

31. Marriage and Relationships (further work)

Contact name and details	The Revd Dr Mark Rowland Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee rowlandm@methodistchurch.org.uk
Resolutions	31/1. The Conference received the Report. 31/2. The Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to produce a report on 'Living Well with Contradictory Convictions' in the light of the 2006 report <i>Living with Contradictory Convictions</i> and the principles of good relating set out in <i>God in Love Unites Us</i> and to report to the 2027 Conference. 31/3. The Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to explore the possibility of further work regarding childlessness and being child-free, including by whom such work might be done, and to bring appropriate proposals to the Conference of 2026. 31/4. The Conference directed that, for the purposes of their placement in CPD, the 1993 resolutions be classified as historic texts. <i>Resolution 31/5 will only be put if resolution 31/4 is not carried.</i> 31/5. WITHDRAWN

Summary of content and impact

Subject and aims	To consider potential further work relating to marriage and relationships.
Main points	• Introduction • General reflection • The family • Marriage • Cohabitation • Childlessness and being child-free • Gender Identity • Polygamy and Polyamory • Healthy Sexual Expression • New Statement on Marriage and Relationships • Status of the 1993 resolutions
Background context and relevant documents	God in Love Unites Us (2019) The Response of the Faith and Order Committee to the God in Love Unites Us report (2021) Marriage and Relationships (2022)
Impact	Resolutions ask further work of the Faith and Order Committee and possibly of other people/groups to be identified.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Following the major decisions relating to marriage and relationships made in 2021 as a result of *God in Love Unites Us*,¹ the Faith and Order Committee reported to the Conference of 2022 about a number of areas where further theological work would be possible and invited the Conference's view as to what, if anything, ought to be taken forward at that time. The Conference directed work on singleness, which was reported to the Conference of 2024, and in addition directed the committee 'to keep marriage and relationships on its agenda and to bring a report to the 2025 Conference that enables the Conference to decide whether any further work is required' (resolution 27/3). The committee accordingly presents this report to the Conference, which discusses a number of areas in

¹ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/resources/seasons-and-themes/themes/god-in-love-unites-us/>

which further work would be possible and invites the Conference to form a view as to what would be appropriate at this time.

- 1.2 In addition, the committee has reflected further on the reality of being a church 'living with contradictory convictions' (including in the context of the annual affirmations made in the presbyteral sessions of the Synod and in the Convocation of the Methodist Diaconal Order as well as in the Conference) and on the place of the 1993 resolutions. The Conference of 2022 removed the status of the 1992 Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*² and the committee has also considered the question of whether a new Statement of the Conference ought to be prepared.
- 1.3 Underlying much of this reflection is an overall theological question about the use of (personal) experience in the theological process. This is, of course, not a new question but questions that are, of their nature, as personal as those considered here put it in sharp relief. Methodists are well used to seeing experience as a theological resource: something which aids in our interpretation of scripture, a context in which we may discern the work of God and much more. The committee has on its agenda to continue to consider the theological use of experience and notes here the importance of being appropriately reflective as to our personal and corporate experience.
- 1.4 The committee is also aware that life and experience continues to develop and however much is said or written about any of these topics, there will always be more that could be said. We have also sought to be discerning about what is ours to do and what might be done that would be of help to the Methodist Church and the Methodist people. In considering this report, we ask the Conference to hold those questions in mind. In each case, the committee has offered its recommendation, and the resolutions below reflect those recommendations. Nevertheless, it is for the Conference to determine the way forward by accepting, amending or rejecting the committee's recommendations.

