*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 E**

**PRAYERS, PUBLIC THANKSGIVINGS AND BLESSINGS**

1. The Methodist Church has for many years acknowledged, at least implicitly, a lack of symmetry in the making of marriages and other formal, personal relationships between what is religious or spiritual, and what is civic or legal. So far as marriage is concerned, it raises the question of what part does a marriage service in a church play in the making of a marriage. The Introduction in the current (1999) *Methodist Worship Book*’s services for “Marriage and the Blessing of a Marriage” states that:

*A marriage ceremony is a formal occasion when a solemn, legal contract is made between a man and a woman. In a Christian context, it is also an act of worship in which marriage is celebrated as a gift of God and the joy of the couple is shared and their commitment to each other is witnessed by family and friends.* **The Marriage Service*'s*** *themes of love, hope, faithfulness, sacrifice and trust are at the heart of the Christian gospel.* **The Blessing of a Marriage Previously Solemnized** *also gives expression to these themes. It is intended for those whose marriage was solemnized in a civil ceremony and who later desire the blessing of that marriage in an act of Christian worship.*

1. These services have until now only been for mixed-sex couples, but the underlying principles would apply, if the Conference decided to extend its understanding of marriage to include same-sex marriage. Where the ceremony in the Church will also simultaneously lead to the registration of the marriage as valid under the law of the land, the act of worship is seen as expressing general gospel themes and God’s blessing upon it. In a case where people have been previously married in a civil ceremony, the service in the Church is said to be an act of worship seeking for God’s blessing of the marriage that has already been contracted.
2. The advent of civil partnerships, currently for same-sex couples but potentially in the future for mixed-sex couples, raised the question of what, if any, might be appropriate responses in prayer and worship.[[1]](#footnote-1) In 2006 the Methodist Conference resolved that, “there is no reason *per se* within our discipline to prevent anyone within the Church, ordained or lay, from entering into, or remaining within a civil partnership. However, the 1993 *[Derby]* Resolutions *[on Human Sexuality]* do still apply”.[[2]](#footnote-2) The 2006 Conference Report from the working party on *The Pilgrimage of Faith* which contained that resolution[[3]](#footnote-3) also excluded the possibility of the Methodist Church giving an ‘official’ blessing to a same-sex relationship, and resolved that, “the [1993] Resolutions preclude the possibility of authorised liturgies being adopted for the blessing of same-sex relationships and that Methodist premises may not be used for such a purpose.”[[4]](#footnote-4)
3. At the same time, however, the 2006 Conference issued guidance about what would be good pastoral practice in responding to requests for prayers or for services of blessing for same-sex couples. The guidance was not directed towards Local Churches, but to the person receiving the request to lead the prayers or services. They were to be pastorally sensitive, welcoming and respectful, but were not required to act contrary to their conscience. Nor were they to say or do anything which misrepresented the Church’s beliefs or discipline, so whereas those approached could offer ‘informal, spontaneous prayer in response to a pastoral need’, they were not to use Methodist premises ‘for the blessing of same-sex relationships.’[[5]](#footnote-5)
4. In 2014, the Conference revised that guidance.[[6]](#footnote-6) It recognised that not just the person who might lead any prayers or other response, but also Local Churches have a role to play in responding well to requests for them. It acknowledged that Methodist premises could be used as the venue for any response that was consonant with the Methodist Church’s understanding and discipline. This latter point was only implicit in the guidance itself, but was made explicit in an editorial note to them in the *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, which stated that, “when requests for prayers or services are made by same sex couples, including those whose relationship has been recognised in a civil ceremony”, the range of potential responses “includes the consideration of the use of local Methodist premises in appropriate circumstances for public thanksgivings”. In 2018, the Conference adopted a Notice of Motion which effectively turned the content of that editorial note into an official part of the formal guidance.[[7]](#footnote-7)
5. The Conference has therefore made a distinction between prayers, public thanksgivings and services of blessing. But what is that distinction? In making the recommendation that excluded ‘official’ blessings of same-sex relationships, the report to the 2006 Conference on *The Pilgrimage of Faith* offered some important theological reflections on blessing and prayer.[[8]](#footnote-8) So far as prayer is concerned, it stated that spontaneous, ‘of the moment’ prayers (such as arise naturally in response to an immediate pastoral need) are different to those that are pre-arranged or formal; and that prayers that are offered in private carry a different connotation from those offered in public or, more particularly, in church.[[9]](#footnote-9)
6. Praying with people in this more informal way does not imply acceptance or approval of their behaviour or lifestyle. Prayer of this sort is not about seeking God’s endorsement for human actions or opinions. It is about being open to God. It is a way in which we increase our awareness of God’s presence and seek enlightenment concerning God’s will. We seek to be freed from the obstacles that hinder us from living in God’s way and to be liberated to live more nearly in the way of the Kingdom. As we draw closer to God, we may be encouraged, comforted, rebuked or challenged. Prayer is a channel for the release of the Holy Spirit into our lives, thus transforming people and situations in ways we may, even at best, only partially anticipate.
