

17. Singleness

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Resolutions	17/1. The Conference receives the Report. 17/2. The Conference commends the Report for study and comment and invites responses to be sent to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee by 1 September 2025.

Summary of content and impact

Subject and aims	To offer more reflective work on singleness, in response to Notice of Motion 2022/102.
Main points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction • Theological Resources: Biblical Insights • Theological Resources: Methodist History • Recommendations and Practical Guidance
Background context and relevant documents (with function)	<p>A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage (Statement 1992; Statement status removed 2022)</p> <p>God in Love Unites Us (2019)</p> <p>The response of the Faith and Order Committee to the God in Love Unites Us report (2021)</p> <p>Marriage and Relationships (2022)</p> <p>Notice of Motion 2022/102</p>

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report from the Faith and Order Committee arose in response to a Notice of Motion adopted by the Conference in 2022. Notice of Motion 2022/102 observed that the debate on *God in Love Unites Us* brought calls for more reflective work on singleness and noted that the 1992 Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* was ‘unhelpful in its assumptions and inadequate for the task’. Recognising that ‘[t]here is much still to do in welcoming, affirming, and celebrating the presence and contribution of single people in the church’s life together’, the Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to bring a report on singleness to the Conference of 2024.

- 1.2 The Faith and Order Committee gladly endorses the first sentence of the section on *A Christian Understanding of the Single Person* in the 1992 Statement: 'Every person has infinite value before God.' The Committee recognises, however, that this is not the felt experience of all. A sampling of quantitative research supports anecdotal evidence that single people may not find church a positive place to be, and that both communal assumptions and some liturgical language may reinforce this negative experience. The Committee therefore offers this report to provide theological resources to help the Church to welcome, affirm, and celebrate the contribution of single people, and, on the basis of those resources, to suggest further action that might be taken to give effect to the intentions of Notice of Motion 2022/102.
- 1.3 Although this report was prompted by discussions in the Methodist Conference, the Faith and Order Committee is aware of conversations and concerns well beyond the life of the Methodist Church. On the one hand, the 2023 Final Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households, *Love Matters*, pays welcome attention to singleness as a significant part of contemporary society, affirming that 'single people must be valued at the heart of our society' and that 'Jesus' own singleness should ensure that the Church ... celebrates singleness ...'¹ On the other hand, the rise of the 'incel' ('involuntary celibate') subculture, with its deeply disturbing overtones of misogyny, misanthropy, and sexual violence, reinforces the need for the positive steps urged by the Notice of Motion.
- 1.4 In undertaking this work, the Faith and Order Committee realises that the terms 'single', 'family', and 'household' may be used in different ways and to denote different realities. The experience of being single may mean not married, or married and now separated, or divorced, or widowed. It may mean being in relationship with another person, and perhaps living with them. It may mean living in a one-person household, or sharing a home with others, or living in a community. There may be children. A narrow legal definition, simply reflecting marital condition, ignores the divorced and the widowed, and neglects people who are partnered or cohabiting, but not married. Whether legally or socially defined, moreover, singleness, is not synonymous with solitude, nor with celibacy, and it may include parenthood. The first step in welcoming, affirming, and celebrating the presence and contribution of single people in the Church's life, therefore, is to be careful and respectful in listening and in speaking, so that the experience of each person is honoured. The following sections, offering resources from the Bible and from Methodist history, demonstrate that diversity in practice and

1 *Love Matters. Summary Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households (2023)*, 17. See also the full version of the *Report*, 48-51. The assumption of Jesus's singleness, it should be noted, rests on an argument from silence – there is no evidence either way in the New Testament.

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experience is not unique to the twenty-first century and that the witnesses of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience speak against simplistic binaries.

