thus may be unconstitutional. If it wishes to rely so much on that report, then further work must surely be required first to identify which of the approaches to scripture described in *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path* accord with the Deed of Union.

This catastrophic error is repeated in *God In Love Unites Us* itself. It initially indicates that its use of the Bible is based upon the range of attitudes described in *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*.<sup>19</sup> The second reference is found later in the report, where it is stated:

The challenge for the Methodist Church, and therefore for our work as a Task Group, is that ... a report to the 1998 Conference identified seven different attitudes to biblical authority, and indicated a range of ways in which Methodists use what is written in the Bible as a source for what they believe and do. But neither the 1998 Conference nor any subsequent Conference has chosen to reject any of these ways of using Scripture that it had identified; nor has it promoted any of them as being more useful or correct than the others.<sup>20</sup>

That is correct, although no reference is made to the observation in *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path* and the subsequent report of the Faith and Order committee that not all the views may be compatible with the Deed of Union. However, *God In Love Unites Us* then goes on to repeat the fallacy about this range of views: 'each of which the Conference has affirmed'.<sup>21</sup> It is this

12 *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, Resolutions 3/1 and 3/2.

13 Faith and Order Committee (2001), section C, 'The Nature of Authority'; available at: [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-the-nature-of-authority-2001.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-the-nature-of-authority-2001.pdf).

14 Faith and Order Committee (2001), section C, paragraph 4.1.

15 Faith and Order Committee (2001), section C, paragraph 4.1.

16 Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships (2014), paragraph 81; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2014-40-marriage-and-civil-partnerships.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2014-40-marriage-and-civil-partnerships.pdf).

17 The Marriage and Relationships Task Group (2016), paragraph 1.3; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2016-29-Marriage-and-Relationships-Task-Group.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2016-29-Marriage-and-Relationships-Task-Group.pdf).

18 Marriage and Relationships Task Group: Interim Report (2018); available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2018-27-Marriage-and-Relationships-report.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2018-27-Marriage-and-Relationships-report.pdf).

19 God In Love Unites Us (2019), paragraph 0.3.3; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2019-10-amended-marriage-and-relationships-report.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2019-10-amended-marriage-and-relationships-report.pdf).

20 God In Love Unites Us, paragraph 4.3.14.

21 God In Love Unites Us, paragraph 4.3.14.

affirmation of each of the views, *God In Love Unites Us* states, that leads to contradictory convictions and makes it particularly challenging to find a way forward within the Methodist Church.

The answer would seem to be clear: to correct the mistakes. Firstly, this involves recognising that the proposals of *God In Love Unites Us* are based on an entirely false premise and are therefore in danger of being unconstitutional and so must be reconsidered; secondly, retracing our steps back to 1998 and completing the task which was begun then of identifying how the Bible is to be used, according to the Deed of Union, within the Methodist Church.

## 'Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church' (2006)

As part of the pilgrimage of faith debates, the Methodist Conference of 2005 directed the Faith and Order Committee 'to reflect upon the theological implications of being a Church that has to live or contend with different and mutually contradictory convictions'. The fruit of this work was presented to the Conference of 2006 in the form of the report, *Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church*.<sup>22</sup>

Deliberately and explicitly set within the context of disagreements about homosexuality, which it identifies as an ethical rather than doctrinal question,<sup>23</sup> the report seeks to preserve unity within the Methodist Church. Highlighting both the inclusiveness of the Christian Church – particularly in the Methodist tradition – and the need for appropriate boundaries, it asks whether this is an issue 'about which a clear conclusion is needed or whether it is an example of a form of diversity which has to be "lived with"'.<sup>24</sup> It therefore presents a consideration of diversity, unity and division within the Church and urges openness – openness to God and openness to one another: 'to welcome all those who are prepared to share and critically compare their personal stories with the story of God within a commitment to do this with each other'.<sup>25</sup>

Whilst there may be much to be said for an attempt to deal honestly with the range of competing convictions held by members of the Methodist Church, this report formalises at least three weaknesses which had emerged in the debates leading to it and which were further perpetuated subsequently. By way of consequence, this has had a very significant effect of eroding the foundations of biblical authority within the denomination.

Firstly, in questioning whether the Conference needs to arrive at a clear conclusion about such matters the report enshrines the refusal to acknowledge that, in the 1993 resolutions, the Conference has already arrived at a clear conclusion. This perpetuates the contradictions within the denomination and undermines the authority of the Conference.

Secondly, in its attempts to preserve unity within the Methodist Church, the question perhaps ought to be asked whether the report places too much emphasis on structural unity and conflates human institutions with the body of Christ. The Bible, after all, describes Christian unity as an already present reality amongst believers in Jesus – a unity in which people may choose to participate, in response to the unmerited grace of God in Christ, or from which they may choose to absent themselves.

Thirdly, and warranting lengthier consideration here, given its increasingly central place in related Conference reports, this report uses the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as a framework for considering the issues that arise, drawing insights from scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Thus it makes explicit what was already becoming an increasing emphasis in the pilgrimage of faith reports and would become a driving force of all the subsequent reports on marriage and relationships.

The use – and particularly the misuse – of the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral is a significant weakness in the reports, not least *God In Love Unites Us*, and has contributed to the loss of control over the Methodist Church's runaway train. The way in which it is construed can appear to give equal weight to reason, tradition and experience alongside scripture as sources of authority within the Church. The model was proposed by the American Methodist theologian, Albert Outler, who himself regretted the way in which it had quickly come to be misused.<sup>26</sup> British Methodist Minister, Daniel Pratt Morris-Chapman has more recently argued persuasively that the model was flawed from the beginning, as Outler himself misunderstood the way in which sources of authority were used within the Church of England in Wesley's day.<sup>27</sup>

22 *Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church (2006)*, paragraph 1.1; available at: [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/Conf06\\_Faith\\_and\\_Order\\_committee\\_pt2.docx](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/Conf06_Faith_and_Order_committee_pt2.docx).