7. But when people are looking to open themselves to God in this way, they are also wanting to do it supported by others, and in a way that celebrates who they both are; their relationship; the partnership they are entering; and what God is doing for them in it all. That brings the prayer into a more ‘public’ sphere. Moreover, the basic way of being open to God in the sense of this and the previous paragraph, is through ‘thanksgiving’. Hence, since 2006 the concept of ‘public thanksgiving’ has entered the debate.[[10]](#footnote-10)
8. The spiritual dynamics involved in public thanksgiving, however, bring us close to the ones involved in ‘blessing’. The 2006 report stated that it is important to be clear what we are doing, or seeking to do, when we ‘bless’ anyone or anything. The word ‘bless’ is easily used, but what it denotes is easily misunderstood. In common speech, the word is often used to mean approval, encouragement or support (as in, for example, “They gave the plan their blessing.”). In a real sense, the Church is voicing its approval of what the couple are doing, and, in the name of God, voicing God’s as well.
9. To ‘bless’ a relationship is not simply to permit it or to approve of it. The Introduction to and text of the services for Marriage in the 1999 *Methodist Worship Book* speak of God having a positive intention in creating the possibility of marriage, and of God’s will for it. The legal proclamation that the couple are husband and wife is complemented and deepened by a spiritual or religious one: ‘God so join you together that none shall ever part you’.
10. That proclamation is a form of blessing. It may include voicing approval, but points to something deeper. In his Presidential address to the 2016 Conference, Roger Walton picked up a hint by Charles Elliot that when Jesus used the phrase “Blessed are those who….” in the proclamations of blessing that we know as the Beatitudes, it might best be interpreted as “You are in the best place when…”.[[11]](#footnote-11) We can perhaps go further, and say that Jesus redefined the meaning of blessing in another way as well. His emphasis in the Beatitudes is not so much on the idea that you are in the best place because, even if things are going badly for you now, you will get compensation and a reward later. Rather, he is saying that when you are doing things like being with the poor in spirit, or mourning with those who mourn, or hungering and thirsting to bring about justice and righteousness, even if it means being persecuted, it is then that God is most with you, and God’s love is overflowing in you and through you to others. That is what it means to be blessed.
11. ‘Bless’ is therefore a theological word. God is, according to the Bible, ‘the Blessed One’, and, as such, the source and giver of life, wholeness and true happiness. So God is the ultimate source of all blessing. Consequently, any statement of blessing that we make or act of blessing that we perform can only be a way of recognising or magnifying God’s blessing. Blessing is therefore a sacramental action, like Jesus’ blessing of the children in, eg, Mark 10:13-16. It is also the natural response of faith to God’s blessing, as in the last chapter of Luke’s Gospel: Jesus blessed the disciples (24:51), and they, in return, ‘blessed’ (*eulogesen*, as in v.51) God. Blessing is always to do with the overflowing life of God. In blessing, we seek to convey that blessing to others, or we ‘return’ the blessing, in the form of thanks and praise to God.[[12]](#footnote-12)
12. So when we say or perform a blessing, we are stating our belief that God is already present and has already blessed the people, relationships and situations involved. By stating it to them, we are creating the opportunity for them to recognise it more clearly for themselves, and inviting them to respond with gratitude and commitment to God and to each other to accept the obligations that the blessing brings with it. In this, they open themselves to the deepening, enriching, continuing and overflowing blessing of God: ‘God will give to the one who already has’ (Mark 4:25a).
