

Marriage and Relationships Task Group

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Status of Paper	Interim Report
Action Required	Discussion
Draft Resolutions	21/1. The Council receives the report.
Alternative Options to Consider, if Any	N/a

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	To update the Council regarding the work of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group, and guide the task group if required.
Main Points	<p>The work of the Task Group in relation to resolutions 40/3 and 40/4 of the 2014 Conference is progressing, This report outlines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The production and publication of a definition of what is and is not considered to be homophobia, together with guidance; • Resources identified, publicised, developed and published by the Task Group to support reflection and discussion across the Connexion about marriage and relationships, including where training and development opportunities have been provided; • The conclusion of ecumenical discussions about the use of shared premises if a denomination opted into the marriage of same sex couples; • the development of a learning resource to enable local churches to welcome same sex couples and their families; • consultation with the Faith and Order Committee concerning the 1992 Statement on Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage; • The value and importance of Districts' involvement in managing the feedback to the Task Group from the local discussions on marriage and relationships.
Background Context and Relevant Documents	2014 Conference Resolutions, which are reproduced at Appendix 1.
Consultations	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee Faith and Order Committee

Summary of Impact

Faith and Order	Faith and Order Committee will need to discuss the 1992 Statement on Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage
Legal including impact on other jurisdictions	To explore the implications of Same sex marriage legislation for the Church.
Wider Connexional	Discussions to continue in Districts and Circuits; to be managed by districts; with feedback by 23 February 2016.

Marriage and Relationships Task Group

1. Background

- 1.1 This report updates on the progress to date on implementing decisions of the 2014 Conference in relation to Marriage and Relationships and guidance on homophobia; specifically resolutions 40/3 and 40/4 of the report to the 2014 Conference from the Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships. See appendix 1 for the text of the resolutions.

2. Summary of progress

2.1 **Homophobia Definition and Guidance**

This resource has been produced by the Equality Diversity and Inclusion Committee, in consultation with the Marriage and Relationships (M&R) Task Group, and will be published in January. It provides a definition of what it is and what is not considered to be homophobia, together with guidance and short case studies. The definition and guidance is designed to promote respectful discussion.

2.2 **Facilitating and resourcing discussion across the Connexion**

- 2.2.1 The Chair of the Task Group spoke about the Task Group's work at the Connexional Leaders' Forum in January 2015 and agreed with District Chairs the timetable and arrangements for managing the conversations. A guidance note was sent to all District Chairs on 23 March, setting out the timetable and arrangements for discussions and feedback, and a list of resources available on the Methodist Church website. The guidance note was reissued in August and October.

- 2.2.2 Resources made available via the Methodist Church website in March 2015 included:

- a) Living with Contradictory Convictions, Conference report and Study Guide, 2006
- 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, Conference report, 1998
- c) A Methodist Statement on a Christian understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage, Conference report, 1992
- d) resources produced by the Methodist Church of Southern Africa for its discussions on Christians and Same Sex Relationships in 2003
- e) resources to support marriage and relationships discussions produced by ecumenical partners

- 2.2.3 Further resources were researched, developed and/or produced by the Task Group and published between June and October 2015, including:

- a) Worship resources to support discussions, based on the Living with Contradictory Convictions Conference report and Study Guide; developed in partnership with 'ROOTS for Churches'
- b) A model statement to support conversations where there are differing convictions
- c) "The Solemnisation of Christian Marriage in Methodism", an extract from 'Born in Song: Methodist Worship in Britain', by the Revd Dr David M Chapman
- d) Timeline on the History of Marriage in Methodism
- e) Vodcasts: the Revd Samuel McBratney and the Revd Paul Smith talk about Marriage and Relationships from different perspectives.

- 2.2.4 Workshop discussions were held at the 2015 Conference. Presentations from the workshops were published on the Methodist Church website.
- 2.2.5 Facilitation Training, October 2015. All Districts were invited to identify people who would enable and facilitate discussions across their District. A facilitation training weekend was held in October, with representatives from all but two Districts in attendance. Those attending the event were provided with a toolkit of additional resources to help support local conversations.

2.3 Shared premises and the ecumenical implications of 'opting in' to the provision for the marriage of same sex couples

As reported previously, the legislation requires that all denominations sharing church premises would need to 'opt in' before any shared premises can be used for same sex marriage, regardless of the ownership of the premises. Discussions with ecumenical partners have confirmed that denominations with which local Methodist churches share buildings are fully accepting of the need for the Methodist Conference to consider this matter before making any decisions about opting in or not and no urgent decision is required.

3. Current work programme and next steps

Work is progressing on all the workstreams as identified at appendix 1 to this report. There are three areas of work that the Task Group wishes to bring to the attention of the Methodist Council:

- 3.1 Currently under development is a learning resource and guidance to encourage Local Churches to welcome same sex couples and their families and to enable their participation in the life and worship of the Church (cf Resolution 40/4(iv) 2014). This is an additional module of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit, which will be available as a resource from March 2016.
- 3.2 In parallel with the discussions across the Connexion, the Task Group is reflecting on missional challenges and opportunities of either revisiting or not revisiting the Methodist definition of marriage, matters of divergence between the tradition and experience of the Church, and arguments for and against the continued involvement of the Church in the solemnisation of marriage. The Task Group has asked the Faith and Order Committee to consider theological matters relating to the 1992 Conference Statement on Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage.
- 3.3 The 2014 Conference encouraged collective consideration of the issues, rather than individual feedback. This process is a conversation, and not a consultation. Therefore, as agreed at the Connexional Leaders' Forum in January 2015, the Task Group asked all Districts to provide feedback from the local discussions. Districts play a vital role in managing the feedback by providing a single point of feedback to the Task Group. It is important for district leadership teams to hear the breadth of conversation within the District. It is entirely up to each District how they manage the feedback process; some are using their District Policy Committees, others are using Superintendents' meetings, others are holding 'road-shows' and managing feedback via District Facilitators. A feedback template has been provided to all District Chairs, with a deadline for return of 23 February 2016. Along with input from the Faith and Order Committee, this feedback will inform the Task Group's own reflections and investigations, as it prepares to report to the Conference in 2016. The next meeting of the Council will also receive the report.

*****RESOLUTION**

21/1. The Council receives the report.

The Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnership resolutions were:

- 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 as 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 solemnization 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 the 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.