

Faithful Listening?

A Response to 'God in Love Unites Us' (2019)

Introduction

In 2019, the British Methodist Conference will be asked to receive 'God in Love Unites Us', a report produced by the Marriage and Relationships Task Group.¹ Set up in 2016, the task group offers the report as the next stage of the Church's 'pilgrimage of faith' and sketches a vision of sexuality that seeks to guide Methodists in Christian living today.

The report represents a watershed moment in the life of the Methodist Church in Britain. If its resolutions are adopted, the approach of the Methodist Church to marriage and relationships will be fundamentally changed. The Church is called to remain faithful to the biblical teaching on sexuality, and yet the revisions to the Church's view proposed in the report radically change this teaching in a number of ways:

- The report argues that the *qualities* of relationships are what is important, and so all relationships – including sexual relationships – which exhibit good qualities reflect the presence of God's love. The report then departs from the view that traditional marriage is the only God-given place for sexual intimacy, and believes the Church should no longer require chastity (i.e. celibacy) for the unmarried.²
- Exploring cohabitation and civil partnerships, the report seeks to show that both forms of relationship can display the qualities of good relating and calls the Church to celebrate the love of God that is present within them. The report seeks to make it possible for the Church to offer blessings to those in civil partnerships, both for same-sex and mixed-sex couples.
- The report proposes that the liturgies and theology of the Methodist Church be changed to accommodate same-sex marriage. Marriage should be defined as between 'two people' rather than 'one man and one woman'.
- Since divorce will sometimes occur, the report recommends that the Church provide liturgies to mark the end of a marriage as well as its beginning.

In this response, we briefly summarise the report before demonstrating how it fails to listen well to the Bible, to Tradition, and to Experience. For these reasons, the report does not offer a faithful response to God's call. Following a discussion of each area, we propose a way ahead for the Church and the Conference.

A Summary of the Report

At sixty-five pages long, the report offers a lengthy treatment of various aspects of sexuality and relationships. It is worth reading in full to gain a sense of the argument, but this brief summary aims to sketch key elements in each of its sections.

Following a short preface, the report begins with an introduction that sets out the history of the task group, a description of the task, and the process through which the task group pursued it. The introduction also reflects on the theological principles guiding the group, and summarises the five sections of the report.

In section 1, the report explores the way in which God has made us to be in relationship and as 'sexual beings'. Engaging with the Genesis creation narrative, the report explores the nature of the *imago Dei* (the 'image of God') and rightly notes that a key dimension of it is the calling to relationship, both with God and with others. The report argues for the goodness of sexuality and points to its diverse expressions today. This section also includes a glossary of terms, drawn from various organisations including The World Health Organisation, Stonewall, Childline, The Office for National Statistics, and the Methodist Church's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee.

Section 2 explores how God guides the ways we relate to one another, drawing on key theological themes from the creation narrative to the kingdom announcement of Jesus. The section describes both the purpose of God for relationships and key qualities of good relating. Such qualities, the report argues, should also be nurtured within sexually intimate relationships, alongside other specific qualities that the report explores, such as wisdom, self-control, chastity and fidelity. Section 2 also explores how the qualities of good relating can be found among cohabiting couples, civil partnerships, and those within LGBTQI+ relationships.

In section 3, the task group explores how the qualities of good relating might develop our vision of God's guidance for marriage. The section begins by exploring some of the existing theology around marriage, including its means as a channel of God's grace, before exploring ways in which the meaning of marriage has changed throughout history. The section also includes the suggestion of producing liturgical texts to mark the ending of a marriage, as well as calling for a broader range of resources supporting marriage and other committed relationships within the Church.