13. How does this understanding of blessing work out, for example, in the ‘making’ of a marriage? In the religious aspect of a marriage, there are a number of participants. There are the couple, who make their commitments to each other, thanking God for the love they have already received from each other and the grace and blessing that they have already received from God through that. There is God, who showers blessing upon blessing on them. There is the Church, through its authorised representative and faithful members of the congregation, who discerns what God is doing and speaks and acts in God’s name to confirm it. So we might say that in a marriage service people thank God for the blessings of God’s grace and the love from each other that they have already received; commit themselves in faith to accept and return that love in every way they can through the changing circumstances of life; return the blessing to God in the form of thanks and praise; and receive their relationship again from God, recognised, transformed and overflowing with love.
14. On the other hand, as the 2006 report states, “where there is no openness to God’s will and God’s grace, it is difficult to see how a *blessing* can be offered. Another form of prayer will be more appropriate in such situations”.[[13]](#footnote-13) Some people in the Church regard a personal relationship, particularly a sexual relationship, outside marriage between two people, whether of the same sex or other sex, as sinful and find it impossible to pray or pronounce God’s blessing upon it. Others perceive the blessing of God to be already present if there is love and faithfulness in such relationships, and therefore feel able to pronounce and pray for blessing.
15. That said, since all holy ways of relating are equal in the eyes of God, we ought to respond to them graciously. In some cases, couples are open and receptive to the possibility of discerning God’s love present in what has brought them to form their partnership, and there can seem to be a real pastoral need to offer them something other in addition to the opportunity to marry in church. In these cases it could be argued that it is appropriate for the Church to offer thanks for and bless their partnerships. This would require developing and offering appropriate forms of prayer and orders of service. The analogy would be with what is already provided for the marriage of other-sex couples. We already have a service for other-sex couples who have entered a marriage in a civil ceremony (eg at a Registry Office). We call it a Service of, or for, “The Blessing of a Marriage Previously Solemnised”. Such a service does not effect or create a legal marriage. A similar service for civil partnerships would not effect or create a legal partnership. But it would open the occasion up to the grace of God through thanksgiving, and to the blessing of God as we have outlined that above.
1. The legislation for same-sex civil partnerships was introduced in 2004. In October 2018 the Prime Minister indicated that the government intended to introduce legislation to extend them to mixed-sex couples. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Resolution 40/7 of the 2006 Conference. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Agenda Item 40 of the 2006 Conference. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Resolution 40/8 of the 2006 Conference. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Resolution 40/10 of the 2006 Conference. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Resolution 40/5 of the 2014 Conference. The full text of the revised guidance can be found in the *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* Book VII Part 10.  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 2018 Conference Notice of Motion 203 [Daily Record 7/17/8 as clarified by 8/53/1-2]. The relevant part of the Notice of Motion for the concern of this paragraph reads “The Conference… reiterates the Guidance on Requests for Services in Book VII Part 10 of CPD and affirms that this allows for Local Churches to allow their premises to be used to conduct public thanksgivings for same-sex couples who have solemnised a civil marriage or partnership, presided over by an appropriate minister, probationer or member.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 2006 Conference Agenda item 40 *The Pilgrimage of Faith* paragraphs E6 – E12. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This and the following paragraph are edited versions of material drawn from paragraphs E8 -E9 of the 2006 report. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This paragraph has been created for this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Roger Walton Presidential Address <http://www.methodist.org.uk/news-and-events/news-releases/new-methodist-president-calls-for-holiness>; Charles Elliot *Praying the Kingdom* Paulist Press 1986 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. These sentences are lightly edited versions of those in paragraph E6 of the 2006 report. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Paragraph E10 of the 2006 report. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)