

The Annual Affirmation

This leaflet is provided to help presbyters prayerfully to consider the meaning of the affirmation that we are asked to make in our Synod (and which contributes to the answer given in the Conference by a Chair to the question: Do we continue to believe and preach our doctrines and observe and administer our discipline?) The Revd Ken Howcroft (past President and former Assistant Secretary of the Conference) introduces the topic and then we hear from four presbyters who bring different perspectives to the question. I am aware that some presbyters find this a particular challenge this year and will be discussing their concerns with their District Chair. These reflections are particularly intended to assist with those conversations, but I hope and pray that they will help us all to prepare for a solemn, significant and affirming moment, and I am very grateful to those who have carefully and honestly shared their thoughts here.

Jonathan Hustler
Secretary of the Conference

Introduction – The Revd Ken Howcroft

Making my affirmations at the annual enquiry has always been very important to me. So was responding to the charge and making my promises when I was received into full connexion and ordained. It is always tempting not to think about these things and treat them as empty, formulaic ritual. Instead, I find myself prompted to reflect and pray about how well I have fulfilled my previous commitments, whether I can still affirm them, and what it would mean for me to renew them now. It is the same with the annual Covenant Service in which I renew my commitments to a covenant relationship with God. That is not surprising, as the covenant relationship I am invited to enter with the Conference for ministry is one particular outworking of the worship and discipleship in the wider covenant relationship in grace to which I am welcomed by God.

Sometimes there are things that happen in our lives or the life of the Church that means we have to think longer and pray harder. The decisions of the 2021 Conference about *God in Love Unites Us* (which itself came after processes of conferring and discernment which had gone on for many years) may be one such example. They raise legitimate questions about where we stand concerning our doctrines and our discipline.

As the reply to M32 adopted by the 2021 Conference states, presbyters are asked at the Synod each year to affirm that each continues ‘to believe and preach our doctrines...’. Similarly, during the annual Convocation deacons are asked to renew the promise they made at ordination to ‘believe the doctrines of the Christian faith as this Church has received them’; and the reply also notes that the term ‘our doctrines’ also appears in the list of the duties of local preachers. The term ‘our doctrines’ refers to the Methodist doctrinal standards which are set out in clause 4 of the Deed of Union. In adopting the reply to M32, the Conference affirmed the judgment of the Faith and Order Committee that there was nothing in the resolutions confirmed by the 2021 Conference (including the one recognising that in the Church there are two understandings of marriage) that necessitated a change to clause 4 of the Deed.

The reply to M32 also stated that each year presbyters are asked if they continue to ‘... observe and administer our discipline’. Similarly, deacons are asked to reaffirm that they ‘accept our discipline, and work together with your sisters and brother in the Church’; and again the reply notes that local preachers are also in their annual recommitment expected to indicate their intention to abide by the discipline of the Church. In adopting the reply, the Conference affirmed that the provisions that have now been made in Standing Orders to safeguard the position of those who are prevented from officiating at same sex

weddings by reason of conscience are such that no one should be unable to administer and observe the discipline by reason of conscience. In the process it notes that very similar provision has been in place for many years with regard to the marriage of divorced persons whose previous spouse is still alive.

The Conference decisions that have resulted from *God in Love Unites Us* are about much more than same-sex marriage, but it is the ones about that topic which are perhaps the most contentious. In effect what the Conference is saying is “If you believe that marriage can only be between a man and a woman, the Conference welcomes and respects you, and will not require you to act against your conscience”. Similarly, “If you believe that marriage can be between not just a woman and a man, but any two persons, the Conference welcomes and respects you, and will not require you to act against your conscience”. Beyond that, the Conference simply asks us to find ways of respecting, living and working together whatever our views.

The question for all of us is whether we can do that. In this document you will find a number of reflections from ministers who hold a range of views about these matters. They have all wrestled with them with deep honesty and integrity. They are offered as prompts to your own prayerful reflection.

As Mr Wesley said at the end of the 1753 *Twelve Rules of a Helper* “... remember, a Methodist Preacher is to mind every point, great and small, in the Methodist Discipline. Therefore you will need all the grace and all the sense you have, and to have all your wits about you.”

Reflection One

The recent decision of Conference to adopt the resolutions laid out in the GILUU report has made it easier for me to assent to the questions asked of us in the annual enquiry at Presbyteral Synod. Over the years I had become increasingly uneasy when answering the question: ‘Does each of us continue faithfully to discharge the obligations laid upon us to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.’ My understanding of the gospel is that, in Christ, God’s grace is extended to all, but I have hitherto felt unable to express this fully in my ministry.

As a presbyter, I have been called to a ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care. As part of that duty of pastoral care I have had too many conversations with people who have deeply struggled with their sexuality, sometimes to the point of self-harm and even attempted suicide, to believe that this is something that a person chooses, rather than being a part of their God-given identity. The Bible speaks of God knowing us even before we were in the womb, and that God hates nothing he has made: I would not treat anyone differently on account of their gender, race or colour, so why should I treat someone differently because of their sexual identity? I have long been aware of the deep hurt and sense of rejection felt by those who have yearned to celebrate their love and to make their vows in the presence of God, in the same way as heterosexual couples, but who have not been able to. I have also had pastoral conversations with some who have not just walked away from the church, but have walked away from God, believing themselves unworthy of his love. This, I find heart-breaking, and in the past, it has deeply saddened me to feel that the Methodist Church’s previous refusal to offer same-sex couples the opportunity of equal marriage opportunities has helped to fuel that sense of unworthiness.

