

A METHODIST STATEMENT ON

A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF FAMILY LIFE, THE SINGLE PERSON AND MARRIAGE

Adopted by the Methodist Conference
of 1992

This Statement is offered primarily to those who as single or married people are consciously seeking to live as Christians, and those with pastoral responsibility for them. But it is hoped that it will be of value also to those who do not interpret their lives in a religious way but who welcome resources which enable responsible choices to be made. The Statement recognises that there are many people whose experience of life is much more disjointed than that which is the main concern of what is described here.

Alongside this Statement the Methodist Conference has encouraged discussion of a range of pastoral issues connected with its subject matter, to supplement the Statement. (Introductions to such issues are available in a separate document from the Methodist Publishing House and will be updated from time to time.)

PART A: A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE FAMILY

Definitions

1 The word 'family' is used of a wide range of groupings of people, living in very different relationships and bound together in various ways. In our own society it is most often used of a couple and their children, if any – the so-called 'nuclear family'. These children may be theirs by birth, adoption, fostering or some other relationship of caring. They may also include the children of one partner by a previous marriage or partnership. A single parent with one or more children similarly constitutes a family.

2 The word 'family' may also be used of larger groups. These include:

- a) The 'extended family' of an older couple, their children and grandchildren, who may live in more than one household. There may also be a more extensive web of uncles, aunts and other relations.
- b) In some ethnic groups, the strength of common beliefs, customs and expectations produces whole communities which think of themselves as large families. These are rather similar to the tribal families, as we refer to them, of the Old Testament.
- c) Other communities with strong family characteristics are formed by groups of people who live under a single roof, share a rule of life and may pool some or all of their resources. They may be seeking to create richer forms of family life than that of many 'nuclear' families.

3 These various uses of the word 'family' show that kinship (by blood-relationship, adoption or marriage) is an important element. But in the identification of a group as a family, another significant factor is self-understanding – the way the individual members perceive themselves, their desire to find enrichment through relationships with others in the group and their recognition of the duties and obligations involved in membership of the group.

4 Thus the Christian tradition recognises three main types of family:

- a) the **kinship-related family** (blood-relationship, adoption or marriage);
- b) the **household-family** (of common obligations and privileges) (Cornelius' 'family' in Acts 10, for example, included slaves and probably widows and orphans living as one household with the kinship-related); here is perhaps the germ in the Christian story of those forms of family life so common today – in which step-children and step-parents and other children, young people and adults not formally related by either kinship or law, live together and become bonded through shared need and mutual caring;
- c) the **'family of faith'**, constituted by the call of God, comprising as 'sisters' and 'brothers' those who respond to that call. This is the worldwide *'household of faith'* (Galatians 6:10), the Church, which each individual Christian experiences locally.

5 The kinship-related family is a human reality. It is the first of God's creation ordinances (Genesis 1-2), which came into being that human life might continue in the physical sense and flourish in the social, personal and spiritual senses.

6 The kinship or 'household' relationship is the setting of the physical, mental and personal nourishment essential to growth. How that nourishment is made over to us – generously or meanly, tenderly or roughly, reliably or unpredictably – will influence us throughout our lives. Consciously or unconsciously, we relive and, to an extent, repeat these early experiences in all our subsequent relationships, including our own later family life. To be able to recognise and reflect on this is a significant contribution to all adult life relationships – a way of overcoming harmful effects of early life experiences.

7 The kinship-based family cannot provide us with all the relationships we need. Although it assists us vitally in becoming established as persons, it is unlikely to be sufficient for our mature development. While some find fulfilment in developing the relationships within the parental home, the majority of people subsequently establish another family (which may or may not be based on marriage) or live alone.

8 In the face of the criticism that is levelled nowadays at both the nuclear and the extended family as institutions, the Methodist Church nevertheless affirms that the family remains a permanent and necessary unit of social and personal life. It is the primary form within which God intends his children to share in common life and experience. As we have said (paragraph 5), it is an 'order of creation' –

instituted for the care and nurture of the young and mutual benefit of the different age groups.

9 In the Christian view, the 'family of faith' has a significance of a different order to that of other 'families'. Not only can it make up for their deficiencies, it is a 'gospel' community in which the renewing and healing power of redemption in Christ is declared and experienced. In the Gospels, Jesus clearly gives his family of faith priority over his kinship family (Matthew 12:47-50; Luke 14:26), although this did not mean that the important needs of his kinship family were neglected (witness the account in John 19:27 of his commissioning the Beloved Disciple to take Mary into his own extended family on the day of his crucifixion).