Section 4 explicitly calls Methodists to widen the practice of marriage to include same-sex couples. It notes that society has developed in this area, and that the Church already accepts members and ministers entering into civil partnerships and same sex marriages contracted under the State. The report also tackles objections to extending marriage to same-sex couples, critiquing arguments from nature, from morality, and from Scripture. The writers of the report argue that the Spirit is prompting the Church to extend marriage to same-sex couples, and so to expand marriage to include such couples is to remain true to the 'God of justice and love.'³

Section 5 proposes next steps for the Methodist Church, including adding a new 'Guidance on the Understanding of Marriage' section in CPD and amending the Standing Order concerning marriage to embrace same-sex couples. The report proposes introducing a Standing Order to protect those with different convictions, and suggests a parallel to the arrangements for respecting those with different convictions around divorce. The section also calls for steps to support marriage and other significant relationships, including through new sets of resources and liturgies.

The conclusion to the report suggests that it offers a map for the continuing 'pilgrimage of faith' within the Methodist Church. In revising the definition of marriage while also attempting to create space for those who disagree, it contends, the Church has the opportunity to model unity to a conflicted world. The report ends with a series of resolutions to Conference.

Listening to Scripture

At times, the report listens carefully and helpfully to Scripture, such as in its discussion of the qualities of good relationships. Such qualities – in both sexual and non-sexual contexts – include self-giving love, commitment, fidelity, loyalty, honesty, mutual respect, equality and the desire for mutual flourishing. Growing in such virtues helps us reflect our calling to be like Christ.

While this treatment of the qualities of good relationships is helpful, the report neglects to consider well the broader treatment of sexuality in Scripture. This suggests that a particular reading of contemporary experience is given priority over the biblical view of marriage and sexuality. In three key ways the report fails to listen well to the Bible's teaching:

- 1) While the report mentions the importance of listening to the whole narrative of Scripture,⁴ it fails to apply that principle to the way in which marriage and sexuality feature within the story-line of Scripture as a whole. As argued in the MET Study Guide *Remaining Faithful*, marriage between man and woman bookends Scripture as a whole, featuring in the creation account (Genesis 2:21-24) as well as in the vision of the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 19:9; 21:2).⁵ The interdependence of male and female within marriage is a

key part of the scriptural depiction of marriage, and it is this that allows it to feature as an image of God's relationship with Israel and the Church (Hosea 2:19; Ephesians 5:31-32).

2) The report ignores the way in which sexual intimacy within Scripture takes place within the context of the marriage relationship.⁶ The biblical view is that sexual intimacy creates a physical and spiritual bond between husband and wife (Genesis 2.24, Ephesians 5.28-33; 1 Corinthians 6.15-20), and so honouring that bond is a key reason for confining sexual intimacy to marriage. Sexual relations outside the bonds of marriage are forbidden (1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 18), and this is emphasised particularly strongly by Jesus who calls his followers to an even deeper purity of heart (Matthew 5:27-30).

3) The report does not listen well to Scripture's teaching on homosexual practice. The report only references one scholarly work on the 'contested verses', and ignores the wide body of scholarship arguing that the biblical writers' condemnation of same-sex practice was rooted in their theology of creation.⁷ Indeed, it is significant that many revisionist scholars agree with this but argue that the Bible itself is wrong. While the Bible does include a trajectory of moral development, in the realm of sexual relationships this is a trajectory towards *greater* restrictions.⁸

Listening to the Church

As well as listening to Scripture, the report also seeks to listen to the Church – both to the historical view of the Church and to theologians on sexuality today. This is reflected in the report's discussion of how marriage has changed within Methodism as well as its citations of 'queer' theologians offering new readings of the tradition.

There are, however, significant areas in which the report does not listen well to the Church of the past and the Church of today:

1) While the report rightly notes that marriage functions differently within different parts of Methodist history, it downplays the extent to which there is a broad consensus on marriage throughout Christian history. As noted in *Remaining Faithful*, the view throughout Christian history has been that marriage is between one man and one woman.⁹ While the different aspects of marriage are emphasised differently in different ages, marriage as a union between a man and a woman has been a constant part of the Church's definition of marriage.

2) The report aims to listen to theological thinking on marriage today, but this is hindered by an over-reliance on authors who propose revising the Church's teaching rather than remaining faithful to it. Not one of the authors cited in the footnotes support the traditional view of marriage, and in the bibliography provided in the ancillary reading to the report the vast majority of authors are revisionist in this area. It is a shame that the authors of the

report have failed to listen to a range of theological voices in this report,¹⁰ as other voices have warned the Church of the dangers of changing its teaching in this area.

