

Marriage in the Methodist Church

I Summary

In 1998 the Methodist Conference adopted a Report on *Christian Preparation for Marriage*. The Report reviewed the marriage practice of the Methodist Church and introduced a number of changes, particularly in relation to the Church's response to requests for marriage by people who have been divorced. In reply to Memorial 24, expressing concern at some aspects of the new policy introduced in 1998, the 1999 Conference welcomed a suggestion 'that in 2001 a process will be inaugurated to review the implementation of the policy adopted in 1998. The review should be comprehensive and involve thorough consultation.' This Report seeks both to provide such a review and consider other recent developments both within and outside the Church relating to marriage.

Section II summarises the 1998 Report and the changes introduced. Section III describes how the Report's specific recommendations have been implemented. The results of two surveys undertaken into current marriage practice within the Methodist Church are contained in Section IV. Some of the findings relate directly to issues raised in and changes made by the 1998 Report, while others provide a snapshot of some aspects of marriage in Methodist churches in 2002. Section V provides a brief overview of recent legislation and other developments regarding marriage in British society in the past five years. Section VI sets out some questions now facing the Methodist Church and the accompanying Resolutions make recommendations as to how the Church might respond.

II The 1998 Conference Report

At the time the 1998 Report was written, the majority of marriages in Methodist churches involved at least one divorced person. The proportion in 1994 was 64%, almost double the figure of 34% just twenty years earlier.

What started as a review of over 50 years experience in the Methodist Church of marrying people who had been previously married, became a Conference Report with a much wider scope — hence its title, *Christian Preparation for Marriage (CPM)*. The Report sought to promote coherence and consistency in the way ministers and churches respond to people wishing to marry in Methodist churches and offered 'a comprehensive set of pastoral guidelines for all requests for marriage in Methodist churches'. It suggested that 'when church members and members of the general public approach the Methodist Church with a request to be married, they deserve to receive a **consistent, well-informed and pastorally sensitive response**.' They should experience the Church 'as fundamentally a **welcoming community**' and be offered good quality marriage preparation, followed by '**support to marriage and family life at all stages in the life-cycle**'.

The introduction to the 1998 Report briefly reviewed the history of the Church's involvement in marriage and the development of Methodist practice relating to the marriage of people whose previous marriage had ended in divorce. It considered these developments against the background of changes in

society and in people's understanding of and attitudes to relationships. The Report also reviewed some major theological questions relating to marriage and divorce, which had been more fully explored in Section C of the 1992 Conference Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*. (Note: the Conference in 1998 also authorised what is the most recent public expression of a Methodist understanding of marriage, in the *Marriage Service* contained in the Methodist Worship Book.) This Report does not discuss the theological questions but recognizes the need for the Methodist Church to be engaged in the continuing debate (theological and otherwise) about marriage, families and relationships.

Sections 6 and 7 of the 1998 Report introduced a new Policy for Marriages, along with Guidelines and Directions for Good Practice, and Conference adopted a new Standing Order (O11A). These introduced a process for a minister and a couple together to come to a decision about the appropriateness of a marriage taking place in a Methodist church. This process of mutual exploration replaced the previous practice in situations where one or both of the people wishing to be married had been married before, in which a minister sought by examination and consultation to determine what had gone wrong in the previous marriage before agreeing to a couple's request to be married in a Methodist church. Under the new arrangements, if, at the end of the process, the couple reaffirm their request for marriage in a Methodist church, the minister would normally honour their request (*CPM*, 6.5.1). However, the Report provided that a minister might make a pastoral judgement that it was inappropriate for a particular marriage to take place in *a particular Methodist church* (e.g. where relatives from a previous marriage were members of the congregation and had not come to terms with the breakdown of the marriage). There was also provision for dealing with other situations where a minister had difficulties or uncertainties about going ahead with conducting *a particular marriage* (e.g. where there were serious unaddressed problems within the couple's relationship). In addition, the Report recognized that some ministers are prevented by conscience from ever marrying a person whose previous spouse is still living. It sought to protect the conscience of these ministers while, at the same time, ensuring that all couples received a consistent and welcoming response when seeking to be married in a Methodist church.