10 To summarise: Christianity regards the family as an essential feature of the created order. But in each generation it has to be completed in new, adult, relationships, and for all it can be transcended through membership of the family of faith. Thus, in probably most cases, Christian family relationships consist of father, mother and child or children, supported by the extended family and the family of faith. There are, however, increasing numbers of situations where, by choice or necessity, Christians are living in other familial forms – as described in paragraph 4(b) above. To all family life the Church should offer its pastoral support and care.

Parenthood

11 Recognising that Christianity has no exclusive definition of what constitutes a family (it is ready to recognise familial characteristics in many forms of human relationship), it has a particular concern about one aspect of family life: parenthood.

12 The imagery of parenthood runs strongly through Christian theology and liturgy. God is frequently referred to as 'Father'. But the Biblical imagery of God is not exclusively masculine. Feminine qualities also are attributed to the Creator (as, for example, in Isaiah 46:3 and 66:12f, Hosea 1:1-4 and Luke 13:34).

13 As Creator, God is the source and nourisher of creation and of all loving relationships. Women and men are made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). The maleness and femaleness in each of us derives from a life which is a living relationship in itself: a life in Trinitarian community. We are created out of relationship, for relationship. Longing for a quality of loving worthy of that origin, the partners in a family may draw on the resources of God. They are enabled to inspire, forgive, 'start again' – in a word, to 'develop' one another – in a way which is compared in the scriptures to the role Christ performs in relationship to the Church (Ephesians 5:25-33). As Christ inspires, forgives, begins again and again with his Body, the Church, so a husband and wife are to develop one another in the fellowship of their marriage.

14 The first obligation upon parents is to give their children love, care and security. Inevitably, and rightly, the children will be nurtured within the values and faith of the parents; however, as they grow into maturity and responsibility they must be free to choose their own values, life-style and religious commitment. There are no requirements parents can make of children in these matters, beyond

those imposed by the law of the land. God too grants His children this ultimate freedom – to love Him spontaneously, to ignore or reject Him or to seek other values and ‘goods’ (ie gods). The tensions and pains that this process involves are an inevitable part of parenthood, but they are also a means of personal growth for both parent and child.

15 Parenting, even ‘good enough’ (as against ‘perfect’) parenting is an exacting task. The intense feelings generated in family life are not all positive and can include anger amounting to hate and the desire to split apart. Family life calls for time, energy and emotional and spiritual resourcefulness – all aspects of what the Christian tradition means by love. It requires mutual forgiveness, resilience and honesty, a lifestyle that is consistent with the principles being professed and a willingness to respect the growing independence and uniqueness of the child. Such qualities do not come easily. They need to be consciously nurtured under the grace of God.

16 But parenting can also be a source of much joy and fulfilment and a means of personal growth for the parent. The joy of parenthood is referred to in many of the patriarchal stories and in passages such as Psalm 127:3-5 and John 16:21. Even the pain and heartache which many parents experience may stimulate growth. Often the most difficult aspect of parenthood is that of encouraging the child to grow up able to cope with life independently, make free decisions and enjoy a freely accepted personal faith. The child on becoming adult must be able to leave home, form adult relationships and become a parent too, developing a new sort of relationship with his or her parents. There are warnings within scripture to parents who allow their children too little freedom (eg Colossians 3:21, Ephesians 6:4) as well as exhortations to children (Mark 7:9-13, Exodus 10:12) to respect their parents. Jesus showed the need children feel to be independent (Luke 2:41-51).

17 The task of parenting begins with the childhoods of the parents themselves. Their own experiences when young will influence strongly the way they bring up their children. In a more immediate sense, the task begins with the establishing of the marriage and the home. It continues as the basic physical needs of the child for food, warmth, shelter and protection, together with the child’s needs for emotional security and acceptance and help in learning the skills necessary for adult life are all met.

18 Nurture includes enabling the growing person to discover what is acceptable behaviour and what is not, what is right and what is wrong. A vital part of parenting is teaching values and standards. It includes introducing children to the reality of God, the practice of prayer, the awareness of His presence and knowing and doing His will. Finally it includes the encouragement of personal commitment to God in Christ and membership of His Church, although the crucial challenge may come from outside the family. All this flows from the ‘solemn obligations (that) rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism’ (Methodist Service Book, 1975). Above all, parenting requires from parents the assurance that the child matters uniquely to them and that whatever happens the child(ren) will not fall out of the range of their love. Human parenting thus offers insights into the way God treats us, His children (eg Psalm 103:13, Luke 11:11-13).