2. Theological Resources: Biblical Insights

- 2.1 A complete survey of all the biblical material that may be relevant would be beyond the scope of this report. One overarching truth that is proclaimed in the Bible is God's all-encompassing love for all people no matter what may be their circumstances (John 3:16; Galatians 3:28). This is central to the Gospel, and to our faith.
- 2.2 There are many stories in the Old Testament that centre round the imperative of marriage for the continuance of the family line (Genesis 28:2). The narratives of barrenness underscore the social pressure to perpetuate one's family memory and kinship (Genesis 11:30; 25:21; 29:31). Remaining single under the kinship system in ancient Israel would have been seen as a social tragedy and in many ways similar to the tragedy of being barren (Judges 11:37-38) and one's name no longer being remembered (Jeremiah 11:19; 16:1-4).
- 2.3 Hosea's marriage to Gomer (Hosea chapters 1-3) has been hotly debated. It may or may not have been an acted parable to describe God's relationship with Israel. It certainly shows that marriage can lead to pain and distress. Jeremiah is forbidden from marrying (Jeremiah 16:1-9) and Ezekiel is forbidden from mourning his wife (Ezekiel 24:15-1), both indicating that the forthcoming disaster that will overtake Jerusalem will completely overshadow all other things. The traditional understanding of the marriage bond is rejected such is the new and terrible situation. It is the horror of the political and military situation that makes sense of this profound departure from what was the norm. This example of the rejection of marriage in the face of an impending catastrophic situation may be a first inkling of some views expressed in the New Testament where relationships and life are seen against a background of expecting the end of the world at any moment.
- 2.4 A different insight may be gained from Ruth. Here is a narrative that has many layers of meaning to be uncovered. It tells of the ever-present dangers of harvest failure and famine, when the plight of the childless widow was parlous in the extreme. Ruth tells, among other things, of how two widows who must fend for themselves tackled the problem of survival.
- 2.5 In the New Testament, the Gospel proclaims a radically new way of living 'in Christ'. There is an expectation of the imminent return of Christ and Acts 2:45²

2 Acts 2:44-45 (NRSV) reads 'All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.'

provides an insight into a church development that is usually understood as reflecting a very early response to this belief. Here is a way in which the physical needs of the congregation might be met whilst awaiting the eschaton. It provides for those who have rejected conventional ties in order to devote themselves wholly to the work of the Gospel. Paul may be advocating this way of living in order to serve the Lord in 1 Corinthians 7.

If it is the case that widows and unmarried women in the first century must rely on their male family members for sustenance, Paul's suggestion that it is better to remain single in order to serve the Lord requires a new sort of family to provide the necessary physical and emotional support, especially in the case where there have been rifts caused by the new faith – an inclusive family of Christian believers is needed.

- 2.6 According to Mark's Gospel in particular, at the very beginning of his ministry Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James and John to leave everything behind and follow him (Mark 1:16-20). They were all four fishermen, and Simon, at any rate was married (Mark 1:30). The break was sudden if not to say brutal. From now onwards they would follow Jesus. The social ramifications are not discussed, but a few chapters later (Mark 3:31-35) Jesus rejects the earthly family ties that were so important then as they still are now. Human families cannot match the importance of the new family, the family of those who do the will of God. 'Looking at those who sat around him, Jesus said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'" (Mark 3:34-35). Even in New Testament times, the Gospel turns upside down traditional values and support networks. The family of Jesus is defined by loyalty to the will of God rather than human relations.
- 2.7 The Bible affords different examples of the significance of singleness and marriage. The eschatological perspective found in the New Testament radically reshapes all human relationships. The Biblical material underlines the view that we are all one in Christ Jesus, whatever our human differences of race, gender, or marital state. We all belong together, include each other, support each other, and offer our own unique service to the Gospel.

3. Theological Resources: Methodist History

- 3.1 Methodists are often tempted to step straight from the New Testament to the Evangelical Revival, overlooking the seventeen hundred years of Christian history which separate the Early Church from the Wesleys. Before focusing on insights from Methodist history, it is important to note, therefore, that church history does not offer a simple template for households and relationships. At different

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times the church has celebrated and affirmed the chosen solitude of hermits and anchorites, the single life lived in close community of the monastic tradition, a celibate priesthood, the ministry of widows, and the mutual responsibilities and obligations of an extended family or household.

- 3.2 The Wesleys' Methodism developed in a society where the most common household arrangement was for a house to be occupied by one married couple, with or without children. People married relatively late – couples did not generally marry until they could afford to set up home – and for in-laws or members of the wider family to live in (as Susanna Wesley did with various of her children in her widowhood after 1735) was unusual. Households were, however, likely to include domestic servants, apprentices, or lodgers.³
- 3.3 Although tradition implied a household headed by a man, in practice there was considerable variety: a sizeable number of households were headed by women – some widows, like Mary Vazeille (who later married John Wesley) and some unmarried, like Mary Bosanquet, who led a Christian community in her own house in Leytonstone from 1762 until her marriage to John Fletcher, vicar of Madeley, in 1781.⁴
- 3.4 Social historians estimate that around 10% of women in eighteenth-century England never married. Of couples marrying in the later 1730s, 24% would lose their partner within ten years and 56% in twenty-five years; only 15% would reach forty years of marriage.⁵ There were numerous examples, therefore, of widows and widowers, single-parent households, second and third marriages, and households with half- and step-siblings. Some people were able to afford a single lifestyle in their own home; other single people shared a home (like Sarah Crosby and Sarah Ryan, both separated from abusive husbands, who lived with Mary Bosanquet); some lived in other households as domestic servants or paid companions.
- 3.5 Until his marriage to the widowed Mary Vazeille in 1751, at the age of 48, John Wesley was single, but not living alone. He experienced life in the crowded Epworth Rectory, with his parents, many siblings, and servants. He also experienced the communal life of a boarding school (Charterhouse) and two Oxford colleges: Christ Church, as an undergraduate, and then, from 1726, Lincoln

3 Summary in Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 159. Compare Penelope J Corfield, *The Georgians* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2022), 73-6.