2. General reflection

- 2.1 The committee's members reflected on their experience since the Conference confirmed the resolutions of *God in Love Unites Us*. Experience was varied but there were similar themes which emerged from different contexts. Some churches have been keen to agree to hold same-sex marriages on their premises and have done so. Some churches have not engaged with the conversation at all. Some have discerned that there should be no change to their practice. There has been some experience of members leaving and of ministerial resignations. Some churches have welcomed new members or attendees attracted by a more 'inclusive' stance and in a number of places across the Connexion new churches and communities have been formed with an explicitly inclusive identity. In some places, the new reality has created challenges in ecumenical relationships while for others (eg LEPs with the URC) the changes enable closer working. We noted a general perception that conversations are 'finished', and little appetite for further discussion, with some fears of potential divisiveness. At the same time, some churches have been energised by the changes in missional ways, with opportunities to begin or deepen outreach to their local LGBTQ+ communities and to engage with local Prides.
- 2.2 In adopting the resolutions of *God in Love Unites Us*, the Conference explicitly approved two understandings of marriage within the Methodist Church, on an equal basis, with provision to be made for each. The committee noted some perception of minority status for the understanding that marriage is only between one man and one woman and that some feel unable to be open about holding that perspective. At the same time, discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards LGBTQ+ people in the church are still present and there are still instances of unacceptable conduct that have to be addressed. We are aware that there can be challenges in everyday circuit life and in the stationing process, including when ministers' views and the views in Circuits or churches do not align.
- 2.3 The committee reflected theologically on these experiences in the light of the Methodist Church's aspiration to 'live with contradictory convictions'. The way in which we 'live with' this is both the opportunity and the challenge: there is a danger we 'live with' contradictory convictions by not talking about them. This can lead to people feeling their perspective is silenced and does not help the Church to deepen its theological conversation. Meanwhile, the Church lives and engages in mission

² <https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/meth-statement-family-life-single-person-marriage-1992-0714.pdf>

within a broader culture – globally and nationally – that arguably pushes people towards polarized positions and may be taken to suggest that to live with contradictory convictions is not possible or simply an unhappy compromise. There is importance for the Church to own that it does live with contradictory convictions and not to be afraid of it. In some ways this has been the reality – in relation to various issues – at least since the writing of Romans 14.

- 2.4 The committee's reflection wondered what the consequence might be of drawing more intentionally together a theology of 'good relating' with a theology of 'living with contradictory convictions'. How might this enable the Church to engage in a prophetic and counter-cultural witness in an increasingly polarized world? The committee is also aware that other denominations are continuing their conversations about questions relating to marriage and relationships and there may be a benefit to giving greater clarity to the theological basis for living with contradictory convictions. It may also be helpful to give some attention to the limits of this approach: when must we say 'Here we stand, we can do no other'?
- 2.5 In 2006, the Conference received the committee's original report on *Living with Contradictory Convictions* and commended it 'for prayerful and constructive discussion and use in relation to all areas of the Church's life in which diversity and disagreement appear.' This report itself emerged from discussions relating to sexuality and to debate as to the use of scripture in that light. Nearly twenty years later, the committee sees value in returning to the thinking in this report considering the Church's experience and the developments in our life since then. We recommend the production of an updated version of this report, with reference to the concept of good relating: in essence, seeking to address the question of what living *well* with contradictory convictions might look like and how we might do that in practice. The committee noted the potential synergy of this thinking with existing work on *Positive Working Together*³ and the importance of taking a holistic view: our thinking and practice on marriage and relationships is not done in isolation from the rest of the life of the Church. An updated version of this report could be significant for the Methodist Church's own life, in what we could contribute to the conversations of our ecumenical partners, and for our mission and witness to the nation and the world at large.

3 The Family

- 3.1 The committee noted the removal of status from the 1992 statement and the ways in which that report may no longer be helpful. We are, and need to be, more attentive to the complexity of 'family' which takes multiple forms and of which there are multiple experiences. Scripturally, there is a diverse portrayal of 'family' and the cultural significance of 'family' is varied in the many cultures represented within the Methodist Church. Family does not necessarily imply children but there is a common association: for example, if someone is asked "Do you have family?" it may be intended or taken to mean "Do you have children?" Family traditionally refers to blood relations as well as to those who join a family by marriage. There are also broader concepts within particular communities as well as the notion of 'chosen family'.
- 3.2 It may be helpful for the Church to say something further about the nature of family. Rather than speaking of 'the family', as if it were a single experience, we feel it would be better to speak of family in general, recognising a wide range of patterns, experiences and understandings. It would need to be modest, humble and exploratory in tone, rather than dogmatic or prescriptive. The qualities of good relating that were outlined in *God in Love Unites Us* may provide a helpful starting point for further reflection on the nature of family. In addition, we noted the interconnectedness of questions of family with other questions within this report (and indeed beyond it). At the same time, it would be important to be attentive to experiences and contexts where family is not a model of 'good relating' and to experiences of family that are constraining, unsafe or where family bonds are non-existent.
- 3.3 While the committee could see that there were areas that could be explored further, it did not feel that such work was a priority at this time.