The new policy (Section 6 of the 1998 Report), in brief, was

- to welcome everyone who enquires about an intended marriage service in a Methodist church
- if one or both parties have been married before, to ensure that a couple is directed to a minister who is not prevented by conscience from considering their request
- to establish a good relationship with the couple and explore the appropriateness of their marriage taking place in an act of worship in a Methodist church
- to involve each couple seeking marriage in a process of preparation
- to reach with each couple a clear decision relating to their request for marriage in a Methodist church

- to provide in each marriage service a liturgical celebration which symbolises the joy, solemnity and deep significance of the occasion (with sensitivity to the needs and possible involvement of children and family members from former relationships)

The new Guidelines and Directions for Good Practice (Section 7) included:

- an encouragement to ministers regularly to review their practice in relation to marriage services, marriage preparation, and support for marriage and family life
- the non-acceptability of discrimination against any minister on the basis of gender or race in the performance of duties relating to marriage
- that training in this area of ministry should be part of initial training and probation
- that church members should be encouraged to become more involved in marriage preparation, marriage services and the support of marriage and family life and that there should be opportunities to explore the Church's teaching on these matters
- that Methodist churches should work with other churches and agencies to make marriage preparation available to as many couples as possible
- that in appropriate circumstances a minister might encourage a divorced person seeking to be married to share in an act of prayer expressing penitence, forgiveness and new beginnings
- that ministers should seek to involve representatives of other denominations in leading marriage services where one party to the marriage is a member of another denomination
- that inter faith marriages should follow the guidelines laid down by Conference.

Aware of the wider ongoing debate in our society, the Report also encouraged the Methodist Church 'to discuss much more openly and vigorously the divergent and conflicting stances among us relating to divorce, marriage after divorce, cohabitation and contemporary attitudes to chastity, celibacy and sexual intimacy' (CPM 5.10).

III Specific recommendations of the 1998 Report

Section 8 of the 1998 Report contained five specific recommendations:

1. *The Family and Personal Relationships Committee should urgently review current marriage preparation courses and advise Methodist churches accordingly. The committee should produce new resources as necessary, and offer training opportunities to ministers, deacons and lay people for their flexible, realistic and imaginative use.*

A small group was set up by the Family and Personal Relationships Committee, working with colleagues from the Church of England FLAME (Family Life and Marriage Education) Network and a Roman Catholic representative to undertake this review. The group agreed that what was needed at this time was not more marriage preparation material, but encouragement to ministers and others to develop good

practice and to make fuller use of what was already available. As a result, an ecumenical web site (www.marriage-preparation.co.uk) was set up in 2001 and a leaflet *Why do Marriage Preparation?* was circulated to all ministers. The leaflet publicized the new web site and contained details of relevant resources and agencies. The web site contained further information, along with the text of *Step Carefully* and *Carefully Prepared*, two ecumenical booklets on marriage preparation (the first relating specifically to marriages where there were children from a previous relationship) published in the 1990s by Churches Together for Families.

2. *The Family and Personal Relationships Committee, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee, should recommend the outline of a service for the reaffirmation of marriage vows.*

A different small group was set up with three representatives from each Committee and joined by Ann Leck, Vice President of the Conference, 2001-2002. As a result of their work, the book *Vows and Partings* was published in January 2002. It contains two orders for the reaffirmation of marriage vows, one complete in itself and the other for use within another act of worship. The material can be used with one or more couples in church, in a couple's home, or in other situations.

3. *The Family and Personal Relationships Committee, in consultation with the Faith and Order Committee and after enquiring into the resources available in other Christian communions, should explore an outline service which expresses penitence, forgiveness and new beginnings for people previously married and divorced.*

The same group looked carefully at material available in other communions and, after discussion, decided not to produce such an outline. To quote the introduction of *Vows and Partings*, 'this is mainly because in discussing situations in which such a service might be used, it became increasingly clear that each was so different and the needs of the individuals involved so sensitive that no one order of service would serve all situations. The needs of individuals and couples trying to find ways of expressing what is going on for them at such significant moments in their relationships are not readily met by any one order of service. So, instead, we have produced some 'suggestions of how to pray' in times of joy and pain, healing and hurt, coming together and growing apart.' *Vows and Partings* contains 52 such 'suggestions of how to pray'. The publication of this material, coinciding with National Marriage Week 2002, drew considerable positive media attention and provided opportunities to demonstrate the Methodist Church's concern and involvement in real issues confronting people in their lives and relationships.

4. *The present SO 830 should be rescinded, and replaced by a new Standing Order which both guarantees the rights of conscience of ministers in respect of requests for marriage and summarises the fundamental convictions of the 1992 Statement and this report.*

Conference in 1998 rescinded SO 830 and replaced it with a new SO 011A.

