

## 51. Marriage and Relationships Task Group

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<b>Resolution</b>	51/1. The Conference receives the Report.

### Summary of Content and Impact

<b>Subject and Aims</b>	To inform the Conference on the current status of the work being undertaken by the Marriage and Relationships Task Group.	
<b>Main Points</b>	<p>Work on Marriage and Relationships, including related work on homophobia guidance, is progressing on resolutions 40/3 and 40/4 (2014). It is managed through the Marriage and Relationships Task Group, in consultation with the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee.</p> <p>The report outlines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources to support the Marriage and Relationships discussions across the Connexion.</li> <li>• Learning opportunities for those facilitating discussions.</li> <li>• The current situation in relation to the use of shared premises.</li> <li>• Other work that contributes to delivering resolutions 40/4.</li> </ul>	
<b>Background Context and Relevant Documents (with function)</b>	Agenda Item 40 (2014) Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships	
<b>Consultations</b>	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee	
<b>Impact</b>	<b>Faith and Order</b>	Faith and Order Committee scrutiny is required on the proposed additional resources.
	<b>Financial</b>	Costs already included in the project's budget.
	<b>Wider Connexional</b>	Future discussions to take place at district and circuit level; to be managed by Districts.

## **Marriage and Relationships Task Group**

### **1. Background**

- 1.1 This report seeks to provide an update on the progress on implementing decisions of the 2014 Conference in relation to Marriage and Relationships and the provision of guidance on what is, or is not, to be regarded as homophobia. (Resolutions 40/3 and 40/4 of the 2014 Conference. See appendix 1 for further details.)

### **2. Summary of progress**

#### **2.1 Resources to support conversations across the Connexion**

The 2014 Conference resolved that discussions should take place across the Connexion, these conversations have started in many places. Discussions will continue until next year. The following two resources form the basis and theological context upon which conversations across the Connexion are taking place:

- a) *Living with Contradictory Convictions*, including the study guide
- b) *A Lamp to my Feet and Light to my Path: The Nature of Authority and the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church*.

The Guidance on Homophobia, which is in the process of being produced, will form a third resource. Work on this is being undertaken by the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, which will work in consultation with the Marriage and Relationships Task Group

The Marriage and Relationships Task Group has a page on the Methodist Church website with links to these and other resources.

#### **2.2 Development opportunities for those managing the conversations**

- a) The District Chairs' meeting discussed and agreed the timetable and arrangements for managing the conversations. A guidance note was sent to all Districts on 23 March 2015, and Districts were asked to nominate two persons to facilitate discussions within Districts.
- b) Workshops have been organised to take place at the 2015 Conference, where guidance on how to use the resources will be shared.
- c) All the district facilitators are being invited to a training event on 2 and 3 October.
- d) Districts have been asked to make reports of conversations to the Task Group in February 2016.

#### **2.3 Shared Premises and ecumenical discussions**

The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 requires all churches sharing premises under the Sharing of Church Buildings Act 1969 to 'opt in' before shared premises can be used for the solemnization of same sex marriage, regardless of the ownership of the premises. The Marriage and Relationships Task Group has considered the implications for shared premises if there are differences of view between ecumenical partners. Following consultation with the Connexional Ecumenical Officer it has been confirmed that partner denominations respect the need for the Conference to consider this matter in its own time.

## 2.4 Other matters

- a. Divergence between the Methodist Church's definition of marriage and legal definitions of marriage. (Resolution 40/4 b) (iii)
  - (i) The task group has commissioned a resource on the history of marriage in Methodism; and drawing together information from existing Methodist documents that explore some of the challenges and issues relating to the divergence of definition, tradition and experience between the Church and society.
  - (ii) The task group has reviewed those Standing Orders that refer to the terms 'spouse,' 'widow' and 'married' and considered whether amendments are required to Standing Orders as a result of the change in the legal definition of marriage. The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 does not require the Conference to make any amendments to Standing Orders. However, further consideration does need to be given to the question of whether or not the Conference would wish references to 'spouse,' 'widow' and 'married' within Standing Orders to include a spouse of the same sex. The task group did note that the proposed Standing Order amendments in the Law and Polity Committee report to the Conference (related to work undertaken by the Connexional Allowances Committee) go some way to ensure that benefits for ministers such as maternity, paternity and shared parental leave and some support from the Fund for the Support of Presbyters and Deacons is available to people in all relationships not just those in a marriage as defined by Standing Order 011A. There are still some Standing Orders that require consideration and the task group proposes to undertake further work with the Faith and Order Committee on the use of the terms 'spouse,' 'widow' and 'married'. Any proposal for further changes to Standing Orders will be brought to the 2016 Conference.
- b. Welcoming same sex couples (Resolution 40/4 b) (iv))

Independently of this work, the Connexional Team has developed, and is currently piloting the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit. Within the toolkit there is a module on sexual orientation which can be used in relation to resolution 40/4(b)(iv) (to find ways to encourage Local Churches, and if thought necessary, equipping them with pastoral and teaching resources, to welcome same sex couples and their families and to enable their participation in the life and worship of the Church).