I recognise, of course, that not all will share my deeply held convictions, and will want to hold fast to their own deeply held convictions that marriage should only be between a man and a woman. I am pleased therefore, that those who do not wish to conduct same-sex weddings will be able to refuse and will not be forced to act against their conscience, just as I am both relieved and delighted that henceforth I, and many others like me, will not have to act against *our* consciences when asked to marry two people of the same sex who wish to celebrate and affirm their love for one another in a church.

Reflection Two

I began this journey viewing Christians from the LGBTQ+ community with great suspicion. I thought they were trying to manipulate scripture to get it to agree with what they wanted to do. But then I met some. We were thrown together on various committees and working parties. It was, without doubt, the most significant thing about the whole journey. I began to discover that they were not as I thought. They were just as sincere as I tried to be, just as eager to be faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus as I am. They just saw things differently. We shared together, prayed together and yes sometimes cried together. As we did so we learned from each other and I began to feel that God was teaching us both. I now understand that we need to recognize that there are a whole variety of issues on which Christians will disagree, and this is one of them. I guess it will always be so. But the most important things are not those which divide us, but those on which we can stand together; for the rest we learn to respect and love, trusting that God has His own way of speaking to everyone willing to hear.

Bravely, the Methodist Conference has now acknowledged and embraced this position. It has affirmed that within the life of our church both views are affirmed. The challenge now is to translate that into action, by guarding the legitimacy of both views, at every level of the church's life. I believe that by doing so it can demonstrate to a broken world, and too often a broken Church, that it is possible to love those with whom you disagree. We have before us a golden opportunity of demonstrating that the gospel of reconciliation really works. There is a better way than argument and division. It is the Jesus way. To all who will hear I say, with Wesley, 'Is your heart one *with my heart? If so give me your hand.*'

Reflection Three

As a new year begins many of us are beginning to wrestle with the 'annual enquiry' and whether this is something we can now affirm with the same confidence and enthusiasm as we once did.

I, like many, have journeyed with the God in Love Unites Us report and the significant and challenging resolutions that we have adopted and are now implementing across the Connexion and in each local church. It is when I must stand and affirm my own position within the life of our Church that the reality hits me hardest.

I remain committed to a traditional perspective on marriage and hold that marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman. I also remain, and intend to remain, a member of the Methodist Church in Britain and remain committed to its journey over these next months and years.

As a Methodist people we clearly affirm two sacraments, baptism and communion, marriage is not a sacrament within our movement. Our doctrinal standards do not mention marriage, but clearly affirm the importance of the divine revelation of scripture, and we now find ourselves in a place where we are not agreed on how that revelation should be lived out in practice (I am not sure we have been for a long time). The decisions within the reports to the Conference, I believe, enable me to hold the deep theological position that I do with integrity in our Church, whilst living alongside those who hold differing deep theological positions. We live in a spirit of collegiality and a sense of 'watching over one another with love'. I am grateful that each of us can exercise our ministries with honesty and in the light.

Reflection Four

1. Do you continue to faithfully discharge the obligations laid upon us by the ministry which we have received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God?
2. Do you continue to believe and preach our doctrines
3. and administer our discipline?

This is proving to be something of a conundrum, requiring as it does, a single answer to three now very different and vital questions. As someone who has a high view of scripture and who has not re-defined evangelical for the present age, I need to be able to give an honest answer that reflects my understanding of discipline and honour.

I remain called to ordained ministry and preaching within the Wesleyan Tradition, and so am able to unequivocally say yes to the first two parts. The experience I bring and the theological diversity -which represents the heart and faith of many non-Conference attenders- must not be allowed to be further diluted within Methodism. I will absolutely preach, offer pastoral care and do all the things that are good and honourable as a minister of Word and Sacrament.

The basic doctrines of Jesus Christ, Salvation, of Sanctification, of the Holy Spirit, and Prevenient Grace remain at the core of my Wesleyan heart. So too, the missional imperative that this saving love of God in Christ Jesus is for all people.

However, my heart says 'insofar as it pleases God', with regard to the administration of discipline. I am hugely grieved by the stripping away within our standing orders of the transformative expectations of faith which Wesley bore witness to and which are understood and experienced in a proper focus on the cross.

Where Conference has diverted from these doctrines within the body of the standing orders in pursuit of a liberal and well intentioned agenda, the expectation of a living and transformative faith in Christ through the cross is diminished and even negated. Our disciplines may now run counter to some of these doctrines. I acknowledge that Faith and Order have not bowed to divert from the doctrines which underpin the Wesleyan traditions of Christian Faith.

I am increasingly lonely in maintaining the course within the Methodist Church. Many of our experienced preachers and presbyters with whom I share fellowship are choosing to resign rather than be subjected to remaining under what can fairly be seen as 'compromise'. However, where God calls, I go and where calling persists, I remain. Insofar as it pleases God.

A Prayer

God of grace, we have been appointed to proclaim your gospel, to serve your people, and to watch over one another in love.

We pray for one another that in openness and honesty, in times of change and challenge, we might affirm and be affirmed in our vocation, to seek and do your holy will, living and working to your praise and glory. Amen.