4 Mary Bosanquet Fletcher continued to head the household at Madeley after John Fletcher's death in 1785.

5 Michael Anderson, 'The Social Implications of Demographic Change', in F M L Thompson (ed), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, ii (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 29.

College, where Wesley was one of a small group of single, celibate, resident male Fellows.⁶ For much of his adult life, before and after his marriage, Wesley sustained close relationships with significant women; his marriage, on the other hand, declined into *de facto* separation long before Mary's death in 1781. Meanwhile Charles Wesley found a successful and happy partnership with Sarah Gwynne: they married in 1749, whereupon Charles ceased the life of an itinerant preacher and settled first in Bristol and then in London.

- 3.6 The structure of the Wesleys' Methodism offered groups and activities for all ages and stages of life. In the early Band Societies, men and women, married and single people, met separately.⁷ Society meetings were mixed, but Wesley strongly advocated segregated seating.⁸ The exemplary lives depicted in the *Arminian Magazine* included the single,⁹ the married,¹⁰ the widowed, the old and the young. The Wesleys did not promote a constraining template of social organisation, but rather an aspiration of holiness for all.
- 3.7 The years of British Methodism's greatest numerical expansion – and division into half-a-dozen competing denominations – between 1790 and 1860 coincided with a new cult of domesticity, characterised by the idealisation of motherhood.¹¹ Social historians have used Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* (1854) to express and debate this image, which meshed with an emphasis on gentility or respectability in social relationships. Middle-class norms of 'family' affected working-class households as well, through example, education, and legislation. It is important to note, however, that lifestyles and household patterns remained diverse. Live-in apprenticeships declined through the nineteenth century, and census records show fewer 'farm servants' living with their employers. Growing numbers of single young people migrated to the cities to work in shops and offices, sometimes with supervised communal accommodation provided.¹² Conversely, many lower middle-class households could afford to employ one live-in domestic servant, almost invariably a young, single woman.

6 The college statutes, in common with other Oxbridge colleges, required Fellows to be unmarried; Wesley had to relinquish his Fellowship on his marriage.

7 John Lawson, 'The People called Methodists: Our Discipline', in Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp (eds), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, i (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 191.

8 Wesley to John Valton, 9 April 1781, in John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of John Wesley*, (London: Epworth Press, 1931), vii, 57.

9 For example, John Moon, 'An Account of the Death of Jane Nancarrow', *Arminian Magazine* xiii, April and May 1790, 185-93 and 240-6.

10 D Jackson, 'An Account of Mrs Elizabeth Mather', *Arminian Magazine* xiii, December 1790, 646-50.

11 Leonore Davidoff, 'The family in Britain', in Thompson, *Cambridge Social History of Britain*, ii, 84.

12 For example, the Oxford drapers Charles Badcock and Co provided onsite accommodation for single shop assistants.

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- 3.8 Methodism shared in the Victorian idealisation of 'home'.¹³ Like other Christians, however, Methodists were concerned for the welfare of single young people, supporting and emulating the work of the YMCA and YWCA in providing safe places for social and educational activities. The Wesley Guild, launched in 1896, was intended to reach younger, single people; other branches of Methodism used the inter-denominational Christian Endeavour movement for the same purpose.¹⁴ These concerns and structures continued into the twentieth century. Gender-specific groups like Sisterhoods and Brotherhoods offered opportunities for single and married people to meet and socialise, while the burgeoning Sunday School movement relied heavily on women – many young and single – as teachers.¹⁵ An increase in the number of candidates for the ministry enabled the different Connexions to insist on a rule of singleness for initial training and probation, but the financial implications of inviting a married minister with a family inclined some circuits to prefer a mixed staff team, including a single minister, often living in lodgings.¹⁶ The deaconess movement modelled and celebrated the ministry of single women, weaving this work into the heroic narrative of Methodist urban mission.¹⁷
- 3.9 Twentieth-century social developments defy easy summary, but it may be observed that, while households in fact remained diverse – the family allowance campaigner Eleanor Rathbone pointed out that a quarter of households were people living alone and another quarter married couples with adult children – public discourse and public policy tended to focus on the nuclear family: for example, means tested benefits did not take account of wider kin ties in assessing need.¹⁸ Churches may have echoed or reinforced this by developing an emphasis on 'family church' and 'family services' in the decades after 1945 and with the shift from afternoon Sunday Schools to Sunday morning Junior

13 For the use of domestic and family tropes in evangelism, see John Kent, *Holding the Fort. Studies in Victorian Revivalism* (London: Epworth Press, 1978), 224-9.