5. *The material in sections 6 and 7 of this report should be printed in the section on Guidance in CPD. Sections 6 and 7, together with other relevant information (eg section C of the 1992*

Statement) should be made available to all ministers as a booklet to assist the handling of all requests for marriage in Methodist churches.

Following Conference in 1998, a booklet was produced and sent to all ministers and sections 6 and 7 of the Report now form Section 9 of the section on Guidance in CPD.

IV Current Marriage Practice in Methodist Churches - Two surveys

The surveys

In 2001 and 2002, the Secretary for Pastoral Care and Personal Relationships conducted two surveys which help provide a picture of current marriage practice in Methodist churches. The first survey was conducted in the Spring of 2001, with a questionnaire sent to two ministers in each District (except Shetland, where only one was sent because of the District's small size. A third minister in a larger District was sent a questionnaire). Of the 66 ministers, 45 were male and 21 female. 57 responses were received (a response rate of 86.36%). The main purpose of this survey was to collect information for use in the production of a new Methodist Publishing House booklet to replace the current *So you want a church wedding?* However, some of the information gathered is of interest in this Report in so far as it relates to issues raised in 1998. Other findings in the 2001 survey help build a fuller picture of marriage preparation and marriage services in twenty-first century Methodism. They show a very wide range of practice in different parts of the Connexion that raises the question of whether it is desirable for there to be greater consistency.

The second survey was conducted in January 2002, with a questionnaire sent to a random sample of 156 ministers. The questionnaire was distributed in three different ways, by post (104), telephone (26) and email (26). The response rates were: postal questionnaire 67.3%, emailed questionnaire 61.5%, telephone questionnaire 84.6%. The overall response rate was 69.2%. The different response rates may be of interest for the future gathering of information. A detailed study of the responses suggests that people may respond differently to certain questions over the telephone to how they respond in writing. However, for the purposes of this Report these differences are not significant and the overall response is quoted. In addition to asking a number of set questions, the survey questionnaire invited ministers to comment on issues covered in the 1998 Report. 38 of the 108 who replied chose to do so.

Awareness of the 1998 Report

The 1998 Report had been printed in that year's Conference Agenda and after its adoption was made available in stand alone form. Sections 6 and 7 were published along with Section C of the 1992 Conference Statement and distributed to all ministers. These sections were also added to the Section on Guidance in CPD. The 2002 survey asked ministers (some of whom had entered circuit ministry after 1998) whether they had read the 1998 Report. Just over two thirds of ministers said they had read it. 75.9% said they were aware that in 1998 Conference changed the Standing Order relating to the marriage of people who had been divorced.

How many marriages do ministers conduct?

Both surveys asked ministers how many marriages they conduct in an average year and both received remarkably similar responses. However, the responses show widely different experience. Conducting marriages is a very significant part of some ministers' work and a very rare occurrence for others. The average number of marriages taken by a minister in a year is just over five, but this ranges from ministers who conduct no marriages some years to others who regularly conduct as many as twenty-five. This means a vast difference in the amount of time committed by ministers to marrying people (and, incidentally, to the amount of fees received). A few ministers said that they had noticed a decrease in the number of marriages they conduct, which they attributed to the general decline in the number of marriages, the decrease in the proportion of religious marriage ceremonies, and the availability of alternative venues since 1994. One minister who conducts a lot of marriages each year explained that this was because of a particularly beautiful church building that had become a popular venue for marriages in the area.

The Methodist Church does not collect statistics on the proportion of marriages involving people who have been divorced. Ministers were asked in the two surveys to estimate what proportion of the marriages they conduct involve at least one party who has been married before. In the first survey the range was between 30% and 100%, with an average of 72.25%. This suggests the 1994 figure of 64% may, if anything, be an understatement of the current proportion. In the second survey, where the question was asked in a different way, 71.3% of ministers said that over half of the marriages they conduct involve people who have been married before.

Ministers prevented by conscience from marrying people who have divorced

A major concern of the 1998 Report was to continue to protect the position of those ministers prevented by conscience from ever marrying a divorced person whose previous spouse was still living. Only 3.7% of ministers responding to the 2002 survey placed themselves in this category. However, 8.3% said that there were other members of staff in their circuit so prevented. 12% of ministers said they had at some point in their ministry referred a couple to a colleague. Just under a third said they had had a couple referred to them at some point. Further research would be required to establish how far these figures indicate that the proportion of ministers prevented by conscience from ever marrying a divorced person has declined over time and how far they suggest that, in addition to ministers so prevented, a further small proportion has had significant difficulties and uncertainties in particular cases and has therefore referred a couple to a colleague.