23 *Living with Contradictory Convictions*, paragraph 1.2.

24 *Living with Contradictory Convictions*, paragraph 1.3.

25 *Living with Contradictory Convictions*, paragraph 7.5.

26 Albert Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral – in John Wesley", in Thomas Landford (ed.) *Doctrine and Theology in the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), p. 86.

27 Daniel J. Pratt Morris-Chapman, 'Is the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" an accurate portrayal of Wesley's theological method' in *Theology and Ministry*, issue 5 (2018), 2.1-17.

The weaknesses of the use and misuse of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in *Living with Contradictory Convictions* and the marriage and relationships reports which have followed are manifested particularly in the under-emphasis of scripture and the over-emphasis – and particular understanding – of experience.

In terms of scripture, following the lead of *A Lamp to My Feet and a Lamp to My Path*, *Living with Contradictory Convictions* is anxious to assert that the question is not about biblical *authority* – for, it maintains, all Methodists acknowledge the authority of the Bible – but one of biblical *interpretation*. There is no consideration of how to determine whether or not an interpretation of the Bible has integrity and is therefore an acceptable one, nor of whether some interpretations may themselves deny the authority of scripture. Thus, it may not be wholly accurate to suggest that the question within the Methodist Church is solely one of scriptural interpretation and not one of scriptural authority. This approach to affirming all interpretations of scripture as equally valid has the effect of undermining the authority of scripture both within the debates and within the wider life of the Methodist Church.

The misuse of the quadrilateral in terms of experience is even more significant. Wesley, from whose writing Outler claimed to derive the quadrilateral model, wrote of experience to denote the witness of the Holy Spirit to our spirits that we are children of God.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Wesley warned against what was known in his day as ‘enthusiasm’, which he understood to be the elevation of experience over scripture. Thus any attempt to prioritise experience over and against the authority of scripture within the Methodist Church would be contrary to the doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church.

Nevertheless, this is precisely what the reports regarding marriage and relationships have done, not least *God In Love Unites Us*, and it was *Living with Contradictory Convictions* which opened the door. That earlier report advocates a narrative approach to shaping the theology and practice of the Methodist Church, the telling of personal stories which it recognises are particularly powerful.<sup>29</sup> The report also, however, recognises the dangers of such an approach. Personal stories can be hard to critique and can mask the need for personal change; it is too easy to leave such stories unchallenged as personal experience can appear to be beyond criticism. The report therefore emphasises the need to enter into dialogue and to consider personal stories alongside the narrative of scripture.<sup>30</sup>

The warnings of these dangers have, however, gone unheeded. The reports on marriage and relationships have proceeded to place increasing emphasis on personal experience, elevating it above scripture, and leaving it uncritiqued and unchallenged.

## Red Flags of Warning and Blueprints of Strategy

As the Anglican bishop and theologian, NT Wright, has observed in another context, a perfect storm occurs when a combination of rare factors in the weather come together at the same time.<sup>31</sup> In a similar way, it seems, *Living with Contradictory Convictions* charts the coming together of various factors in the approach to theological debates in the Methodist Church, particularly around human relationships, which have produced a perfect storm: the long-lived reluctance to recognise, accept and affirm that the Conference has already reached a position on such matters, thus disregarding the authority of the Conference; an overemphasis on structural unity and human institutions against the already-present reality of unity amongst all followers of Jesus irrespective of denomination; the ruling of all interpretations of scripture as equally valid, thus undermining the authority of scripture; and the adopting of a dialogical approach to determining official Methodist theology, which elevates personal stories over scripture and fails to distinguish between the witness of the Spirit on the one hand and ‘the devices and desires of our own hearts’, on the other, which we as human beings are prone to follow too much.<sup>32</sup>

Within this perfect storm, the warnings of *Living with Contradictory Convictions* have been ignored. Consequently, those who have been committed to remaining faithful to the Methodist Church’s current position, to Christian tradition and to the teaching of the Bible have been disenfranchised from the debates. As the report foresaw, we have been unable to challenge the personal stories which have been presented with an authority that borders on the absolute (whilst other personal stories that do not fit the desired narrative have been excluded) and our silence has been taken, in varying degrees, as acquiescence, approval or apathy. It almost seems as if the observations of *Living with Contradictory Convictions* have been taken, not as the intended red flags of warning, but as blueprints of strategy. Seizing the opportunity afforded by the ambiguity of the Deed of Union, the two Conference reports *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path* and *Living with Contradictory Convictions* have been taken up and used as spades and pickaxes to chip away at the foundation on which the Methodist Church stands, the authority of the Bible, and the runaway train has careered out of control towards impending derailment.

<sup>28</sup> See John Wesley, ‘The Witness of the Spirit’, Sermon 10 in the ‘first four volumes of his sermons’ to which the Methodist Church is committed in the doctrinal clause of the Deed of Union; available at <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-10-the-witness-of-the-spirit-discourse-one/>.

<sup>29</sup> *Living with Contradictory Convictions*, paragraph 5.1.

<sup>30</sup> *Living with Contradictory Convictions*, paragraphs 5.1 and 5.5.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Tom Wright, ‘Jesus in a Perfect Storm’; available at <https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/03/30/jesus-in-the-perfect-storm/>.