4. Marriage

- 4.1 Similarly to its reflection on family, the committee noted diverse perspectives and experiences of the nature of marriage itself. The Methodist Church's understanding of marriage is best expressed in its

³ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/guidance-for-churches/introducing-positive-working-together/>

authorised liturgy. The authorised services⁴ for the marriage of one man and one woman and for any two persons share a considerable core of material. In this way, the different understandings that the Conference has recognised in the Methodist Church are both expressed as well as our core understanding of the nature of marriage as a relationship.

- 4.2 The committee noted that the decisions of *God in Love Unites Us* are still relatively recent and feels that it is not yet time to do further theological work on the nature of marriage. We believe it would be wise to allow time for the Church to continue to reflect on the changes that have been made, engage in further dialogue with our ecumenical partners, and enable a broader process of reception within the Church community. It may in due course be helpful to re-examine questions as to the nature of marriage and there may be some matters to attend to if significant revision of the marriage liturgies is proposed as part of the work on *The Methodist Worship Book*.

5. Cohabitation

- 5.1 The committee noted the decision made by the Conference regarding an understanding of cohabitation and the reality that within British society cohabitation has become entirely unremarkable. For many couples, the commitment of cohabitating is the same as those who are married. Cohabitation is not simply a question regarding younger people: many older people may cohabit, particularly in a new relationship following the death of their spouse. There may also be financial or other considerations that influence this choice. The committee noted that the legal rights available to cohabiting couples are significantly less than those for married couples but felt this was not primarily a matter for the committee.
- 5.2 While accepting that a variety of perspectives remain in the Methodist Church about cohabitation, in the context of the understanding of cohabitation already approved by the Conference, the committee does not recommend undertaking further work at this time.

6. Childlessness and being child-free

- 6.1 The committee reflected that there is a wide range of situations in which people, for many and varied reasons, do not have children. For some this is a deliberate choice, for others a painful reality, for still others a more complicated set of circumstances. Miscarriage is a reality that many couples will have faced but for many remains unspoken. Others will have experience of the death of infants or children. Still others will have experienced the termination of a pregnancy. While all of this will affect many people within the Methodist Church, the committee observes that it is not significantly discussed. The trend for marriage to move later in life may lead to increased challenges for childbearing for those who want children (although at the same time changing patterns of marriage and cohabitation may mean that marriage comes after children not before them). The committee also reflected that there are important intersections here with other aspects of life. For example, the availability of fertility treatments and support (eg IVF) may be linked to economic status. There are notable currents in public discourse around childbearing – both ‘for and against’ – that may invite comment from the Church.
- 6.2 The language that might be used carries assumptions and implications. To speak of being ‘childless’ may seem to make child-bearing normative. Some who choose not to have children prefer to speak of being ‘child-free’. There is not an easily available broad term that can embrace the range of experiences that not having children may entail.
- 6.3 The committee’s reflection led it to conclude that some broad theological reflection on cultural perspectives relating to procreation and childlessness may be of value, with attention to how we might be of pastoral help to people and enable contexts in which experiences and choices need not be left unspoken. At the same time, it recognises that careful consideration of how this work is framed and constructed will be essential. It therefore recommends that further consideration be given to what could be done in this area, in collaboration with the JDS Committee and other appropriate groups.