When ministers say 'No'

57% of ministers in the first survey and 38.9% in the second said that they had refused to marry at least one couple. Others had not actually refused a couple, but had encouraged them to think so carefully about what they were intending to do that they decided not to proceed with a church marriage ceremony. In some cases the couple decided not to marry at all. The main reasons for ministers saying no were where the present relationship had been the cause of the break up of a previous marriage; when an individual's or a couple's attitude to marriage was not serious enough; where nothing seemed to have been learned from the breakdown of a previous relationship; where there were good reasons to

believe this relationship would not last; and where there was no appropriate reason why the couple should marry in church (one minister insists that all couples wishing to marry in the church attend an Alpha course). As mentioned elsewhere, one minister had refused to marry a couple who had objected to being married by particular minister because she was a woman.

The new process

Five of the 108 ministers in the 2002 survey expressed negative viewpoints about the new process introduced in 1998. One was *'concerned that the new standing orders compromise me as a minister, especially as my colleague has passed weddings on and I am unable to judge them at that stage on their own merits. It would be better without the standing order that obligates us to marry people.'* Another had *'concerns about people who will 'try' a number of ministers until they get the answer they want'*. A third was *'not happy with the implications that there is no conscience left. A minister should be able to say no to a particular couple and not pass them on.'* A fourth was *'wary of being told to do it in a particular way'*. Finally, a circuit staff team had discussed the matter and thought there was a need for more guidelines on what to do when there are reservations about a marriage because of pastoral issues within the church.

Two other comments received on the new process were:-

- from a minister who liked the previous system of having to gain the District Chair's approval — this gave some weight to the minister's request to couples to deal with significant aspects of previous relationships;
- from another who thought that, while the Methodist Church was right to marry people who had been divorced we needed to take seriously the research showing how divorce damages children and the fact that second marriages are more likely to fail than first ones.

However, the majority of comments made about the 1998 Report by ministers were positive, e.g. that it was *'realistic and down to earth'*, that it was important that the church had dealt with these issues head on, or that *'we've got it about right'*. One minister expressed strong support for an *'open door theology'* and another thought the Methodist Church was seen as positive in how it deals with people. Nonetheless, it was also suggested by one that there is a big gulf between theory and practice and by another that maybe the Report needed to be available in a *'plain English version'*. One minister suggested there was more work to be done on how precisely we define marriage. It was suggested by other ministers that the Report didn't seem to take seriously that many people are already cohabiting when they decide to marry and that much of the Report would apply equally to same sex relationships as to heterosexual marriage.

In addition to the two surveys, early in 2002 the *Methodist Recorder* published an invitation to people to write in about their experience of being married in a Methodist church or of being responsible for preparing people for marriage and conducting marriage services. It specifically invited people to write about any situations where our procedures have caused difficulties. No responses were received to this invitation.

In the light of these responses and the small proportion of ministers expressing continuing major concern, this Report suggests no change in the new procedures introduced in 1998. The provision whereby ministers may make a 'pastoral judgement' and the recommendations for how to deal with other situations where a minister has difficulties or uncertainties offer appropriate ways to deal with more difficult cases.

Involving children

The 1998 Report recommended involving the children of previous relationships in a marriage service where appropriate and just over two thirds of ministers in the second survey said they had done this. Children had been bridesmaids, pageboys, ring bearers, witnesses and best man; they had read lessons or poetry, stood with the couple, chosen one of the hymns, lit candles, been named in prayers said by the couple, sung, played musical instruments, 'given mum away'.

Prayers of penitence, forgiveness and new beginnings

The Report also said that when a divorced person who was seeking to be married was troubled by a sense of guilt and failure because they had breached their original marriage vows, a minister might suggest sharing in an act of prayer expressing penitence, forgiveness and new beginnings. Just under a half of ministers responding to the 2002 survey said they had done this — occasionally within the marriage service but more frequently during marriage preparation.

Ecumenical and inter-faith marriages

The 1998 Report considered situations where one party in a couple comes from a different denomination, and encouraged ministers to involve a minister or other representative of that denomination in conducting the marriage service. Over two thirds of ministers said they had done this. Whilst ecumenical involvement in marriage services was relatively common, only 13% of ministers had ever been involved in an inter-faith marriage. (Guidelines for such marriages were adopted by Conference in 2000.) One respondent said he would '*never take part in any inter-faith marriage service or any other such activity.*'

Discrimination against ministers on grounds of gender or race

The Report and the new Standing Order 011A stated clearly that it is unacceptable for a couple to object to a particular minister conducting their marriage on the grounds of gender or race and that such a couple should not be allowed to marry in a Methodist church. 24.1% of ministers responding to the second survey said that they had experienced or been aware of this happening, one of whom gave this as the reason for having refused to marry a particular couple.