<sup>32</sup> See the General Confession from *The Order for Morning and Evening Prayer* in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

It remains the case, however, that **the Bible must hold a place of supreme authority** within the Methodist Church. This is not as explicit in the Deed of Union as it could have been, but is confirmed by the writings of Wesley, which are also held to be authoritative in the denomination. **The Conference itself is subject to the authority of scripture.** It follows that **its resolutions must not contradict it**, though it is charged with interpreting scripture. *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path* is clear that **not all views of the Bible held by members of the Methodist Church may be compatible with the Deed of Union**, but the report has been **catastrophically misused** to justify any and every interpretation of scripture. Contrary to the writings of Wesley, to which the Church is committed doctrinally, **personal experience has been elevated over scripture.** Therefore, care must be taken that the Conference does not adopt resolutions which are contrary to the teaching of the Bible and therefore unconstitutional according to the Deed of Union. It is to a more detailed consideration of the proposals of *God In Love Unites Us* that I turn in the next chapter.





## 7. THE IMPENDING DERAILMENT: 'GOD IN LOVE UNITES US'

Our journey through the Methodist Church's pilgrimage of faith, along the tracks of the runaway train, has finally brought us to the controversial proposals of *God In Love Unites Us*. Commissioned by the Conference of 2016, and with its timetable subsequently extended by a year, the task group presented its report to the Conference of 2019. Some of its proposals, including the production of liturgical resources to mark divorce in the context of worship, were adopted with immediate effect. However, the most significant resolutions were adopted provisionally, subject to consultation across the Connexion. The Conference was originally due to vote on the ratification of the resolutions in the light of the consultation's feedback in 2020, but owing to the disruption of the global pandemic, this was postponed until 2021.

In this chapter, I will set out my concerns with the provisional resolutions of *God In Love Unites Us*, in the light of everything considered so far. I will seek to demonstrate that the report has been overly influenced by a secular worldview and by controversial political pressure groups, and is misleading in the way it presents information. Most importantly, I will argue that the report is unconstitutional.

It is not my aim here, owing to constraints of space, to set out a deeply and distinctly biblical and Christian vision of marriage and human relationships, such as we had hoped to find in *God In Love Unites Us*. The Remaining Faithful study guide and overview leaflet produced by Methodist Evangelicals Together in 2019 offers more on that vision.<sup>1</sup>

Here, I will focus on the proposals which are the subject of the current consultation and which are due to be voted on at the Conference of 2021. Before turning to those considerations, however, I will begin by outlining one final, very significant development in the process which contributed to the development of *God In Love Unites Us* and then make some observations about the consultation process which has followed the Conference of 2019.

### The Derailment Begins

I have referred in chapter 1 to the atmosphere of whispered conversations and hurried strategizing at the Conference of 2018, all of which seemed to be utterly unfitting within the body of Christ. The outcome of it all was astonishing. Two notices of motion were brought from the floor of the Conference. The first attempted to circumvent the entire process of Connexional consultation and immediately permit same sex marriages to be held on Methodist Church premises, with ministers and other Methodists officiating.<sup>2</sup> It was clear that crisis meetings were being hurriedly arranged, seeking to apply the brakes to the runaway train as its derailment looked set to begin. In the end, in a highly unusual and perhaps unprecedented move, the Chairs of District *en bloc* proposed that the vote be not put, to which the Conference agreed.

<sup>1</sup> Available for download at [www.methodistevangelicals.org.uk/rf-study-guide](http://www.methodistevangelicals.org.uk/rf-study-guide) and [www.methodistevangelicals.org.uk/rf-leaflet](http://www.methodistevangelicals.org.uk/rf-leaflet); hard copies available from the MET Development worker.

<sup>2</sup> Notice of Motion 2018/112; see *Daily Record* (2018), 7/17/6; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/21229/conf-2018-daily-record-complete.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/21229/conf-2018-daily-record-complete.pdf).

A second notice of motion was then proposed. This succeeded in forcing the hand of the task group writing the report. It dictated that the report must enable 'those who feel called by God to solemnise same sex marriages to do so'.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the original intention of the task group, now their hands were tied. Although the Methodist people had been asked to consent to a *revisiting* of the definition of marriage with the assurance that *revisiting* the definition of marriage did not mean *changing* it, their trust had now been betrayed. The Conference had consented to dictate an outcome which would require a change to the definition of marriage.

### The Consultation Process

The consultation process which subsequently followed the production of *God In Love Unites Us* is itself deserving of comment. The last time such significant proposals were considered by the Conference – in 1990 – consultation across the Church was undertaken as widely as possible. The report of the Commission on Human Sexuality (which preceded the 1993 Resolutions, considered in chapter 2) was 'received' by the Conference with a further resolution that 'while not at this stage making any final judgement on anything contained in the report, the Conference nevertheless commends it for study to the churches, circuits and districts' and a process was subsequently developed to enable responses to be received and proposals formulated in the light of it.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the views of Methodists were formally sought across every level of Methodist Church life – local churches, circuits and districts – and, in the light of the responses received, the 1993 Resolutions were subsequently adopted.

The same process of open consultation and response could have been followed with *God In Love Unites Us*. Instead, a much more restrictive approach was adopted, proposed by the task group which presented the report. Instead of receiving the report without expressing a view and commending it across the Connexion for study and response, the Conference adopted each and every resolution. Although it did subsequently resolve that a number of those resolutions were to be treated as provisional, thus subjecting them to consultation and final ratification, adopting this process had two very significant implications. Firstly, whether intentionally or not, the Conference very firmly expressed a view, in favour of the report and its resolutions. Secondly, it severely limited the consultation, restricting it solely to district synods rather than openly consulting across the Connexion at every level as had been the case in 1990.

Even the standard procedure the Conference adopted when restricting consultation to the district synods was amended to restrict the consultation further. As noted in chapter 4, the standing order requiring a two-year consultation process was suspended in order to restrict the consultation to one year only. In the end, the outbreak of a global pandemic made that impossible and the vote on the ratification of the resolutions was deferred until 2021. However, at the time of writing, the postponed consultation has so far proved to be far from satisfactory. Districts have planned to conduct synods through online video conferencing, with inadequate notice and briefings owing to the pressure of time. The unconvincing medium for deep and sensitive discussion, combined with the inevitable difficulties resulting from the operation of the technology by people still trying to learn how to use it, has left much to be desired.