14 The full title of Christian Endeavour was 'The Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour'.

15 See, for example, Charles Cashdollar, *A Spiritual Home. Life in British and American Reformed Congregations, 1830-1915* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State UP, 2000), 129.

16 In this period there was a standard minimum stipend for all ministers, with additional allowances for spouse and each child.

17 The standard history of the Wesley Deaconess Order is E Dorothy Graham, *Saved to Serve. The Story of the Wesley Deaconess Order, 1890-1978* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2002). See also Ellen Ross, 'St Francis in Soho: Emmeline Pethick, Mary Neal, the West London Wesleyan Mission, and the Allure of "Simple Living" in the 1890s', *Church History* 83.4 (December 2014), 843-83.

18 Davidoff, 'The family in Britain', 126-7. For Rathbone and the 1945 Family Allowances Act, see Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2004), 362-8.

Church from the 1960s.¹⁹ At a time of steep numerical decline in membership and congregations, it is, sadly, far too common to hear calls for 'young families' to rescue the church.

- 3.10 At the risk of simplifying a complicated picture, an overview of the history of singleness in British society and in Methodism since the time of the Wesleys might be that the experience and reality of relationships has been much more diverse and more nuanced than has often been assumed by policymakers and commentators in State and Church. Single people, whether single by choice or circumstance, for one or more stages of life, or lifelong, have been integral to the total community of the Church, even when this has not been fully recognised.

4. Recommendations and Practical Guidance

- 4.1 The Committee invites the Conference to explore the synergy between welcoming, affirming, and celebrating the presence and contribution of single people in the church's life and the theological foundations and emphases of the Strategy for Justice, Dignity, and Solidarity, adopted by the Conference in 2021. The Committee believes that the experience of single people offers a test case for the commitment of the JDS strategy to implement 'transformational change' on the basis that 'all people' are treated 'justly and with dignity across the breadth of the Methodist Church.'²⁰
- 4.2 The Committee believes that any revisions to the *Revised Common Lectionary* or to the *Methodist Worship Book* should pay careful attention to the affirmation and celebration of singleness in the selection of texts and the language of liturgy.
- 4.3 The Committee suggests that Local Churches might:
- a) Reflect on who is single within congregations:
 - Think about different forms of singleness and differing needs (never married, divorced, widowed, separated, those for whom singleness is vocational etc).
 - Each person will have their own needs and experience of singleness. As always, we need to be looking at the whole person, loved and valued children of God.

19 See, for instance, Ian Jones, *The Local Church and Generational Change in Birmingham, 1945-2000* (Woodbridge: Boydell, for the Royal Historical Society, 2012), 73-96. On Sunday Schools, see Philip B Cliff, *The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement in England, 1780-1980* (Redhill: NCEC, 1986).

20 *Strategy for Justice, Dignity, and Solidarity*, Conference Agenda 2021, 753-4.

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- Always seek to avoid unhelpful assumptions about the circumstances and experiences of others.
- b) Reflect on inclusion:
 - How are those who are single welcomed into your congregation?
 - Are single people included in the social life of the Church?
 - What does it mean to move beyond welcoming single people to their full belonging and participation?
- c) Reflect on language:
 - What messages are we giving out in our publications, through our social and other media, through posters on our walls, our newsletters, and other communications?
 - How is the word 'family' used within the church?
 - What messages about relationships are preached upon?
 - Are there sometimes unhelpful assumptions made of a 'normative' position in our language? How might these be countered?
- d) Reflect on leadership:
 - How is the demographic of your congregation reflected in your leadership?
 - How might everyone be encouraged to identify their gifts and serve God in the church?
- e) Be attentive to events that may be more difficult for those who are single:
 - Mothering Sunday;
 - Father's Day;
 - 'Family services';
 - Parenting or Marriage courses.

***RESOLUTIONS

17/1. The Conference receives the Report.

17/2. The Conference commends the Report for study and comment and invites responses to be sent to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee by 1 September 2025.