Marriage preparation

The 1998 Report's title was *Christian Preparation for Marriage* and the Report recommended that the Methodist Church should seek to develop best practice in marriage preparation. Both surveys asked ministers whether they offered marriage preparation to couples. Most said they do so. One described it

as *'a most important part of my ministry'*. Three said they would like to give it much higher priority than they currently did. 84.3% of ministers in the 2002 survey said they provided marriage preparation, though the form this took varied. For example, it might mean holding two or three meetings to collect the details, go through the service and then hold a rehearsal, or it could be a series of group meetings with various leaders and activities arranged. Most had developed their own material or outlines for meetings, but some used material produced by CPAS, CTBI, Care for the Family, the Family Caring Trust, the Church of Scotland, Church of England dioceses, Lion and other publishers. Several ministers in the 2002 survey expressed a need for more easily usable resources for marriage preparation. One argued for the standardisation of marriage preparation practice, in view of the divorce/remarriage statistics. Another pointed out that, while it may be good to do marriage preparation with groups of couples, it is better to meet separately with those previously married and those for whom this is the first time, as it can be upsetting for people getting married for the first time to be involved in discussions about divorce. Another said it was difficult to involve the couples who most need marriage preparation. Most ministers run their sessions in evenings, but some make use of Saturdays.

While the 1998 Report encouraged greater involvement of lay people in marriage preparation, 86% of the ministers in the 2001 survey and 83.3% in 2002 said they delivered it on their own. One minister expressed preference for a team rather than lone approach, but another said it had been hard to involve lay people, who were already very busy. Where other people were involved, it was occasionally a spouse, a couple from the congregation, circuit or ecumenical colleagues, local projects, or organisations like Relate.

Ongoing support for marriage and family life through the life cycle

The 1998 Report challenged churches to offer support to marriage and family life at all stages in the life cycle. The 2002 survey asked ministers whether they or any church for which they were responsible did this. Only 36.1% said they did. Such support varied from inviting couples to worship, visiting them, linking them with other couples, holding anniversary or rededication services, marriage enrichment groups, toddler groups and parenting courses. A few churches had appointed 'family workers' to develop work in this area, particularly with couples with young children. Their brief sometimes included maintaining links with couples married in the church. One respondent advocated greater use of marriage enrichment groups. Another wished the church could find *'a better way of following up people we have married'*.

Training and reviews of practice

The Report suggested that ministers should receive good training in marriage preparation. 58.3% of respondents to the second survey said they had received some such training in their initial training; 12% had done so during their probation and 5.6% subsequently. Nonetheless, several ministers suggested there was a need for more or better training, perhaps on a local level. One minister felt the need for training in the legal aspects of marriage. The Report also recommended that ministers should regularly review their practice in relation to marriage, preparation, and support for marriage and family life. The

second survey asked how far this occurred. 43.5% said they had done so as a circuit staff, 15.8% within the context of District Synod and 16.7% in ecumenical meetings.

What do Methodist marriages look like today?

One question in the 2001 survey was, 'How far do you involve couples in deciding what happens during the service?' Two ministers said '*little*' or '*not much*'. All the others said they encouraged couples to be involved, either by making choices within the usual options (hymns, readings, music, version of vows, where to sign the register) or to a greater extent, with quite a lot of freedom to make suggestions to make their marriage service unique. It would seem most couples approaching a Methodist minister to arrange a marriage service are likely to be encouraged to make the service their own. If anything, ministers expressed disappointment that couples were not more adventurous. '*I encourage them to make suggestions but rarely get any response.*' '*Most want a 'set service.'*' '*Those who marry from within the congregation tend to build the service with me. It is very much a cooperative venture. Those on the fringe tend to want a 'standard' product.*' '*The less previous experience they have of church, the more anxious they seem to be to have the standard format — 'a proper church wedding' in their eyes.*'

Overall the survey suggested that many couples, particularly those not normally involved in church life and worship, prefer an off the shelf product, the '*proper church wedding*'. Clearly, some couples have very imaginative ideas (like one who distributed party poppers to the congregation) but it is more normal for ministers to give a lead in suggesting what might or might not be done in a service. One minister has encouraged couples to use a particularly good wedding hymn (HP 364). Another said '*I always point out that hymns are unnecessary.*'

There seemed to be little take up of the possibility of using non-Biblical readings. Kahil Gibran was quoted by four ministers, 'favourite poems' by two and a Shakespeare sonnet on love by one.