7. Gender Identity

⁴ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/resources/leading-worship/methodist-liturgies/marriage-and-the-blessing-of-a-marriage/>

- 7.1 Gender identity is named here as it was in the list of questions previously identified in the report to the Conference of 2022. However, the committee noted that gender identity is not the same as sexuality and raises different questions. If further work were to be done, the committee believe it should be separated from the work on marriage and relationships, and may benefit from a pause to reinforce that they are separate issues.
- 7.2 The committee notes that political and governmental decisions regarding trans people have created a context of significant fear and that there is a toxicity to public discourse and debate in this area. Attentive to the inherent dignity of all people made in the image and likeness of God, mindful of the vulnerability the political context creates, and wishing to stand in solidarity with trans people, the committee believes now is not the time to initiate a theological debate as to the nature of gender identity.
- 7.3 There may be work which could helpfully be done including ongoing updating of the EDI toolkit and consideration of appropriate pastoral resources for supporting trans and gender non-conforming people in the life of the church.

8. Polygamy and Polyamory

- 8.1 The committee reflected on questions of polygamy and polyamory. These arise both in the UK and considering a broader range of cultural contexts. Awareness of forms of relationship involving multiple partners is becoming more widespread and there is more (but still not significant levels) of representation in television and film. The committee did not believe it would be of assistance to the Church to engage in further work on this at this time. It may, in due course, be helpful to return to these questions.

9. Healthy Sexual Expression

- 9.1 The committee reflected on this question and noted that the guidance for the Methodist Church on marriage and relationships⁵ includes a number of broad principles including the building of relationships on self-giving love, commitment, fidelity, loyalty, honesty, mutual respect, equality and the desire for the mutual flourishing of the people involved. The guidance (following the earlier 1993 resolutions) rejects all relationships which are promiscuous, exploitative or demeaning. The committee's reflection is that these broad principles provide an appropriate context within which Methodists can consider healthy sexual expression and that it would not be helpful to seek to define that more precisely. The committee therefore does not recommend further work in this area.

10. New Statement on Marriage and Relationships

- 10.1 In the light of the committee's reflections on family and marriage (above), as well as some of the other considerations in this report, the committee concluded that it would not be appropriate to propose the drafting of a new Statement on Marriage and Relationships at this stage.

11. Status of the 1993 Resolutions

- 11.1 The 1993 resolutions currently appear in the guidance section of CPD.⁶ The Conference in 2022 resolved not to put a resolution that they be deleted. In considering the matters raised in this report, the committee felt it important to highlight this issue once more. In 2022, the committee felt that the 1993 resolutions were in tension with the more recent decisions of the Conference. Elements of them have been incorporated into the consolidated guidance now found in Book VII, Part 8 of CPD.⁷
- 11.2 The committee considers that the 1993 resolutions represent an important part of the history of these questions in the life of the Methodist Church. For a generation, they governed our position and provided a framework within which the Church lived together on these matters. Their witness to the dignity and worth of each person and against practices of sexuality which are promiscuous, exploitative or demeaning stands. For these reasons, the committee feels that the 1993 resolutions should be moved to the historic texts section of CPD. Should the Conference not wish to do this, an

⁵ *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, p. 850.

⁶ *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, p. 860.

⁷ *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, p. 850.

alternative resolution offers the possibility of deleting the 1993 resolutions from CPD. If the Conference is minded to preserve the status quo, then both resolutions could be rejected.

12. Concluding remarks

- 12.1 Of necessity, this report has treated a wide range of questions in very brief terms. It should never be forgotten that in each case these are matters not simply of theology or church discipline but of people's lives. The committee keeps before it the scriptural truth that all people are made in God's image and likeness and our Lord's command that we love our neighbour as ourselves. In our work in this report, as elsewhere, we pray that we may be faithful to that witness.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

- 31/1. The Conference received the Report.**
- 31/2. The Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to produce a report on 'Living Well with Contradictory Convictions' in the light of the 2006 report *Living with Contradictory Convictions* and the principles of good relating set out in *God in Love Unites Us* and to report to the 2027 Conference.**
- 31/3. The Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to explore the possibility of further work regarding childlessness and being child-free, including by whom such work might be done, and to bring appropriate proposals to the Conference of 2026.**
- 31/4. The Conference directed that, for the purposes of their placement in CPD, the 1993 resolutions be classified as historic texts.**

Resolution 31/5 will only be put if resolution 31/4 is not carried.

- 31/5. WITHDRAWN**