19 At the heart of the family’s existence is the mystery of the powerful bond which holds most parents and children together. Motherhood and fatherhood involve intense feelings of caring, belonging and commitment (hence the wisdom of Solomon to recognise the power of this emotional bond in the incident recorded in I Kings 3:16-27). This mystery is deeper than the genetic connection between parents and children. It is God’s providential ordering of human existence. It is a bond which makes for continuity between one generation and another, the handing on of both personal characteristics and of values, of faith.

20 It is within the family especially that we learn to consider other people besides ourselves, to share with others, to forgive and to be forgiven, to give and to receive and to be reliable, and many other attitudes and practices which derive from and contribute to loving and caring. These need to be experienced by the growing child as aspects of a whole Christian life. They may be focused in simple family rituals: grace at meals, prayers together, celebrations on family occasions and the great Christian festivals, as well as in active participation in the Christian congregation. To establish these family routines and rituals is a challenge to the contemporary nuclear family. They may be easier to establish and maintain when older generations are involved as well.

21 Moreover the family is intended by God to be the setting within which we learn to care for those outside our own kith-and-kin. Hence the stress in scripture on practising hospitality. In the Old Testament this was fundamental to corporate life. It meant especial concern for the ‘stranger’. In the New Testament, hospitality is an essential aspect of Christian living (Luke 14:12-14; Romans 12:13; I Peter 4:9) and the life of the leaders of the churches (Titus 1:8). Within the life of the family and its practice of hospitality, God’s grace is experienced. There is mutual giving and receiving between the older and younger members of the family and between the family as host and the stranger welcomed in its midst.

The local household of faith

22 The Christian household can become a focus for Christian teaching and living, Christian worship and prayer. It can also be a place of mutual care and concern, compassion and helpfulness, giving and receiving, sharing and discipline, forgiving and being forgiven. It is a place for celebration and recollection. These same family virtues should also characterise the life of the local Christian congregation. Its fellowship brings together a wide variety of people of all ages and life situations to meet in worship and service as the local embodiment of the extended Church – extended through time and space.

23 The local church is referred to in the New Testament as the ‘household of God’ (Ephesians 2:19) or ‘household of faith’ (Galatians 6:10). For some single or lonely people it may well be the only place where they presently experience some of the good family life referred to in the previous paragraph. The local ‘household of faith’ too has its special rituals, its celebrations and feasts, its sharing of everyone’s gifts and resources. Its life points forward to the great celebration in God’s Kingdom when all God’s people will gather round the table and all will receive enough to meet every kind of need (Luke 14:15-23; Revelations 19:9).

The role of Government and Church in supporting the family

24 Since the family is the most formative influence upon children and one of the most significant social institutions, there is a major responsibility upon all organs of society, especially government, to ensure the stability and flourishing of family life. This places obligations upon society-organised-as-government to enable families to obtain the provisions necessary to life itself and to participate as citizens in society: food, clothing, housing, adequate education, health and family support services, as well as a just, reliable and accessible framework of law.

25 The Church is also required to support and develop family life, to nurture its young people into understanding the purposes of the family and to help them establish families of their own. It is a major obligation of the Church to offer caring, compassion, help and understanding to families experiencing distress or difficulty. All families have tensions and crises. By the content and style of its worship, preaching, teaching and prayer the Church must encourage the realisation that no family is perfect, but that with God's help difficulties can become creative as they are worked through and learned from. Indeed, to share the burdens as well as the joys of family is one of the privileges of Christian marriage.

26 For most Christians, their service of God and His Kingdom will be through fulfilling their daily obligations as partner, parent, neighbour and worker. For some, however, service to God may require a costlier response. The call of God may demand that we deny ourselves the consolations of the family '*for the sake of the Kingdom*' (see Luke 12:51-53). 'Vocation' can cut across all other considerations, demanding of some that they do not marry at all (see 1 Corinthians 7:25f, 32f). Service of God will demand of all of us that we treat everyone within reach with justice – either personally or through corporate or political action. And we must always be ready to acknowledge the kinship of others seeking to follow Christ's way (see Mark 3:31-35).