### Contravening the Doctrinal Standards of the Methodist Church

Regardless of the consultation, however, it seems to me that the resolutions which arise from *God In Love Unites Us*, and the report on which they are based, are unconstitutional, both in the substance of what they propose and in the process through which they have been adopted. It is to these concerns that I now turn.

First, *God In Love Unites Us* and its resolutions seem to contradict the doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church. The doctrinal clause of the Deed of Union – the governing document of the Methodist Church – states that the Church 'loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation'. These doctrines 'are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures' and the Church 'acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice'. Further clarification is given: 'these evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church are pledged are contained in Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons'.<sup>5</sup>

The most significant way in which *God In Love Unites Us* contravenes these doctrinal standards is its superficial treatment of scripture which obscures and misrepresents its meaning, as considered below. However, there are other concerns which I will briefly address first. The report deals equally superficially with Wesley's sermons in its concluding call to unity, quoting from his *Catholic Spirit*: 'though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?'<sup>6</sup> It is a sermon famously based upon the text, 'Is thine heart right, as my

<sup>3</sup> Notice of Motion 2018/203; see *Daily Record* (2018), 7/17/8. The notice of motion also erroneously affirmed that the Guidance of 2014 affirmed that Methodist premises may be used for public thanksgiving of same sex marriages and civil partnerships, which is not the case, as demonstrated in chapter 4.

<sup>4</sup> The Report of the Conference Commission on Human Sexuality (1990); available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/ne\\_confcommonhumsexuality1990\\_0305.rtf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/ne_confcommonhumsexuality1990_0305.rtf).

<sup>5</sup> The Constitution, Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, (CPD, 2020), vol. 2, p. 213; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/media/18420/conf-2020-cpd-vol-2.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/18420/conf-2020-cpd-vol-2.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> *God In Love Unites Us* (2019), Conclusions; available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2019-10-amended-marriage-and-relationships-report.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2019-10-amended-marriage-and-relationships-report.pdf).

heart is with thy heart? ... If it be, give me thine hand' (2 Kings 10:15). The brief reference in *God In Love Unites Us* overlooks the fact that Wesley sets the bar very high for determining 'if your heart is as my heart': 'two cannot walk together unless they are agreed' and further overlooks his definition of a catholic spirit: it is not speculative or practical latitudinarianism, indifference to all opinions regarding belief or conduct within the church which he describes in no uncertain terms as 'the spawn of hell'.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, *God In Love Unites Us* appears to be overly influenced by secular rather than biblical arguments, basing its conclusions on particular insights drawn from scientific bodies and controversial political pressure groups. These are given greater authority than 'the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures' which the Methodist Church acknowledges to be its supreme authority.

The report presents a diverse understanding of sexuality which includes diversity of orientation and gender. These insights are drawn from secular sources, most notably the World Health Organisation, though in other places also from the political pressure group, Stonewall – including in its 'non-definitive' list of definitions (one wonders what use non-definitive definitions are). These sources are used uncritically without assessment in the light of a thoroughly biblical vision of human nature. In fact, the only theological engagement comes with the consideration of how the Methodist Church's commitment that 'every person has infinite value before God' can be applied to this unquestioningly accepted secular vision of human nature.<sup>8</sup>

Given its commitment to the natural and social sciences, it is unfortunate that *God In Love Unites Us* uses these sources so selectively. A broader approach to such insights should have led to very different conclusions. In its consideration of cohabitation, for example, the report overlooks entirely the body of research which demonstrates that cohabitation, when compared to marriage as the relationship in which children are raised, is much more likely to lead to the separation of parents, resulting in insecurity and instability that are bad for children in almost every outcome that can be measured. Glynn Harrison, professor emeritus of Psychology at the University of Bristol, reviews research which concludes, 'Most scholars now agree that children raised by two biological parents in a stable marriage do better than children in other family forms across a wide range of outcomes.'<sup>9</sup> Yet, *God In Love Unites Us* proposes the endorsement of cohabitation by the Methodist Church, flying in the face of both the biblical and the scientific evidence.

A further, similar comment may be made about the report's reliance on human experience. Again, it seems to give this greater authority than the teaching of the Bible and is very selective in its use. It ignores entirely the experience of Christians with same sex attraction who are committed to living biblically faithful lifestyles of celibacy. Instead, the report has the effect of ignoring their experience and undermining their convictions entirely.<sup>10</sup>

It is, however, the misuse and misrepresentation of scripture that is of the greatest concern in the report's contravention of the Methodist Church's doctrinal standards. Although formally committed to the principles of the Reformation, many Methodists – not least those who have penned Conference reports over the years – seem to have forgotten one of those significant principles: the perspicuity of scripture.<sup>11</sup> This refers to scripture's clarity: the conviction that the general teaching of scripture necessary for Christian faith and conduct is clear and understandable to ordinary Christians. It was this conviction that lay behind the Reformers' passionate determination to translate the Bible into vernacular languages and to place it in the hands of ordinary people, a task for which translators gave their lives. It is a conviction John Wesley shared and expressed in his writings, which the Deed of Union also holds to be authoritative for the Methodist Church. He held that the Bible has an internal logic, which makes its meaning clear as one passage is compared with another.<sup>12</sup> The authors of *God In Love Unites Us* seem to take the opposite approach, seeking to undermine and obscure the message of the Bible by taking an either/or approach to the meaning of passages, rather than both/and, and by setting passages over and against each other, claiming contradiction and confusion.<sup>13</sup>