3) The report pays little attention to the view of Methodists across the globe or to the view of sister churches within the United Kingdom. The United Methodist Church has recently confirmed the traditional view of marriage, and this reflects the way in which the global Church has remained faithful to the biblical ideal of marriage. Similarly, the Church of England currently remains faithful to the biblical view of marriage, and so revising this within the Methodist Church will inevitably strain the existing Covenant between the Anglican Church and the Methodist Church.¹¹

Listening to Experience

Where the report makes its strongest argument is in the attention it gives to experience, including the experience of cohabiting couples and LGBTI+ Christians. Such experience functions as an appeal for Methodists to open their minds and hearts to new forms of sexual relations, and for the writers of the report points to the work of the Spirit in moving the Church to a new view in this area.

But even there, the report's attention to experience is limited as it ignores the experience of those who have remained faithful to the Bible's teaching:

1) While the report points to the experience of lesbian and gay Christians in sexual relationships, it is silent about the testimony or even the existence of same-sex attracted Christians who have chosen to remain celibate in obedience to Scripture. What this means is that it is only those seeking to change the tradition of the Church who are heard, and the voices of gay and lesbian celibate Christians are overlooked. There are, however, numerous gay and lesbian (or same-sex attracted) Christians who have remained faithful to biblical teaching and testified to their experience.¹²

2) The report also neglects to include the experience of same-sex attracted Christians who have entered into traditional marriages and found God's call to them there.¹³ Such 'mixed-orientation' marriages seem invisible to the writers of the report, and yet surely their experience also needs to be considered.¹⁴ They too witness to the way in which faithfulness to Scripture can challenge cultural trends.

3) It is also striking that the report seems to ignore the experience of Jesus – a single, celibate Jewish rabbi – in reaching its conclusions. The assumption throughout the report seems to be that, aside from those who identify as 'asexual', sexual relationships are necessary for fulfilment in life. But Jesus, of course, lived a celibate life, one that was fully open to God and others.¹⁵ The apostle Paul also lived a celibate life, and through him the grace of God worked powerfully (1 Corinthians 15:10). The report risks succumbing to the

cultural view that sexual relationships are necessary for human fulfilment, but this is surely a view that the gospel questions.

Conclusion

‘God In Love Unites Us’ does not offer a good way forward for the Methodist Church in Britain. The report fails to listen well to Scripture, to the Church, and to the experience of same-sex attracted Christians who seek to remain faithful to the Church’s current and historic teaching.

The report draws on the idea of accepting contradictory convictions, even citing the words of Paul in Romans 14. However, the notion that sexual ethics can be an area of legitimate disagreement within the Church is one that needs to be challenged. For Paul, as for all the early Christians, the call to holiness involves the call to sexual purity. Indeed, ‘sexual immorality’ – sex outside the bond of marriage – is consistently included within the lists of sins from which Christians need to flee (Galatians 5:18-21; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Ephesians 5:3).

The resolutions, should they pass, would leave many faithful Methodist Christians in a difficult position. Even if they would not be required to marry same-sex couples, Methodist ministers will be asked to commit to a new teaching on marriage that contradicts their convictions. Many will find it impossible to do so. Methodist local preachers and other lay people will also find it difficult to teach the biblical view of marriage, and their desire to appoint ministers who continue to hold the traditional view could be dismissed as homophobic. The Church would adopt a teaching on marriage that many would deem is unfaithful.

Our practices of worship are *always* related to our beliefs and convictions about God and the gospel.¹⁶ If the Methodist Church adopts a centrally authorised liturgy that offers marriage to same-sex couples or affirms God’s blessing on cohabiting partners, then it is difficult to deny that this is what the Church believes and affirms. Even if individual members dissent from using this liturgy, they will be part of a church that has significantly changed its teaching on sexuality and relationships, and ultimately on holiness.¹⁷ A ‘mixed economy’ model will not work. The Church is not called to accommodate two different approaches to holiness in its midst, but must rather remain faithful to the biblical teaching on marriage, teaching currently reflected in Standing Order 011A (1).

