*This is one of a number of Ancillary Papers relating to the report of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group that is being presented to the Methodist Conference in 2019. The report itself, entitled God in love unites us can be found and downloaded from* [*www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19*](http://www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19)

*The report does not depend on these papers. They have not been presented to the Conference or approved by any formal body in the Methodist Church. They have been written as background papers or to help the Task Group think through some particular issues as it sought to come to a mind and develop its views in writing its report. They are not necessarily the considered view of the whole of the Task Group, but are offered here in the hope that some may find them stimulating, challenging or illuminating.*

**ANCILLARY PAPER D**

**HOW THE WORK REQUESTED IN RECENT CONFERENCE REPORTS ON MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS IS TAKEN UP BY THE 2019 REPORT**

D1 The task for our group arose from resolutions of the 2016 Conference resulting from the report of the then Marriage and Relationships Task Group.[[1]](#footnote-1) That group’s work in turn had come from resolutions resulting from the 2014 report from the Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships. That working party had conducted a consultation throughout the Methodist Church in Britain on the question of how the Methodist Church should respond to changes in legislation allowing (in England, Wales and Scotland) the solemnisation of the marriage of same sex couples.

D2 The 2014 Conference had passed a resolution (40/2) to urge the Methodist people “to engage with each other honestly, prayerfully and graciously” about the issues raised in the 2014 report, and had appointed a Task Group on marriage and relationships to be responsible for the implementation of that work. Resolution 40/4 included the following directions for that task group’s work:

- 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 in England, Wales and Scotland.[[2]](#footnote-2)

* 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;[[3]](#footnote-3)
* work with the Faith and Order committee to develop resources to help people to explore the teaching and practice of the Church in relation to cohabitation;[[4]](#footnote-4)
* investigate what material is already available or could be produced “in order to encourage wider discussions about marriage and other relationships”;[[5]](#footnote-5)
* work with the EDI committee to produce clear guidance on homophobia (vii);[[6]](#footnote-6)
* 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.[[7]](#footnote-7)

D3 The 2014 report resolution 40/4 (b)(x) stated that “in the light of its explorations and experience of working on all these issues”, the Task Group was “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”.

D4 The 2016 Marriage and Relationships Task Group report noted (1.2.1) that in the 2014 consultation the conclusion had been reached that there was “no clear mind as to whether or not the Methodist Church should ‘opt-in’ to the solemnisation of the marriage of same sex couples”. The 2014 report had also noted that the Methodist people held contradictory convictions on these matters and, although strongly held, these contradictory convictions were often not subject to discussion in church life. It was also noted and reported in the 2016 report, “There was a pastoral imperative to encourage the Methodist people to reflect and discuss these matters, to learn from each other and discern how we can live with these contradictory convictions” (2016 1.2.2).

D5 Drawing on work already undertaken by the Methodist Church, the 2014-16 Task Group consulted with the Methodist people according to the resolutions in the 2014 report. The reflections of that Task Group on the missional challenges of these matters which were published in their report to the 2016 Conference were “informed by feedback from the workshops held at the 2015 Conference and the local conversations within Districts …. in 2015/16 *(sc. which were summarised in section 3.3 of the 2016 report)*” (3.1.1). That Task Group noted that the feedback fell into two categories which were a) The relationships between the Church and wider society and b) the pastoral situations requiring careful consideration. In the 2019 report to the Conference, the current Task Group has summarised these challenges in section 0.2.

D6 In their reflections on the ‘role of the tradition and experience of the Church where its values, teachings and practice in regards to marriage are not shared with surrounding society’, the 2016 report noted that the Faith and Order committee had felt this implied a rather static understanding of what tradition is. The suggestion was that “Some theological reflection on living with the dissonance between the teaching of the Church and what is happening in people’s lives may help unpack some of these issues”.[[8]](#footnote-8) The current Task Group has reflected upon the reality of the ways in which people who belong to the Methodist Church and those who do not belong, live their lives in relationships today; and it has encouraged the Methodist people to do the same.