The report deals with biblical teaching superficially, offering a very inadequate basis for such radical changes to the life of the Church. It argues, for example, that Jesus embodied the values of the Old Testament, whilst making no reference at all that those

values – held by orthodox Jews to this day – preclude the very conclusions the report reaches.<sup>14</sup> It comments that the early Christians continued 'traditional Jewish models of the family', though it then makes the unsubstantiated claim that the reason for this was 'the belief that the Second Coming and the end of the world were imminent' and gives no consideration to the possibility that they may have believed those models to be rooted in the values of the Old Testament which were embodied by Jesus and part of God's intention for his creation.<sup>15</sup> It overlooks the Bible's own interpretation of the atrocities at Sodom and Gomorrah, suggesting that the sole reason for judgement was inhospitality, rather than the 'sexual immorality and perversion' identified by Jude (Jude 7).<sup>16</sup>

The report not only seems to seek to obscure the message of the Bible; it also misrepresents it, presenting what is very much a minority position, interpreting the Bible in such a way as to permit same sex sexually intimate relationships. No reference is made even to those scholars who are supportive of same sex relationships, but who recognise that the Bible itself prohibits them.<sup>17</sup>

The New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham, NT Wright has suggested that the best scholarly work on these concerns is that of Richard B Hays, a minister in the United Methodist Church in the USA and former professor at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina.<sup>18</sup> Hays argues persuasively that though there may be all sorts of problematic issues in the Bible which can be difficult to resolve, there are no 'internal tensions' regarding sexual intimacy in same sex relationships; rather, there is 'unqualified disapproval'. He then offers a number of practical considerations for the implications of the Bible's teaching for the life of the church today.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the report entirely ignores his work and the scholarly position he represents. Instead, the report reaches the opposite conclusions without acknowledging the contradiction in any way or giving any suggestion as to why it is appropriate for the Methodist Church to ignore and reject the majority position of biblical scholarship.

It should be clear that, in its superficial treatment of the Bible which obscures and misrepresents its meaning, *God In Love Unites Us* contravenes the doctrinal standards of the Deed of Union. This is further illustrated by its catastrophic misuse of the Conference report *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path*, as outlined in the previous chapter. *God In Love Unites Us* relies on the range of views of Scripture expressed in the latter report, making the entirely false claim 'each of which the Conference has affirmed'.<sup>20</sup> As observed in the previous chapter, the Conference in fact affirmed none of them. Instead, the Faith and Order Committee stated that 'it is not clear that all Models are to be viewed as equally compatible with the Deed of Union'.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it seems that the authors of *God In Love Unites Us* have justified their conclusions on the basis of views of the Bible that are not compatible with our doctrinal standards, on the mistaken belief that such views have been affirmed by the Conference.

## Contravening Due Process

The task group responsible for producing *God In Love Unites Us* itself acknowledged that, in seeking to downgrade the document from a Statement of the Conference to a report, it could not then change the Methodist Church's framework of marriage. Rather, it could only seek to offer answers to specific, practical questions and must do so within the existing framework.<sup>22</sup>

The framework of the understanding of marriage within the Methodist Church is clearly set out in a previous statement and other reports of the Conference, as described in chapter 2. In line with the traditional teaching of the Christian Church and recognising the central importance of the image of marriage within the message of the Bible, the Methodist Church holds a view of marriage which is often unique within wider society: marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman and the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy, with a three-fold purpose of companionship, a remedy for sin, and the procreation of children. All Methodist members, officers and ministers are therefore expected to express, through their lifestyles, a commitment to fidelity within the marriage of one man and one woman and chastity (abstinence from sexual intimacy) outside of such a marriage.

<sup>14</sup> *God In Love Unites Us*, paragraph 2.2.2.

<sup>15</sup> *God In Love Unites Us*, paragraph 2.3.3.

<sup>16</sup> *God In Love Unites Us*, paragraph 4.3.12.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the following remarks: 'It is difficult to see the Bible as expressing anything else but disapproval of homosexual activity', Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490-1700*, (London: Penguin, 2008) p. 705; 'Where the Bible mentions homosexual behaviour at all, it clearly condemns it', Walter Wink, 'Homosexuality and the Bible' in Walter Wink (ed.) *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for Churches*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1999) p.47; 'I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same sex unions can be holy and good', Luke Timothy Johnson, [www.commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-1](http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-1); 'Some scholars propose that the words are uncertain as to meaning and thus that perhaps Paul did not really condemn homosexuality. The words, however, are quite clear', E. P. Sanders, *Paul: A Brief Insight*, (New York, NY: Sterling, 2009), p. 175.

<sup>18</sup> [www.patheos.com/blogs/revangelical/2014/06/01/exclusive-n-t-wright-speaks-about-his-new-book.html](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/revangelical/2014/06/01/exclusive-n-t-wright-speaks-about-his-new-book.html).

<sup>19</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1996), pp. 400-402.

<sup>20</sup> *God In Love Unites Us*, paragraph 4.3.14.

<sup>21</sup> Faith and Order Committee (2001), section C, 'The Nature of Authority'; available at: [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-the-nature-of-authority-2001.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-the-nature-of-authority-2001.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> *Marriage and Relationships Task Group: Interim Report (2018)*, paragraph 9, available at [www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2018-27-Marriage-and-Relationships.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2018-27-Marriage-and-Relationships.pdf).

Over the years, the Conference has given answers within this framework to practical questions that have arisen. Remarriage after divorce is permitted in exceptional circumstances, in line with the ‘exception clauses’ of the New Testament. Given that civil partnerships and same sex marriages do not *require* sexual intimacy, there is no reason *per se* to prevent Methodists from entering such relationships, on the understanding that each of the 1993 Resolutions will continue to apply. However, since such relationships will *often* include sexual intimacy, they may not be solemnised or blessed on Methodist Church premises or with authorised liturgies as this would be contrary to its discipline.