Far from offering a way forward for the Church, ‘God In Love Unites Us’ threatens to separate Methodism from its biblical foundations. The report fails to help Methodists live more faithfully before God, and hinders the calling of the Church to ‘spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.’

The Way Ahead

We urge Conference representatives to read and consider the implications of the resolutions at the end of 'God in Love Unites Us' with great care. The implications of proceeding in the way the resolutions propose, we believe, are serious indeed:

1) **The resolutions ask the Conference to make decisions *this year*.** Although it is intended that a number of the resolutions, having been passed, will be made provisional resolutions (meaning they will not take effect until the consultation has been completed during the coming Connexional year), the Conference will nevertheless be expressing its intentions, which means that the consultation will not be a genuinely open one. Additionally, there is a risk, of which Conference representatives ought to be aware, that having passed resolutions 1 to 9, the Conference may decide not to pass resolution 10, which is the one declaring some of the earlier resolutions to be provisional. In this case, all the resolutions will take effect immediately.

2) **If passed, the resolutions would declare the intentions of the Conference and the consultation will ultimately be informed by a very unbalanced report.** These two factors of the Conference's declared intentions and the unbalanced nature of the report call into question the integrity of the proposed consultation.

3) **We believe that, through the teaching of the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Lord clearly calls us to remain faithful to the Church's present teaching about marriage and relationships.** Therefore, voting these resolutions into our system, even provisionally, is, spiritually, a very serious step to take with profound implications. The Conference has a solemn responsibility for what it presents to the Connexion for consultation. That responsibility cannot be evaded by suggesting that the report is simply 'a discussion starter'. The Conference representatives must be absolutely sure this is the right thing to do before taking such a radical step.

4) **Not all of the resolutions will be subject to consultation.** Resolutions 10/4, 10/5 and 10/6, if passed, will take effect immediately. That means that, this year, the Conference will be deciding:

- (a) to produce resources for the celebration of civil partnerships (with the implication that, **with immediate effect**, such celebrations will be permitted on Methodist Church premises);
- (b) to produce liturgical resources to mark the end of a marriage (with the implication that the Methodist Church wishes these services to become part of its standard liturgical life);

- (c) that resources are produced to offer support to marriage and other committed relationships (with the implication that the Church will thus be endorsing sexually intimate committed relationships beyond marriage. Furthermore, the resolution directs that these resources be based on the insights of this (very unbalanced) report).

We urge representatives to the Conference to consider very carefully the implications of these resolutions before passing them to take immediate effect.

5) In addition to the general concerns over the lack of balance of the report, and the proposals to redefine marriage and the place of sexual intimacy within relationships, **there are concerns over the conscience clauses for local churches and ministers**. Why should it be mandated that such decisions in the local church be reconsidered every five years or sooner (10/7 G6)? The requirement that ministers prevented by conscience from marrying same-sex couples should facilitate such a marriage by referring them to a minister not so prevented (10/9 (3)) cuts across the dictates of conscience which the resolution seeks to protect.

6) If the Conference persists in passing these resolutions, it is vital, given the unbalanced nature of the report, that arguments for and against, and the implications of the resolutions, are set out clearly in advance of the consultation. It should be noted that Standing Order 122 (4) (referred to in resolution 10/10) requires that either 'the whole or some specified part of the text of any report' or 'a summary of the arguments for and against the resolution[s] and of the implications of adopting or declining' them is submitted with the resolutions to the district synods for consultation. The lack of balance in the report surely necessitates such a summary. Under the Standing Order, it is the responsibility of the Secretary of the Conference to produce this. Given that the task group needed an extension of a further year in order to complete the present report, it is unlikely that such a document could be properly prepared in sufficient time for a consultation in the coming Connexional year.