D7 The 2016 Report “identified and provided resources about the historic role of the Methodist Church in the solemnisation of marriage”[[9]](#footnote-9), and the current Task Group has built upon these resources and added further reflections on the dynamic of change in the theology and practice of marriage in the Methodist Church (3.1.7 and3.1.8).

D8 The 2014-2016 Task Group considered “Arguments for and against the continued involvement of the Methodist Church in the solemnisation of marriage” (3.1.3). They concluded: “It is for the Church to consider to what extent discontinuation of the solemnisation of marriage would impact on the mission and pastoral ministry of the Church” along with the reminder that showing God’s love and presence in the world, must include valuing and recognising landmark points in people’s lives such as marriage.[[10]](#footnote-10) The current Task Group has reviewed this question in the light of points raised in the 2016 report and the conversations held in workshops at the 2018 Conference.[[11]](#footnote-11)

D9 The 2016 Report stated that the Task Group had given extensive consideration to the issue of cohabitation [2.2(h)] and had concluded that it could not be “adequately considered in isolation from the wider discussions on marriage and relationships”. The report went on to note that “the core guidance for consideration of matters relating to cohabitation remains the 1992 Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*.”[[12]](#footnote-12) It then stated that “whilst valuing much of the Statement, the Task Group considers that it should be updated, or, at the very least, that pastoral and policy guidance be created.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

D10 The 2016 Task Group raised the following questions with regard to cohabitation which they felt would benefit from further discussion and theological reflection:

a) What constitutes marriage?

b) When does marriage begin?

c) Is cohabitation a form of marriage?

d) Is there a need for an outward ceremony?

e) How can we affirm fidelity and monogamy in relationships that may not be legally or institutionally formed?

f) Why do some people choose to cohabit rather than marry?

g) Why do some people live together for a period and then choose to marry?

h) Why do some people seek civil partnership rather than marriage? This last point also acknowledges a trend in society whereby some opposite sex couples wish the law to be changed to allow the opportunity for civil partnership to be extended to them

D11 The 2019 Report has developed a fresh approach to looking at relationships in general and in the light of this has considered cohabitation in particular.[[14]](#footnote-14)

D12 In discussing what material is already available to encourage wider discussions about marriage and other relationships the 2016 report noted that “the 1992 Statement, subsequent reports and resolutions (as set out in 3.5.2…*sc. of the 2016 report*) should be commended for further discussion and supported through pastoral and policy guidance”.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Task Group noted that a significant proportion of marriages in the Methodist Church involve at least one person who has been divorced, along with a wide diversity of other backgrounds and that this diversity should be recognised in pastoral guidance.[[16]](#footnote-16) The 2016 report suggested that the Methodist Council consider whether specific Methodist resources could be helpful after any updating of the 1992 Statement. The 2019 report calls for the development of resources to support marriage and other relationships.[[17]](#footnote-17) This could take into consideration all of the backgrounds noted in the 2016 report.

D13 The 2016 report raised Transgender issues and noted the work being undertaken by the EDI Committee who advised “Provision is a must for transgender and intersex state persons; the physiological reality is that gender is significantly more complex than male and female”.[[18]](#footnote-18) The 2019 report has included a reflection on developments in understandings of sex and gender.[[19]](#footnote-19) And the application of its reflections on relationships in general to all people regardless of sexuality or gender. The 2019 Task Group are thankful for the ongoing work of the EDI committee to build our understanding of issues of gender and sexuality and note the recommendation that any work on transgender should only be undertaken on the principle of including transgender people in the considerations.[[20]](#footnote-20)