It should be clear that the resolutions of *God In Love Unites Us* regarding cohabitation, same sex marriage and civil partnership are not grounded in that framework. Rather, they directly contradict it. The endorsement of cohabitation, contradicts the 1989 Statement, *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*, which states that ‘the Church continues to maintain that sexual intercourse should be confined to the marriage relationship’ as well as Resolution 4 of the 1993 Resolutions.<sup>23</sup> For the Conference to adopt resolutions on the basis of a report which contradicts a previous Conference Statement would be unconstitutional.

One option would be for the Conference to declare that the 1989 document no longer has the status of a Conference Statement, so that it no longer holds that authority. However, the Conference should be very careful indeed about taking such action on the basis of *God In Love Unites Us*, which it seems to me provides a very inadequate basis on which to make such a decision. Even if the Conference were to make such a decision, the framework still stands, expressed in other resolutions of the Conference. That there is such a pre-existing framework of marriage within the Methodist Church is confirmed by the fact that the Conference has previously ensured that its answers to practical questions have been explicitly grounded in it. Astonishingly, *God In Love Unites Us* seeks to address the very same questions, without changing the framework, and yet offers the opposite answers. Such a position is indefensible.

Rather than tackling the contradictions openly and honestly, the report goes to great lengths to misrepresent the Church’s framework for marriage. It deals with the entire history of the Christian understanding of marriage with a quotation of one sentence from one book which suggests that husband and wife should be ‘restrained and temperate in the use of their lawful pleasures’ which it then dismisses as being ‘far removed’ from the recent considerations of marriage within the Methodist Church.<sup>24</sup> Without any hint of irony, it then goes on to suggest that two qualities that are helpful with regard to sexual relationships are ‘wisdom’ and ‘self-control’, overlooking the fact that a quick glance at ‘self-control’ in a thesaurus would reveal a list of synonyms, likely to include ‘restraint’ and ‘temperance’.

The report proceeds to seek to redefine the Methodist Church’s usage of the words ‘chastity’ and ‘fidelity’ in the 1993 Resolutions, key terms in the Church’s framework for marriage. This is disingenuous for, in those resolutions ‘chastity’ outside of marriage clearly indicates sexual abstinence, for it is contrasted with ‘fidelity’ within marriage.<sup>25</sup>

A chart is later presented, showing the ways in which the understanding of marriage has developed within the various strands of Methodism over the centuries, as a basis for supporting the further developments the report itself proposes.<sup>26</sup> However, the most remarkable aspect of those developments is their consistency. They all uphold the threefold, biblical definition of marriage. They may place the accents differently and highlight different phrases, but they all play the same piece of music. The proposals of *God In Love Unites Us* change the music entirely. Where there had been continuity in past developments, there is radical discontinuity in these proposals, changing the Church’s understanding of marriage and relationships beyond recognition.

There is a further mischaracterisation within the report which appears to be manipulative in the extreme. In addressing the tension between the place of procreation in the Methodist Church’s framework of marriage and the inability of same sex couples to procreate naturally, the report states: ‘If the clock were to be turned back in the Methodist Church, and the importance of procreation re-emphasised, the rationality of conducting marriages for those who, through age, capability or some other reason, are not able to procreate would have to be reassessed’.<sup>27</sup> The statement is utterly fallacious and unworthy of a formal document of the Methodist Church. Even *The Book of Common Prayer* of 1662, on which Methodist liturgy has traditionally been based, makes provision for some such circumstances, stating that a prayer that the couple may ‘be fruitful in procreation of children’ should be omitted ‘where the Woman is past child-bearing’.

Such far-fetched misrepresentations of the Church’s current position betray the fact that *God In Love Unites Us* does indeed seek to change the framework of marriage with the Methodist Church, or at least that in adopting its resolutions, the Conference will

<sup>23</sup> *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* (1992), paragraph 42; available at: [www.methodist.org.uk/media/2106/meth-statement-family-life-single-person-marriage-1992-0714.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/2106/meth-statement-family-life-single-person-marriage-1992-0714.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living*, (1650), quoted in *God In Love Unites Us*, paragraph 2.3.4.

<sup>25</sup> *God In Love Unites Us*, paragraph 2.4.2; see chapter 2, footnote 17.

<sup>26</sup> *God In Love Unites Us*, paragraphs 3.1.8-3.1.9.

<sup>27</sup> *God In Love Unites Us*, paragraph 4.3.18.

necessarily also be changing that framework. In proposing such changes through a report, rather than a Statement, and through a report which misrepresents the current position of the Church and ignores the way in which the Conference has already answered the questions it claims to address, *God In Love Unites Us* contravenes due process and therefore the Conference would appear to be acting unconstitutionally if it ratifies the resolutions.

## Doctrine and Discipline

It should therefore come as no surprise that there are many within the Methodist Church – members, ministers and indeed entire local churches – who will find themselves in an untenable position, unable in good conscience to recognise the authority of the Conference if it ratifies these resolutions. In adopting unconstitutional resolutions contrary, in substance and process, to its doctrinal standards, the Conference will have moved away from the historic biblical, Christian faith in which they stand, and will thus look set to exclude them from the life of the Methodist Church.