Adoption and fostering

27 Adoption is one of the responses of couples who find themselves unable to conceive. But it is important to recognise that some adoptions are by couples who already have children and who are offering their parenting ability in providing a home for a child who needs one.

28 The primary function of adoption or fostering is to meet the needs of the child or young person, not the needs of the couple. But the interests of the two parties are not to be separated in this way. In successful adoption the needs of both child and adults are met. The starting point may be circumstances in which a child's needs are best met by the provision of a new family. Adoption can provide hope, love and a future for both parents and child which had otherwise seemed most unlikely, particularly where the child has special needs or is emotionally damaged or where the parents were unable to have children themselves.

PART B: A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SINGLE PERSON

Opportunities and needs

29 Every person has infinite value before God. Each of us is 'single' in the sense that we are individually loved, redeemed and cared for by God. Equally we are responsible before God for the way that we shape our lives. Others may be consulted and their interests taken into account, but ultimately each one of us is responsible for our own decisions. Society, therefore, is composed of individuals some of whom remain in or return to a single state whilst others live as couples in a married or other long term commitment. Within both these groups there is a great variety of experience.

30 Within our society the term 'single' does not necessarily mean living alone. Some single people have responsibility for other people, such as parents, children, other relations or friends. Different circumstances may lead to an individual being single:

- some make a conscious decision to remain single.
- some choose to follow a career or way of life which they find they can pursue better as a single person.
- some people are single because they have not met anyone else with whom a mutually satisfying relationship could be made. Some of these will not have discarded the possibility of marriage or other long-term relationship.
- some people have returned to being single after experiencing a married or long term relationship which has ended in separation, divorce or death.
- some people are single because of mental/physical disability which may preclude them from enjoying the freedom to choose their status.
- for some the pressures and risks of being in a close relationship with one other person, or the cost of the reduction of independence, appear too great and so they choose to remain single.
- some remain single to fulfil their sense of responsibility towards their parents or siblings.

More than one set of circumstances may apply to individuals in their lifetime. Single people are to be found within a great variety of life-situations and therefore have many widely differing needs.

31 The Biblical definition of those we refer to as single is much narrower than that used today. The understanding of sexual intercourse as creating 'one flesh', even the casual intercourse of prostitution (as in 1 Corinthians 6:16), restricts the status of 'singleness' to those who have not engaged in sexual intercourse. The Greek word 'parthenon' (virgin) is used for both women and men whom we would call single, cf Revelations 14:4. Widows are placed in a different category eg Romans 7:8. The guidance given for the care of widows (cf 1 Timothy 5) reflects a first century society in which the extended family provided the necessary support for those who were unmarried. Many of the needs of single people and the pressures under which they live in the twentieth century arise out of very different

social structures and different understandings of the significance of sexual intercourse than those of the first century AD.

32 Within the context of the Scriptures, an example of a single person is provided by Jesus himself. The intimacy of his relationship with God and the self-awareness that this gave him, released Jesus to relate freely to all. He was free to receive the anointing and recognition of Mary (John 12:3); to weep with Mary and Martha in the death of their brother (John 11:17f); to express openly his love for the Beloved Disciple (John 13:23). Also Paul, in his letters, emphasised the inter-relatedness of individuals (including single people) in the church. All were "*members of one body*" (1 Corinthians 12:12f). He admitted his own need for and appreciation of intimate fellowship with those such as Timothy who shared his ministry.

33 A number of life situations highlight the special needs of the single person. Today's society discriminates in many ways against the single person. Discrimination can be especially acute in the areas of housing and statutory benefits. In times of illness (physical or mental), traumas (accident, burglary) or sudden loss (bereavement, redundancy) being single can present profound problems. Responsibility for self-care can bring an acute sense of apprehension and isolation. Single people may also have difficulty in finding a social life in which they feel comfortable and accepted. Older single men, and women and men who have lost their partner, often find this especially difficult.

34 Whether or not they are in situations of particular need or crisis, single people living alone carry sole responsibility for meeting all their daily needs (eg housework, finance, property upkeep). There is a requirement of competence in every area of life. Difficulties arise easily in respect of finance and the maintenance of a home. Many single parents find themselves bearing these responsibilities but also experiencing great difficulty in building other necessary adult relationships because of having to cope single-handed with their child or children.