An Earnest Plea

As the Conference debates the report, we therefore urge Conference representatives to:

- 1) **Amend resolution 10/1 by notice of motion** in order to refer the report back to the task group, directing it to bring a more balanced report to the Conference of 2020, more accurately reflecting the presently omitted voices of Scripture, Church and Experience.
- 2) **Bring a notice of motion to ensure the forthcoming consultation is as open and impartial as possible** (and delayed by a year if the report is referred back to the task group), directing that:

- (i) the report should offer the following four options to the Connexion, setting out the arguments for and against clearly and impartially:
- (a) Strengthen our existing discipline in line with the decision of the United Methodist Church, seeking assurance that all ministers and office holders within the life of the Methodist Church in Britain are living with integrity in line with the 1993 Resolutions.
 - (b) Maintain our current position as expressed in the 1993 Resolutions, most pertinently reaffirming ‘the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality; namely chastity [i.e. celibacy] for all outside marriage and fidelity within it’, celebrating ‘the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men [by orientation, not sexually intimate practice] in the Church’ and recommitting to the pilgrimage of faith, continuing to embed these resolutions within the life and practice of the Church; when requests by same sex couples for prayers or services are received, a pastoral response should be offered, consonant with these understandings.
 - (c) Permit the celebration of civil partnerships and the solemnisation of same-sex marriages on Methodist Church premises, with conscience clauses for local churches, ministers and other office holders – a modification of the recommendation of the present report, but with a genuine conscience clause that does not require ministers to refer enquiries to another minister, nor churches to reconsider their decisions every five years.
 - (d) Require all local churches, ministers and, where appropriate, office holders to offer the celebration of civil partnerships and the solemnisation/blessing of same sex marriage if they wish to offer the same for opposite sex marriage.

Given the nature of the present report, if it is difficult for the current task group to set out all such arguments impartially, the balance of its membership should be reviewed and changed as necessary. Rather than convene a new task group, a more fruitful way forward may be to commission four groups, each tasked with setting out the arguments for and against one of the respective options outlined above. In this scenario, it would be most effective if each of the four groups is composed of people who are broadly in sympathy with the respective option they are considering, while also being able to articulate the arguments against that option.

The consultation should also enquire whether Methodists wish to:

- (e) Affirm sexually intimate committed relationships other than marriage.

- (f) Offer liturgical resources to mark the end of a marriage.
- (ii) given the emotive and polarising nature of the debate, the consultation should consist of a 'one member, one vote' secret ballot in every local church, with votes for, against, and abstentions recorded and reported back to the Conference through circuits and districts. This will enable the Conference to make a decision fully informed by the views of the Connexion and faithfully listening to the voices of all its members.

3) If a notice of motion to refer the report back to the task group (1) is not achieved, amend resolution 10/1, through notice of motion, so that the Conference receives the report and commends it to the Connexion for consultation, with no further decisions to be taken until the Conference of 2020. If this is the case, we urge Conference to determine how the consultation is to take place with the proposal outlined in (2) above.

4) If emendation of the resolution is not achieved; vote against resolution 10/1 in its current form.

5) If the Conference retains resolution 10/1 in its current form and precedes to vote on the subsequent resolutions, vote against resolutions 10/2, 10/3, 10/4, 10/5, 10/6, 10/7, 10/8 and 10/9, for the reasons given above.

6) If resolutions 10/4, 10/5 and 10/6 are passed, amend resolution 10/10 by notice of motion so that these also become provisional resolutions and will not be enacted until the consultation has taken place.

7) Be alert and strongly resistant to any attempt to vote against resolution 10/10 if any of the resolutions to which it refers has been passed. Voting against this resolution would mean that all resolutions passed would come into immediate effect without subsequent consultation and confirmatory vote in 2020.

Principles

It is impossible to cover every eventuality; Conference debates can develop in unpredictable ways. Beyond our conviction that the Methodist Church should remain faithful to its current teaching on marriage and relationships, and resist a mixed economy, we commend the following principles to Conference representatives in bringing and responding to notices of motion and casting their votes:

- The Conference has a solemn responsibility to put before the Methodist people reports that are balanced, theologically sound, and in which the arguments for and against, and the implications of, decisions are clearly set out.