Ministers are required each year to affirm that they continue to ‘preach our doctrines and administer our discipline’. The argument, seeking to justify the changes, is that ‘our doctrines’ will not change because *God In Love Unites Us* does not seek to change the doctrinal standards of the Deed of Union. However, as noted in chapter 2, it has previously been stated that ‘the doctrine, practice and discipline of the Methodist Church is based on the Deed of Union, Standing Orders and the Resolutions of the Annual Conference’ and subsequent reports have affirmed that the 1993 Resolutions are included within the general commitment candidates for the ministry make to upholding the doctrine and discipline of the Church. It was for this reason that the Conference resolved that those resolutions should be printed in *CPD*.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, the constitution of the Methodist Church gives the Conference ultimate authority to interpret the Church’s doctrine. There will be many who will find it impossible to recognise the authority of the Conference to interpret its doctrine in the ways proposed in *God In Love Unites Us* and to affirm a discipline which itself affirms two, contradictory understandings of marriage. Making the traditional teaching of the Christian church a minority position within the Methodist Church, necessarily requiring the protection of a conscience clause, as is proposed by *God In Love Unites Us*, is a move which many will find unsupportable. I may well not be the only minister who, if Conference ratifies the resolutions of *God In Love Unites Us*, will not be able to affirm that I continue to preach our doctrines and administer our discipline.

*God In Love Unites Us* states, in suggesting the implication of the argument it presents: ‘this moves the emphasis, from a Christian perspective ...’.<sup>29</sup> One might wonder whether the comma is strictly necessary and whether the sentence could end there. The Methodist Church’s existing framework for marriage, understanding it to be the lifelong union of one man and one woman and the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy, thus requiring fidelity within and celibacy outside, is the traditional teaching of the Christian church, as the Methodist Church itself has affirmed through the 1993 Resolutions. In seeking to move away from that framework, *God In Love Unites Us* proposes moving away from a Christian perspective on marriage and relationships. In both substance and process, such a move would surely be unconstitutional within the British Methodist Church.

By virtue of the process it chose to adopt, as suggested by the task group preparing *God In Love Unites Us*, the Conference has already signalled its approval of these resolutions. As I turn to conclude, I therefore join my voice to many others in urgently calling the Methodist Conference to think again and to bring this runaway train under control, reversing the direction of travel and rejecting the proposals. The resolutions adopted in 1993, upholding the traditional teaching of the Christian church and affirming the value and ministry of all people regardless of sexual orientation (whilst not endorsing sexual intimacy outside the marriage of one man and one woman), have held the Church together for three decades and, the last time they were asked, were still viewed with considerable respect by the Methodist people. The Conference has no constitutional authority other than to reaffirm that framework and only to adopt resolutions that are grounded within it.

If the Conference feels it must continue to proceed with the current direction of travel, terminating the pilgrimage of faith as the runaway train is finally derailed, I again join with others in calling it to respond with graciousness and generosity towards those from whom it will be departing, making it possible for them to continue in ministry and mission with a sole commitment to the traditional teaching of the Christian church. This will mean releasing the buildings and funds of local churches and ensuring the continued support of ministers who will no longer be able to affirm the annual inquiry regarding doctrine and discipline. It is to this final, urgent call that I turn in the conclusion.

<sup>28</sup> *Daily Record, Representative Session, June 1996, 10/9, and Pilgrimage of Faith* (2005), paragraph 33; *Pilgrimage of Faith* (2006), section C.

<sup>29</sup> *God In Love Unites Us*, paragraph 2.4.7



## CONCLUSION

I have had to re-think my dietary choices since Sarah Sedgwick, founder of Transformed Ministries, came to speak to our Church Leadership Team.<sup>1</sup> I don't like cucumber at all; I like gherkins a lot. Sarah pointed out that gherkins are simply cucumbers that have been pickled. I had never noticed that before.

That is the problem with pickling. The process involves submerging something in another culture until it becomes infused by that culture and its nature changes. The Church is filled with pickled people. We have all been submerged in the culture of the world and we have all been infused and changed by it more than we realise. The Church is supposed to be the place in which the pickling process is reversed: 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind' (Romans 12:2).

The trouble is, if we're not careful, the institution and human structures of the Church can all too easily become pickled too: stuffed with pickled people on the inside and marinated by the culture of the world which surrounds it outside. The radical proposals of *God In Love Unites Us* at least serve the positive purpose of enabling us to see how far away we are from where we should be; how far the pickling of the Church has progressed. They have been shaped more by a secular worldview and by political pressure groups than they have by a deeply and distinctively biblical and Christian approach to the issues of the day. I hope they will, at least, serve as a wake-up call, enabling the Conference to apply the brakes and bring the Methodist Church's runaway train under control before it derails completely.

The political structures of the secular world are all too familiar with the strategy of radical proposals which are initially put forward only so that they can be changed later to gain a consensus with the appearance of magnanimity whilst still achieving the desired result. I hope that is not the strategy that has been adopted within the Church. Methodists should nevertheless beware that the focus isn't on 'tinkering' with the resolutions whilst the same effect is achieved of affirming and permitting within the Church that which the Bible – our ultimate authority for faith and practice – does not affirm and permit.

Other proposals have been put forward. One suggests that the Methodist Church withdraws from offering marriage altogether and only offers blessings for marriage. However, if marriage is a creation ordinance rather than simply a construct of the state, then surely the Church should delight to solemnise marriages. Furthermore, offering *blessings* rather than *solemnisations* of marriage doesn't solve the problem at all: the Conference would still have to answer the question of whether it should permit the blessing of same sex relationships – something which the Bible and traditional teaching prohibits.

By suggesting alternative resolutions below, I offer a different way forward. In the preceding chapters, I have set out a case that the proposals of *God In Love Unites Us* are not only unbiblical, but also unconstitutional. In substance they contravene the doctrinal

standards of the Church. In process, they contravene the discipline of the Church. Within the constitution of the Church, it seems that the only way forward for the Conference is to reject the report and its resolutions and to reaffirm its current position. This would be achieved through the suggested Resolution 1.

I have also made the case that the pilgrimage of faith, and the report *God In Love Unites Us* to which it has led, has been overly influenced by a secular worldview and by political pressure groups. The suggested Resolution 2 seeks to enable the authority of the Conference to be properly exercised across the Connexion, proposing a way in which the Church can pause and ensure that it is shaped by a deeply and distinctively biblical and Christian approach moving forwards.