D14 The 2016 report notes that there have been “societal changes in relation to adoption, fostering, and surrogacy” and that the 1992 Statement needed additional attention with regard to these areas.[[21]](#footnote-21) The Faith and Order Committee noted that in specific areas such as the legal status of fostering and adoption the language of the 1992 Statement needed updating.[[22]](#footnote-22) While taking note that the 2018 Conference changed the current Task Group’s mandate from bringing an updated Statement to bringing a report with recommendations for changes in policy, the 2019 report seeks to address the concerns identified in 2016 by recommending that they be included in fresh work to produce resources to support parenting.[[23]](#footnote-23)

D15 The 2016 Task Group was asked to consider several other issues, namely: abusive relationships; the lower status of women and girls; pornography and the sexualisation of young people; and female genital mutilation (FGM).[[24]](#footnote-24) It concluded that these would benefit from being included in an updated formal Statement on Marriage and Relationships or in any pastoral and policy guidance for the 1992 Statement that might be produced. With regard to FGM, it provided a reference to the Home Office Select Committee Report on the topic. With regard to pornography, it noted that the Working Group on Pornography had felt that “… this was an extremely complex issue and could not be looked at in isolation but needed to be considered within the context of healthy sexual relationships, sex and relationships education and body confidence”; and had asked “Does the Church have a role in helping people to learn about healthy sexual relationships? If so, how effectively does it do this?”. In Section 2 of its 2019 Report, the current Task Group has offered reflections on what constitutes ‘good relationships’, including healthy sexual relationships. It has also welcomed the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Toolkit, which provides helpful material with regard to many of the issues identified in this paragraph, including gender equality. In recommending that further resources be produced to support marriage and relationships, it hopes that all those mentioned above will be drawn on and supplemented as necessary.

D16 The 2016 report summarised and provided details in an appendix of the conversations about marriage and relationships which had happened across the Connexion. The current Task Group has taken note of this information and the request for the Church to facilitate conversations about these matters (3.3.5).[[25]](#footnote-25) Likewise, the current Task Group has continued to pay attention to the situation and varying priorities of our ecumenical partners and world church partners as the 2016 report did in section 3.4.[[26]](#footnote-26)

D17 With regard to the 1992 Statement the 2016 Report noted that at the very least “further guidance” was needed to take account of the other reports which have been produced and resolutions passed by the Conference since 1992.[[27]](#footnote-27) The current Task Group has considered these further reports. The 1992 Statement had not anticipated “some of the social contexts, such as civil partnerships and the marriage of same sex couples”[[28]](#footnote-28). Nor had the Statement given a theological basis for the definition of marriage in SO 011A.[[29]](#footnote-29) These are all matters the current Task Group has reflected upon and commented upon in the 2019 report.

D18 With regard to what the 2016 report described as the “definition of marriage” the current Task Group has reflected upon the theology of marriage and suggests the church has one description of marriage without “reference to gender” which was one of the options mentioned by the 2016 report.[[30]](#footnote-30)

D19 The previous Task Group considered the phrase that ‘it is God’s intention that marriage is a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman’ and concluded that “People seeking marriage should do so with the intention of it being a life-long union, albeit with the recognition that previous marriages may have ended”.[[31]](#footnote-31) At the same time the 2016 report noted that there were situations where ending a marriage is necessary, and that “the opportunity for new beginnings is core to the Gospel”.[[32]](#footnote-32) The current Task Group has developed these reflections upon divorce and made a specific proposal with regard to resources the Methodist Church might offer to help what a marriage breaks down.[[33]](#footnote-33)

D20 The previous Task Group also considered whether more should be included in the definition of marriage in relation to the qualities of marriage including sexual consent, free will to marry, fidelity, mutual respect and a partnership of equals.[[34]](#footnote-34) The current Task Group has developed this in the consideration of the qualities of relationships, including marriage and in the language of the Standing Order which describes marriage.[[35]](#footnote-35) The previous Task Group held monogamy as crucial in a Christian understanding of marriage,[[36]](#footnote-36) and the current Task Group concurs.