- Consultation should be impartial and genuinely open, most importantly encompassing the members of every local church.
- Given the emotive and polarising nature of these debates, votes (on a one member, one vote basis) should be taken by secret ballot in every local church and reported back to the Conference of 2020 through circuits and districts, recording votes for, against, and abstentions.
- Some, though by no means all, will feel that a genuine conscience clause will prevent them from being placed in an untenable position within the Church. Therefore, any conscience clauses should not require any minister, office holder or local church to facilitate in any way the marriage, or blessing of the marriage or civil partnership, of same-sex couples.
- As long as the State is prepared to authorise churches to register the marriage of opposite-sex people, local churches should retain the right to do so. Marriage as the life-long union of one man and one woman as the context for sexual intimacy has its origins in creation, not as a construct of the State.
- The unity of the Church should be an important factor in these debates and decisions. While some have felt it necessary to leave the denomination, the 1993 Resolutions have *de facto* held the Methodist Church in its current form together. Although there are those within the Church, on all sides of the debate, who are unhappy with the Church's current position, we have all nevertheless decided to join the Church as members or ministers, and those who hold office have committed to upholding the discipline and preaching the doctrines of the Church as they currently stand. Any move away from the 1993 Resolutions will deliberately fracture the unity of the Church and place a number of those who have entered, in good faith, into a covenant relationship with the Church in an untenable position. It is inevitable that changes within society will pose new questions which the Church must seek to answer. However, rather than changing its teaching to fit those developments, the task of the Church is to interpret the developments in the light of its historic, biblical teaching, and thus preserve its unity.

End Notes

¹ www.methodist.org.uk/media/11672/conf-2019-10-marriage-and-relationships-task-group-2019.pdf (accessed 13 July 2019).

² Chastity, as traditionally understood, entails sexual abstinence for the unmarried. The report offers an alternative definition of chastity (2.4.2-2.4.3; pp. 86-87), which departs from this traditional meaning.

³ p. 111.

⁴ 4.3.15, p. 109.

⁵ MET Study Guide *Remaining Faithful: Marriage and Methodism* (MET, 2019), pp.4-8, available at www.methodistevangelicals.org.uk/remaining-faithful (accessed 13 June 2019).

⁶ This view was, of course, affirmed in the 1993 Resolutions.

⁷ For a full discussion, see Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001). For a shorter analysis, see Ian Paul, *Same-sex Unions: The Key Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2014).

⁸ See William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, ILL: Inter Varsity Press, 2001).

⁹ See the discussion in *Remaining Faithful*, pp. 9-11. This is a point ably defended by Todd Wilson, *Mere Sexuality: Rediscovering the Christian Vision of Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), pp. 24-38.

¹⁰ For a range of texts that defend the traditional view, see the Further Reading list in *Remaining Faithful*, p. 16.

¹¹ For the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, see www.anglican-methodist.org.uk/full-text-of-the-covenant (accessed 13 June 2019). For the consequences of changing teaching in this area, see the reflections of an Anglican theologian at www.mbarattdavie.wordpress.com/2019/05/15/british-methodists-go-to-the-dark-side (accessed 13 June 2019).

¹² For two examples, see Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010) and David Bennett, *A War of Loves: The Unexpected Story of a Gay Activist Discovering Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018). See also the various testimonies gathered at www.livingout.org (accessed 13 June 2019).

¹³ For one example, see Sean Doherty, 'Love Does Not Delight in Evil, but Rejoices with the Truth.' A Theological and Pastoral Reflection On My Journey Away From A Homosexual Identity' *Anvil* 30/1 (March 2014), pp. 5-16.

¹⁴ See Nathan Collins, *All But Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).

¹⁵ For a fuller development of this point, see Wilson, *Mere Sexuality*, pp. 39-59.

¹⁶ This is expressed in the Latin expression *lex orandi, lex credendi* – 'what is to be prayed is what is to be believed'.

¹⁷ This means that 'exemption clauses' are largely irrelevant and the suggested parallel with the permissions for ministers who cannot in conscience re-marry divorcees is invalid. Ministers and members who dissent will still belong to a church which endorses, blesses and celebrates same-sex relationships.