It is, however, difficult to escape the sense that the Methodist Church has already passed the point of no return. Whilst the Bible calls us to repentance, it is not common for human institutions to do so. Too much is at stake in terms of personal position, power and pride. Whatever the Conference decisions, the suggested Resolution 3 seeks to enable the Church to respond 'lovingly and supportively' to those who will be hurt by those decisions, as the Secretary of the Conference committed in a post on the Methodist Church website in March 2020.<sup>2</sup> It provides a way to release the 'golden handcuffs', which bind local churches into the Connexion through the central ownership of their buildings and finances, by committing to return them to the local people, where that is appropriately requested. It further commits the Church to continuing to support ministers who will feel unable in good conscience to uphold the doctrine and discipline of the Methodist Church in light of these decisions. Without such an undertaking by the Conference of continued support, such ministers and their families would be set to lose, potentially fairly quickly, their base of ministry, their home and their income.

Passing such a resolution as this will, at least, go some way to addressing the strong sense of injustice felt by those who seek to remain faithful to the traditional teaching of the Christian Church – the current teaching of the Methodist Church they have been committed to serving – not least when others, who have chosen to stay and drive through changes, suggest, 'They should just go'. It also recognises and makes provision for the hurt that will be felt by those who had hoped to see change to the Church's current position if the Conference decides to retain it.

The British Methodist Church faces a profound moment of decision. It must choose one or the other: to reaffirm the traditional teaching of the Christian church, the teaching of the Bible and its current position; or to abandon it in favour of a secular worldview that is shaped by political pressure groups. Either decision will have profound consequences for the future.

So I add my voice to others who call upon the Methodist Conference to reject the report, *God In Love Unites Us*, and its proposals, to reaffirm its current position on marriage and human relationships – ensuring it is properly reflected throughout the life of the Church in the future – and therefore resolving to be a deeply and distinctively biblical and Christian presence in the world, seeking first the Kingdom of God and his glory above all things. In that spirit, I offer the following suggested resolutions as a way forward, in light of the arguments I have developed throughout all I have written.

<sup>1</sup> [www.transformedbygodsllove.com](http://www.transformedbygodsllove.com).

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Hustler, 'World Day of Prayer and God in Love Unites Us' (6 March 2020); available at [www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/news/the-methodist-blog/world-day-of-prayer-and-god-in-love-unites-us/](http://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/news/the-methodist-blog/world-day-of-prayer-and-god-in-love-unites-us/).



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### Resolution 1: Reaffirming and Embedding the 1993 Resolutions

Recognising that the report, *God In Love Unites Us*, offers an inadequate basis for such resolutions and Connexional consultation, the Conference:

1. rescinds each of its previous decisions relating to the resolutions arising from the report;
2. rejects the report and reaffirms its commitment to the 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality;
3. directs the Methodist Council to ensure that, without retrospective disciplinary action, the 1993 Resolutions – particularly Resolutions 4 and 6, interpreted in light of the order in which they were adopted – shall be authentically and with integrity embedded within the life of the Methodist Church, with the exemptions for religious organisations within the relevant legislation properly applied.

### Resolution 2: Reviewing the EDI Committee & Associated Work

The Conference suspends the work of the EDI Committee & all associated work for one year and directs the Methodist Council, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee, to report to the Conference of 2022 on the most appropriate way for the work of EDI to be developed within the Methodist Church which, in order to ensure that the Church is authentically inclusive, holds protected characteristics in appropriate balance and ensures that work around sexuality properly reflects each of the six 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality, interpreted in light of the order in which they were adopted.

### Resolution 3: Releasing Churches and Ministers from the Connexion and Offering Support to All

In a spirit of Christian unity, recognising that such unity extends beyond the bounds of the Connexion, the Conference:

1. directs the Methodist Council to ensure that any local church, whose Church Council – by a two third's majority vote within the ensuing three years, beginning immediately – believes that it can no longer remain within the Connexion in the light of its resolutions relating to *God In Love Unites Us*, is enabled to leave in a way that is generous and gracious, transferring its funds, and its buildings for a nominal consideration of £1 under Model Trust paragraph 20, to a registered charity, committed to the continuation of Christian worship and mission in its locality, as identified by the Church Council by a subsequent simple majority vote;
2. directs the Methodist Council to report to the Conference of 2022 regarding any structures of support that may be required for such local churches and regarding steps that should be taken in order to support ministers who believe that they cannot in good conscience remain in Full Connexion with the Conference in light of these resolutions;
3. resolves that for the coming year, no minister or local preacher shall face disciplinary action, or suspension, or any other disadvantage for being unable to affirm the annual inquiry;
4. directs the Methodist Council to report to the Conference of 2022 on how those churches and ministers who remain within the Connexion, albeit uneasily in the light of these resolutions, may best be enabled to flourish, within the bounds of the doctrine and discipline of the Church.

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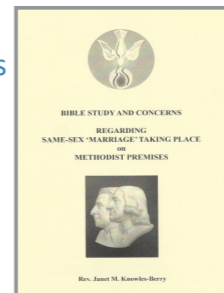

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# THE RUNAWAY TRAIN

A Message to Methodists

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**An urgent call to  
think again about  
'God In Love Unites Us'**



REV DR DAVID A HULL

The Rev. Dr David A. Hull is a Methodist minister who has served in the worlds of church and education. Continuing to be a minister in Full Connexion with the British Methodist Conference, he currently serves within the Free Methodist Church UK as Lead Pastor of Freedom Church Bristol, based in Kingswood. He is Chair of Methodist Evangelicals Together and the inter-denominational mission organisation Share Jesus International, and is a member of the Council of the Evangelical Alliance.