D21 The 2016 Task Group report contained the additional reflection that the feedback from the Connexion had shown there was a “lack of understanding of how to use and reflect on Scripture, and the tools of scriptural interpretation” and at the same time “there is a wealth of knowledge, expertise and experience in the Connexion, which could and should be used more”.[[37]](#footnote-37) The current Task Group has an ongoing concern that this work on enabling the Methodist people to reflect on and interpret Scripture should be appropriately focused upon and resourced. We reflect upon the different attitudes to the authority of Scripture in section 4.3.14 of the 2019 report.

D22 In summary the recommendations of the 2016 report with regard to the 1992 Statement and the Definition of Marriage were that:

* the Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*, 1992, should be updated and that as part of that process, the definition of marriage should be revisited.;
* a new Task Group be appointed to update the Statement and to oversee the process of consulting with the Methodist people on revising the definition of marriage; the Task Group should include expert knowledge of matters of Faith and Order and marriage and relationships;
* the new Task Group should report to the 2018 Conference with a draft statement(s), in which they considered:

a) all relevant reports produced and resolutions passed by the Conference; and

b) whether the definition of marriage should be revised, in light of the views raised throughout the report.

D23 At the 2016 Conference the Marriage and Relationships Task Group report was received and the resolutions from the report were adopted in the following form (Daily Record 6/14/1 and 6/14/2):

*29/7 The Conference directed that a new Statement of the judgment of the Conference on marriage and relationships shall be prepared and that, as part of the process, the definition of marriage should be revisited.*

*29/8 The Conference appointed a new Task Group, which shall include people with expert knowledge of matters of Faith and Order and marriage and relationships, to update the Statement and to oversee the process of consulting with the Methodist people on the definition of marriage.*

*29/9. The Conference directed that the new Task Group shall report to the 2018 Conference with a draft text of a new statement which shall include:*

*a) consideration of all relevant Reports produced and Resolutions passed by the Conference… (sc. as set out in paragraph 3.5.1 of the 2016 report);*

*b) consideration of the definition of marriage, including the matters raised throughout section 3 of … (sc. the 2016) report.*

D24 In 2018, the Conference adopted Resolutions 27A/1 and 27A/2 (Daily Record 7/17/2), which charged the Task Group with bringing to the 2019 Conference a report with recommendations in place of a draft formal Statement. This process would allow for proper consultation, but also meet the sense of urgency being expressed by many in these matters.

The 2019 report *God in love unites us* is the work of the Task Group in response to the task given to it in 2016, as amended in 2018.

1. ie The predecessor to our group with the same title. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2014 Resolution 40/4 (b) (iii) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 2014 Resolution 40/4 (b) (iv). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 2014 Resolution 40/4 (b) (v). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 2014 Resolution 40/4 (b) (vi). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 2014 Resolution 40/4 (b) (vii) referring to Resolution 40/3 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 2014 Resolution 40/4 (b) (viii). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 2016 report 3.1.2 (b). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 2016 report 3.1.2 (c). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 2016 report 3.1.3 (c). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 2019 report 3.3.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 2016 report 3.2.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 2019 report 2.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 2016 report 3.2.2 (a) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 2016 report 3.2.2 (a) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 2019 report 3.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 2016 report 3.2.2 (b) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 2019 1.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 2016 3.2.2 (b) (iii). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 2016 report 3.3.2 (d) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 2016 report 3.5.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 2019 report 5.4.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 2016 report 3.3.2 (e) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 2016 report 3.3.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 2019 report 0.3.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. 2016 report 3.5.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 2016 report 3.5.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. 2016 report 3.5.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 2016 report 3.6.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. 2016 report 3.6.4 (a) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. 2016 report 3.6.4 (a) [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. 2019 3.2.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. 2016 report 3.6.4 (b) [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. 2019 3.1.6 & 5.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. 2016 report 3.6.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. 2016 report 4.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)