- c. Resources on cohabitation (Resolution 40/4 (b) (v))

The Task Group received advice from the Faith and Order Committee that, as there are a variety of overlapping issues involved, further work on these resources would most constructively be undertaken once the issue of the definition of marriage is resolved and parameters of the work defined.

### \*\*\*RESOLUTION

#### 51/1. The Conference received the Report.

The 2014 Conference adopted the following resolutions [Daily Record 7/8]:

- 40/3. The Conference adopted the recommendation contained in paragraph 148 and directed the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion committee, in consultation with the group appointed under resolution 40/4 below, to work, as a matter of priority, on the production and dissemination of clear guidance on what is, or is not, to be regarded as homophobia and, if thought appropriate, on a formal statement for the Conference to adopt on this matter.
- 40/4. a) The Conference adopted the recommendation contained in paragraph 157 and appointed a task group on marriage and relationships to be responsible for the implementation of the work. It recognised the significance and therefore the need for adequate resourcing and support of this work.
- b) The Conference directed that the tasks which the group shall work to implement shall be as follows:
- (i) to seek to engage the Church more widely in exploring the two major themes of
    - i. living with contradictory convictions, and
    - ii. the nature of the authority of the Bible by drawing upon the existing material produced connexionally and identifying other ways of resourcing and encouraging these conversations throughout the Church;
  - (ii) within that context, to encourage and facilitate across the Connexion the process of reflection and discernment referred to in Resolution 40/2;
  - (iii) to explore in depth the implications arising from the divergence between the Methodist Church's teaching on marriage and the legal definition and concept of marriage now applying in England, Wales and Scotland. These explorations should include
    - i. the missional challenges involved
    - ii. the tradition and experience of the Christian Church in living in contexts where its values, teaching and practice relating to marriage have not been shared with those of the surrounding society
    - iii. the considerations for and against the continued involvement of the Methodist Church in the solemnisation of (opposite sex) marriages;
  - (iv) to find ways to encourage Local Churches (and if thought necessary, equipping them with pastoral and teaching resources) to welcome same sex couples and their families and to enable their participation in the life and worship of the Church;
  - (v) drawing as appropriate upon the theological material already produced by the Faith and Order Committee and in collaboration with that committee, to develop resources to help people to explore the teaching and practice of the Church in relation to cohabitation;
  - (vi) to look at the range of other issues raised by paragraphs 92 to 101, to investigate what material is already available or could, within the financial and personnel resources available, be produced in order to encourage wider discussions about marriage and other relationships;

- (vii) to work with the EDI committee on the task directed by Resolution 40/3 above;
  - (viii) to consider further the implications of same sex marriage legislation for shared buildings not held on Methodist trusts and for those working in wider ecumenical contexts, and report to the Conference of 2015 on any action recommended to be taken;
  - (ix) to carry out the work recommended to be done in paragraph 179 and report to the Conference of 2015 about any Standing Order amendments required;
  - (x) in the light of its explorations and experience of working on all these issues, to bring a general report to the Conference of 2016 on the key issues and proposals for any further work to be done, and including recommendations upon:
    - i. whether the 1992 Conference Statement A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage should be updated
    - ii. whether to revisit the question of embarking upon a process of revising the Methodist Church's definition of marriage.
- c) The group's task shall be primarily to oversee and coordinate the work listed in b) above, and it is anticipated that it will identify sub-groups or individuals to undertake particular tasks.
- d) The group shall work wherever possible collaboratively with the relevant members of the Connexional Team, and in consultation with the relevant connexional committees, in particular the Faith and Order Committee.
- e) It shall also seek to work as far as possible with ecumenical partners who are engaged in similar explorations at this time.
- f) It shall report regularly to the Methodist Council upon how its programme of work is being implemented, seeking the advice of the Council as to priorities where necessary.