As for music, five ministers suggested that many modern couples find choosing hymns a struggle and most couples choose hymns they remember from school. This was reflected in the 'top 12 hymns' mentioned in the returns. The clear winner was *All things Bright and Beautiful* (mentioned by 10 of the 44 ministers who named particular items). The full list was as follows:

- 1. All things bright and beautiful
- 2. Morning has broken
- 3. Lord of all hopefulness
- 4= Give me joy in my heart
- 4= Amazing Grace
- 6= Make me a channel of your peace
- 6= As man and woman

- 8= Love Divine
- 8= Dear Lord and Father of Mankind
- 8= Lord of the Dance
- 8= Praise my soul the King of heaven
- 8= One more step along the world I go

When it came to processional music and music to be played during the signing of the register, traditional music was still preferred, with Wagner's *Bridal March* and Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* way in the lead. Jeremiah Clarke's *Trumpet Voluntary* came third and Widor's *Toccata* fourth. Other music mentioned was that from the film *Titanic*, Purcell's *Trumpet Tune*, Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D minor*, Pachelbel's *Canon* and the *Regimental march of the Wessex Regiment*. Other composers mentioned were Scott Joplin, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Gustav Holst. Several ministers said there had been an increase in the use of pre-recorded music. Some couples like to hear a CD of their favourite music as the register is signed or as they process in or out of church. Two songs particularly mentioned were *Love changes everything* and *Up where we belong*.

V Developments regarding marriage in wider society since 1998, and their possible implications for Methodism

Overall, the statistics tend to show continuing trends away from earlier marriage patterns, with more people cohabiting for a period, either as a prelude to marriage or as an alternative. There are currently more than 1.5 million cohabiting couples in England and Wales (*Social Trends*, ONS, 2002). This represents one in six of the adult non-married population. The number of cohabiting couples is expected to double by 2021. About 60% of cohabiting relationships convert into marriage, 35% dissolve and 5% become permanent. Fewer people marry and those who do marry at a higher age (the average age at which people marry continued to rise - for brides from 31.8 to 32.1 between 1999 and 2000; for bridegrooms from 34.4 to 34.8). More people have children outside of marriage. The divorce figures have decreased a little — but this probably mainly reflects the smaller number of people marrying. The average marriage lasts around eight years. Nonetheless, the associate editor of *Social Trends*, Penny Babb, said 'Despite the long-term decline in marriage, the traditional family unit of a couple with dependent children remains the norm' (*Daily Telegraph*, 30.1.02).

The latest British Social Attitudes publication shows that 67% of people now think it is acceptable for a couple to cohabit, even if they don't intend to marry. Young people find it more acceptable than older people. Only about a third of 18-24 year olds think people should marry before becoming parents. Church members are becoming less negative in their attitudes towards cohabitation. Nonetheless, nearly 60% of people still see marriage as the best kind of relationship and only 9% dismiss it as 'just a piece of paper'. Young people have many reasons to be cautious about entering marriage, but *More than just a piece of paper?* (National Children's Bureau, 2001) shows that many young people, particularly boys, expect to marry eventually. For girls, while lone parenthood is associated with lower

incomes, marriage is no longer essential for financial security (indeed, the NCB report suggests lack of good job opportunities and unemployment 'make men appear less attractive as prospective husbands and fathers'). A large majority of people in Britain believe cohabiting couples should have the same legal rights as married couples (and only 37% in the British Social Attitudes survey were aware that they do not).

The number of marriages in England and Wales rose from 263,515 in 1999 to 267,961 in 2000, reversing a steady downward trend from 1990's figure of 331,150 and 1972's peak of 426,241 (Office for National Statistics, 2002). The main reason for the small rise may well have been that some couples were attracted by the thought of marrying in the millennium year. It may also reflect people taking advantage of the provisions of the 1994 Marriage Act, which allowed couples to marry in 'approved premises' other than register offices and churches. There are now around 3,300 such venues. In 2000 more than a quarter of civil ceremonies took place in 'approved premises'. Meanwhile, the number of religious marriage ceremonies in 2000 was 97,161 — 34% of the total (compared with 48% in 1994). 58% of marriages in 2000 were first-time marriages for both partners (compared with 59% in 1999). In 23% of marriages one of the parties was divorced or widowed, while 19% were second marriages for both parties.