Support

- 35 The support and help these situations call for may include:
- 1) practical assistance eg nursing, clearing up after burglary, reporting illness to employers;
 - 2) specific advice or counselling eg support when deciding what step to take; help in representing problems to others;
 - 3) general support eg concern and follow up to mitigate depression.

These examples raise the questions of the extent to which the church is aware of solitary individuals who may be in crisis, of the need for communication with them and of the availability of the means of providing appropriate care.

36 False or unjustified expectations of and attitudes towards single people are both obvious and hidden in the life of the church. These occur at individual and organizational levels.



The freedom and availability of some single people creates the expectation that all single people have considerably more free-time than those who are married and should therefore make themselves available to meet the needs of others. Within the community and the church they are more likely to be pressurised to take on tasks. The joy of working within the church may be replaced by resentment and further isolation. Often the single person needs help to say "no". It should also be recognised that being busy can be a cloak for loneliness.

37 Too often Church activities, including worship, serve only to confirm the isolation of single people and their sense of being different. This occurs when there is an over-emphasis on the nuclear family and the needs of the individuals within it. For example too often younger women's groups serve only those who are married and there is little provision for (or conversation which includes) the single working woman. Expecting or encouraging people to form pairs can cause pain and induce a sense of failure for the single person. Singleness is a completely valid lifestyle, yet it is often portrayed within the Church as failure or as second best.

38 Attitudes within society generally and also within the church, towards those who have been divorced or widowed differ from attitudes towards those who have never married. Depending on the circumstances of their loss, the remaining partner can experience a wide range of reactions varying from being rejected or considered a failure, to sympathy or full acceptance. Those who return to singleness may be seen as a threat to couples or a cause of envy. Their bereavement and subsequent sense of rejection and awkwardness is a challenge for pastoral care. Widowed and divorced people frequently have to rebuild and/or make new relationships including those within the church circle, a difficult process while coping with the effects of bereavement.

39 Jesus described the fellowship of the people of God as the provision of a new family context for the individual: Matthew 19:27-30, Mark 3:35, John 19:25-27. Paul taught that those who believed in Christ were adopted as the children of God (Ephesians 1:5) experiencing the fatherhood of God and the sister/brotherhood of believers. The Christian community needs to discover its 'family' nature so that all the relationship needs of its members can be met. This means affirming everyone, in whatever status they find themselves, within the life of the church family. There is need for knowledge and understanding of single people by those who are married and vice versa, leading to greater mutual support.

Growth

40 Everyone has need to give and receive affection. The ability to seek friendship and be open to receive it rests on an awareness of one's self worth before God and in society. Opportunity for growth in such awareness of worth should be available to everyone. Single people have distinctive opportunities for growth and maturity. At the same time their presence challenges the church to offer appropriate support and pastoral care so that they might be enabled and encouraged to:

- create for themselves a balance in the use of time for both activity and reflection;

- allow time and energy to explore their relationship with God; and,
- develop their potential and gifts in all spheres of life.

41 Intimacy is a vital part of personal development. Sadly our society tends to equate intimacy with sexual intercourse. Relationships involving mutual acceptance and understanding and the willingness to be open and vulnerable to one another are intimate relationships – whether or not physical intercourse takes place. Intimacy is the sharing of personal worlds: emotional, mental, spiritual, social and aesthetic, as well as the appropriate physical expression of mutual affection.

42 The Church continues to maintain that sexual intercourse should be confined to the marriage relationship, although it is aware that within our society sexual intercourse is now common outside marriage. The notion that single people or indeed, others, may rightly express their physical sexuality through casual intercourse is incompatible with the conviction that sexual intercourse creates a unique 'one flesh' bond, a Scriptural teaching strongly supported by modern psychological research. Nor may intercourse be considered right for a single woman seeking to become a one-parent family. Ideally children need both male and female influence and care.

43 However, coping with physical sexuality and meeting the need for tenderness and belonging may present the single Christian with continuing problems which require awareness, sensitivity and resourcefulness on the part of those with whom they are shared and discussed. In such situations understanding, a sense of proportion and awareness of the modern sexual climate are needed, as well as the affirmation of Christian values.

44 In each person there are elements of female-ness and male-ness of which physical characteristics are but one part. Growth takes place partly as our awareness of our sexuality deepens. This is not easy in a society in which previous stereotypes are being broken down. For the sake of good health (emotional, mental and physical) it is important for the individual to own and be affirmed in their own gender.