In 1998 the Government published a consultation document, *Supporting Families*, which said marriage is still the chosen option of most people and should be offered greater support. A number of developments followed *Supporting Families*, including the setting up of the National Family and Parenting Institute. A booklet, *MarriedLife*, was produced for distribution by civil registrars and Anglican clergy to all couples marrying in England and Wales. The Lord Chancellor's Department funded a number of voluntary bodies in developing marriage preparation and support. This followed up the Conservative Government's Family Law Act, which recommended couples seeking divorce should first engage in a process of mediation. Some pro-marriage groups expressed concern that, in the 2002 funding round, the Lord Chancellor's Department decided no longer to offer financial support to the organisers of National Marriage Week. The Department's major grant continued to go to Relate. Among new grants made were some to projects working on domestic violence and others working with ethnic minority communities.

In February 2002, the Government published a white paper, *Civil Registration: Vital Change — Birth, Marriage and Death Registration in the 21st Century*. Its recommended changes (probably the biggest changes in civil marriages since their introduction in 1837) would come into force in 2004 and apply to England and Wales. Many of the preliminaries, currently done by couples attending the Registry Office or in the Church of England by Banns of Marriage, will in future be improved by the use of technology. It may be that all marriages in future will have the same civil preliminaries. Couples will have more choice of where and when to marry.

A basic change is that in future the person conducting the ceremony, rather than the venue, will need to be licensed. This person will be known as the 'celebrant'. The white paper proposes licensing about 15,000 such local authority 'civil celebrants'. Churches and other religious groups will appoint their own 'religious celebrants' and notify them to the Registrar General. The celebrant may conduct a marriage anywhere, so long as 'the solemnity and dignity of the occasion are not compromised' and the place is

publicly accessible, but this could certainly allow couples to marry at home or in a favourite beauty spot. (In Scotland, people opting for a religious marriage ceremony have for a long time been able to choose the location, so long as the celebrant agrees to it.) This change obviously has considerable implications for marriage practice in the Methodist Church. The time for the ceremony will be agreed between the celebrant and the couple (whereas at the moment it can only take place between 8am and 6pm).

Supporting Families recognised the possibility of registrars offering a wider range of services than at present. *Civil Registration: Vital Change* expects them to offer baby naming services and secular marriage reaffirmation services. These will provide non-religious alternatives to Christian baptisms and services for the reaffirmation of marriage vows. Some Christians will see them as meaningless or threatening; others will welcome them as attempts to strengthen family relationships and give them greater significance. Any publicity surrounding the introduction of these new services will provide Churches with useful opportunities to alert people to the Christian practices of baptism and services of reaffirmation of marriage vows.

The Church of England report *Just Cause or Impediment?*, due to be discussed by the General Synod in July 2002, recommends making the legal requirements surrounding marriage in the Church of England more flexible and replacing the current system of Banns with a civil system such as that outlined in the *Civil Registration: Vital Change* white paper. *Just Cause or Impediment?* also recommends changes in civil law to enable an incumbent to allow an Anglican church building to be used for marriages according to the rites of other Churches, subject to the approval of the parochial church council and the bishop. Taken in conjunction with the changes outlined in *Civil Registration: Vital Change*, this would enable a Methodist marriage to take place in a Parish church. This would be a welcome development (e.g. in small villages where the Methodist building is too small for marriages to take place. One respondent in the 2002 survey said most of the church buildings in his Cornwall circuit were small and Methodists therefore marry in the Parish church.)

Just Cause or Impediment? also advocates that 'good quality marriage preparation is made available to all couples' and 'that the clergy should receive training in the pastoral and practical implications of the changes and in effective marriage preparation'.

The Church of England is also currently considering the implications of a report on *Marriage in Church after Divorce*. In 1981 the General Synod resolved that 'there are circumstances in which a divorced person may be married in church during the lifetime of a former partner'. The *MICAD* report recommends making the necessary changes to Canon Law to make this easier. It also called for national pastoral criteria, principles and procedures to be drawn up and for Parochial Church Councils to discuss the general policy to be followed within their parish. Any potential marriage after divorce would be referred to the diocesan bishop before taking place. The implementation of this report is clearly likely to increase the number of such marriages taking place in Church of England churches (and, consequently, decrease the number in Methodist churches). Interestingly, the Church of England actually already conducts more such marriages each year than does the Methodist Church, but they represent a much smaller proportion (around 10%) of the total number of Church of England marriages.