45 Single people are often perceived differently in their place of work. There they are valued for their abilities and the contribution they can make and have the possibility for significant inter-personal relationships. However, excessive dependence upon work for personal satisfaction can impair the quality of relationships outside work. Alternatively, unemployment, or absence of rewarding work, can remove stimulus and creativity leading to a deep sense of isolation in times of redundancy and retirement.

46 Family situations can vary leading to new responsibilities and loyalties in adulthood for single people. A single person may accept the responsibility for dependent parent(s) or siblings; or they may have no immediate family. The single person may find himself or herself in the role of parent and/or partner in an unmarried relationship. It should not be assumed that the single child rather than his or her married siblings should undertake responsibility of caring for widowed or sick parents.



47 Individuals can be, and obviously are, completely fulfilled as single people. Marriage is not the best way for everyone. The presence of a very large number of single people within the pastoral responsibility of the church challenges each congregation to undertake a humane and spiritual dialogue through which the intrinsic worth and characteristics of every individual may be understood and celebrated. In doing this the church lives by and promotes that love-without-condition with which Christ embraces the whole world. The single person, along with everyone else, has the glorious liberty to claim and extend that embrace.

PART C: A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF MARRIAGE

Definition

48 'According to the laws of this country, marriage is the life-long union of one man with one woman.' These words, to be found on wall plaques in many marriage Register Offices, define the two essential features of marriage. Marriage is intended to be a permanent relationship (the life-long 'union') between a man and a woman, and a social institution (based on a contract regulated by 'the laws of this country').

49 The institutional aspect of marriage is marked by a public ceremony as well as described in a contract. Taken together, the ceremony and the contract create the status to which the parties are entitled in their own families and in society at large. In many cases, representatives at least of the two families and two sets of friends will be present at the initiating ceremony of marriage – adding further public significance to the event.

50 What as a status is formal, may or may not be based on a relationship as potentially demanding and rewarding as is implied by the Biblical phrase: 'the two shall become one flesh'.

Civil marriage

51 Provided it is contracted between two adults legally free to marry each other, expressing their free consent and making life-long vows 'according to the laws' a marriage taking place in a non-religious setting such as a Register Office, is in all respects a valid and binding marriage.

52 Marriage is one of the basic human institutions – common in some form to almost all societies regardless of religion or the absence of religion. It is then lived out in a variety of ways, according to one or more of a number of personal and public value systems. Its public significance is such that we look to Government acting on behalf of society to formulate the legal obligations of those who marry. When the Church celebrates a marriage within a context of worship, it incorporates what society requires.

53 One consequence of this is that the form of Service offered to couples who have been married in a Register Office, who wish later to have a service of blessing in Church, should take the form of the renewal or confirmation of a marriage already in being. The service should not repeat the legally constitutive parts of the civil ceremony, but set the existing contract in the context of the Christian understandings, expectations and promises about marriage. The Service should culminate in the offer of what is most obviously missing from the civil ceremony: the blessing of this already existing marriage in the name of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Christian marriage – marriage undertaken by Christians

54 The questions for those who wish to be 'married in Church' and for those already married who wish to have their marriages 'blessed' by the Church are: what light is thrown by the Christian faith on the meaning of marriage and how we might live together? What resources are available from the Christian faith to help

us live together creatively and work together for the development and sustaining of our marriage?

55 The Christian marriage service, conducted in a Christian setting, enables the couple to add to the public and social aspects of their coming together personal signs of their religious convictions about what they are doing together: making a marriage.

56 The marriage service enables the partners to express their love for one another 'in Christ'. It sets their commitment in the context of the body of Christ – the church. The service proclaims the covenant love of God to be the basis of their relationship. The ceremony itself, conducted in solemn form, in a dedicated place, adds its own weight to their mutual commitment and it sets before all present the Christian teaching about marriage and the offer of God's grace.

Equality in Christ

57 In the societies which formed the cultural background to the Scriptures, men were accorded a superior status to women, especially within marriage. Jesus by his association with and treatment of women and his involvement of them in the initial proclamation of the Gospel (John 20:18) challenged this. Paul also affirmed equality of status before God (Galatians 3:28) and the need for equality in marriage (I Corinthians 7:3). Sadly the so-called 'house-tables' or 'house rules' of Ephesians 5:22ff and Colossians 3:18ff have been employed over the centuries to reverse this trend towards equality. Through the misuse of the terms 'headship' and 'submission' inequality has been promoted. Ephesians 5 read as a whole clearly reveals that the pattern for the exercise of 'headship' is the servanthood of Christ revealed in his sacrificial, self-denying love. 'Submission' is required on the part of all Christians towards one another (Ephesians 5:21) and is not meant to imply 'obedience to another' but rather a voluntary giving of oneself to serve the good of another. In that sense, submission is the equal obligation of both partners towards one another in a marriage.

58 Though men and women are recognised as physically and psychologically different, before God and within marriage neither sex is superior. Marriage is a relationship in which each has the opportunity, by mutual consent, to discover themselves and the other, and to find and face their strengths and weaknesses within the security of mutual commitment.**

**Christian monogamy

Christian teaching affirms the equal value of each person, whatever their race, class or sex. This is the fundamental reason for monogamy being the norm for Christian marriage. It is not right to make a marriage covenant with more than one person at the same time.

In monogamy there is at least potential for each sex, and each partner, to be of equal significance. Polygamy, in at least some societies, results in the exploitation of one sex by the other. On the other hand, to require instant monogamy of polygamous converts to Christianity could be to impose divorce on all but one of the partners and would discriminate against women. So what is to be maintained rigorously once it is achieved, must be approached with understanding of the situation of those already living polygamously.

Only if polygamy is being steadily phased out may polygamy be tolerated from a Christian point of view. This could have been the situation in the churches to which the letters to Timothy and Titus were written, which apparently imply that some local Christians had more than one wife (I Timothy 3:2 and 12, and Titus 1:6).

59 The essential equality of the marriage relationship should be reflected in the way the couple share emotional needs and strengths, financial and other resources – including their working together on the task of making a marriage and a home, in the strength of a life of prayer, bible-reading and worship together.

Married life: human sexuality

60 The Biblical reference to husband and wife becoming 'one flesh' is partly a reference to the most intimate aspects of marriage: physical attraction and sexual intercourse. Both are described positively in the Bible. The ecstasy of each partner in the other is a central theme of the Song of Solomon. Throughout the scriptures, bride and groom are referred to beyond all others as examples of joy. Passages such as Isaiah 61:10 and 62:5 describe the anticipation and joyful celebration of weddings as similar to the response evoked by the prospect of the coming of the Kingdom of God itself (cf Matthew 22:2; Revelation 19:7 and the story of the Wedding at Cana in John 2:1-11).

61 The book of Genesis includes ideas and stories of male dominance and interpretations of the pains accompanying child-birth which need qualification in the light of the teaching and ministry of Christ. On the other hand, the blessing of the first parents in Genesis 1:28 and the command to them to '*be fruitful and multiply*' is the culmination of a passage in which the whole of the created order, including the relationship between the first husband and wife, is seen to be 'good' – a pleasure to look upon, which gave God himself delight.

62 Despite the fact that over long periods of time these affirming and positive attitudes were obscured within the Christian tradition, some even regarding sexual intercourse as a sign of inherent depravity and celibacy as a superior calling to marriage, the Methodist Church affirms this positive view of human relationships and sexuality and expresses it clearly within its marriage service.

63 However, things good in themselves can be abused. Sin finds expression in human sexuality as through any other human attribute. When expressed regardless of the values which should guard and guide it, sexual activity can be an expression of selfishness rather than commitment. It was awareness of both the power of sexuality in itself and its potential for disaster that led the church to view marriage as partly a 'remedy for sin' – a permitted setting for the sexual activity which could otherwise be exploitative of the other partner and destructive of oneself.

64 Christian experience confirms the basic conviction of the Biblical witness: that marriage as both an institution and a relationship is 'good' and carries its own special blessing from God.

The spiritual understanding of marriage

65 The Christian view of marriage lays much emphasis on its spiritual significance. Marriage is to be understood as '*the life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman*' (1936 Methodist Statement on Marriage and the Family).

66 To emphasise the spiritual significance of marriage is to give a value to marriage which other views may not. For example, such views may not exclude

sexual intimacy outside the marriage. They may also allow marriage to be brought to an end for less exceptional reasons than in the Christian tradition.

67 By ascribing spiritual significance to marriage, the Christian implies an intensity within this 'life together' which derives from and is in some respects similar to the life of God himself. All marriages are both dependent on and inspired by the creative and nourishing, giving and receiving, suffering and healing love which is God's nature.

Covenant love

68 Thus Christian reflection on marriage is grounded in our understanding of God and particularly in the conviction that as God covenants himself to humankind, so husband and wife are 'covenanted' to one another – committed to one another in a free, full and permanent relationship: '*a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife*' (Genesis 2:24). The covenants of the Old and New Testaments and marriage are regarded as exclusive relationships (Exodus 20:3; Matthew 5:28).

69 The characteristics of covenant love are illustrated by the dealings of God with his people in the Old Testament and in the life of Christ. They are enumerated as the fruit of the Spirit in the letter to the Churches of Galatia (Galatians 5:22f).

The characteristics of Christian marriage

70 To live in the security of God's 'covenanted' love is to possess a trustworthy basis for living, a foundation for mutual confidence in which we may experience personal growth. Within marriage the same principle applies: personal development may take place within the fundamental security of mutual commitment in covenant love.

71 Christians understand the characteristics of good marriage to derive from that covenant love: the regular giving and receiving of forgiveness; exclusiveness (so that no other person has the same significance or holds the same place as the married partner); such physical expression of love as provides fulfilment and enjoyment to the two partners, (in I Corinthians 7:3-5 St Paul warns against abstinence from sexual intercourse!) open, free and frank communication; our wounds and disappointments should be shared as well as our more 'successful' experiences of life. Secretiveness can be destructive.

72 The covenant is made between God and the whole community, whether of Israel or of the Church, but its outworking is to be seen in the nature of the love shown between individual members of that community (Leviticus 19:18; John 15:12) and especially in the marriage relationship. The guidelines for marriage given in Ephesians 5:25f and I Timothy 3:2ff illustrate the influence of this thinking.

73 Within the security of such permanent, exclusive commitments, human sexuality is able to symbolize, strengthen, renew, unify and 'develop' the partnership – which becomes the natural setting for the creation of children.

The 'image of God'

74 The marriage relationship is also described in other than covenant terms within the scriptures. Man and woman together, as a whole, are described as being *'made in the image of God'*: *'So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them'* (Genesis 27f). Jesus is recorded in Mark 10:7 and 8 as quoting with strong approval the Genesis passage already cited above: *'a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife.'* (Genesis 2:24)

75 The relationship between husband and wife is also likened to that between Christ and his Church (Ephesians 5:21-33). Jesus refers to himself as Israel's *'bridegroom'* (Matthew 9:15, John 3:29). When God's purpose is fulfilled his people will appear as *'the bride of the Lamb'* (Revelation 21:9).

76 Thus some of the most positive and life-affirming imagery in the Bible is used to describe the marriage union. The nature of this union is itself used to illuminate the nature of our relationship with God. Marriage has the same qualities of intensity and commitment as has God's fellowship with his people.

77 The intensity and exclusivity of some of these images ('one flesh', 'covenant union') must not mislead us into thinking of marriage as a denial of difference or individuality. Marriage should be a mixture of dependence and independence, of being together and being apart.

78 This understanding of the nature of life-together in marriage is encouraged by what we know of God through revelation and experience. The life of the Trinity is dynamic, involving venture and return, separation and coming together, 'three Persons in One'. The gospel of John (see particularly chapter 14) may be read as a commentary on this dynamic as against static understanding of the life of God.

79 Christian lovers have often supposed that the intensity and commitment of what they feel for one another is both founded in and a reflection of the life of the Trinity. In the late 20th century this has become especially illuminating. As the quality of sexual and other forms of human relationship is increasingly threatened by commercial values and self interest, Christian loving must continue to derive its character from its origin in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the source of all sacrificial individuality-in-fellowship.

Marriage as sacramental

80 In the view of some Christian traditions, marriage is regarded formally as a 'sacrament' – as an ordinance of the Church, specifically identified and understood as signifying God's work and as conveying his grace.

81 Methodists and many other Christians restrict the term 'sacrament' to the two great acts clearly commanded by Christ in the gospels: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Yet in the sense described in the last section, in which marriage was seen as a reflection of the life of eternity, in which we may experience the presence of God in a daily dying and rising to self and to the partner, as is called for and experienced in marriage, marriage may indeed be thought of as sacramental.



Through the nature of the demands it lays upon the partners and its offer of fellowship and joy it is certainly the nearest many come to experiencing God's presence in the world.