Behind the changes in marriage statistics and alongside proposed changes in the civil and religious arrangements in marriage practice, there is an ongoing public debate about marriage and other relationships. Some point to the decline in marriage and increase in divorces as major causes behind some of the most pressing problems facing individuals, communities and society as a whole. Others welcome the greater diversity in family life and relationships. While some people would expect and hope the Church to take its stand on the 'traditional' side in this debate, many Christians find the issues far from simple. Seeking to understand the complexity of human experience does not always lead to dogmatic statements on the moral and pastoral issues of the day. To repeat what was said in the 1998 Report: 'In the New Testament and in Christian tradition we discern attempts by Christians of earlier generations to relate the understandings of marriage in their cultures to what they believed about God in the light of the gospel as it was interpreted in their contexts. We are involved in a similar exploration in our own culture, where assumptions about marriage, sexuality, and the roles of women and men in society are hugely different from what was taken for granted in the ancient world.'

The *Civil Partnership Bill*, drawn up by Lord Lester of Herne Hill, would have given cohabiting couples (including lesbian and gay couples) the right to sign up to voluntary civil partnerships which would give them the same rights (regarding next-of-kin, property and pensions) as married couples. The Bill followed a similar (unsuccessful) 10 minute Bill (*the Relationship (Civil Registration) Bill*) introduced in the Commons by Jane Griffiths MP. In the debate in the Lords in January 2002, the Leader of the Lords said the Government had 'an open mind' on the proposals. The Bill was withdrawn on the basis that the Government was prepared to see an ad-hoc Select Committee established to hear evidence with a view to making recommendations on legislation at some time in the future. Bishops in the Lords' debate expressed concern that the Bill was bound further to undermine the institution of marriage, though the Bishop of Guildford said that if there was a need for appropriate declarations about relationships other than marriage 'these can and should be made'. Lord Lester argues that civil partnership is not a threat to marriage but an alternative, allowing couples who cannot or would not marry to base their common life on a firm legal foundation. Several European countries (Sweden, Finland, Germany, France) have already passed similar legislation.

Civil Registration: Vital Change proposes adding the 'life partner' of the deceased to the list of persons qualified to register a death. It says 'such a change will reflect the changing shape of society and the variety of forms that the family unit now takes'. On 5th September 2001 the Greater London Authority started to register the non-married relationships of same and opposite sex couples (though such registration confers no legal status).

It is questionable whether a private member's Bill such as Lord Lester's *Civil Partnership Bill* is the right way for changes of such significance to be made. It would be far more appropriate for the Government to set up a full consultation process to enable this debate to take place before any legislation is eventually formulated. The proposed legislation would then come to Parliament with the backing of the Government.

Such developments are bound to be accompanied by further requests to reconsider whether (and, if so, what) religious ceremonies should be available for those who want to celebrate and mark such a relationship in the context of their faith.

New adoption legislation is currently under consideration in Parliament. At the moment, children may only be adopted by married couples or by individuals. An amendment has been proposed (and the Government has suggested it will not oppose it) to allow cohabiting couples to adopt. A recent MORI survey commissioned by British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) found that 41% of cohabiting couples as compared with 25% of married couples consider adoption.

So the current marriage practice of the Methodist Church is set in a time of change in people's beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. Many questions face the Church, to some of which there are no easy answers.

VI Some questions now facing the Methodist Church

This section indicates some of the questions raised elsewhere in the Report. It does not propose immediate answers. Rather, the recommendation is that these and related questions need properly to be addressed by the whole Church and by those members of the Connexional Team with particular responsibilities in these areas.

1 The ongoing debate

Section 5 of the 1998 Report encouraged the Methodist Church 'to discuss much more openly and vigorously the divergent and conflicting stances among us relating to divorce, marriage after divorce, cohabitation and contemporary attitudes to chastity, celibacy and sexual intimacy'. How and where will this discussion take place? It needs to happen at every level of church life and must be well informed. We need to discuss very basic questions like what and who is marriage for? We need to consider how far our attitudes to marriage, family and relationships reflect culture, class, religious views, economic understanding etc.

The discussion will need to include full consideration of the 1992 Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*, the Resolutions of the Derby Conference, the 1998 Report on *Christian Preparation for Marriage* and the *Way Forward* Report on the agenda of this, 2002, Conference.

We need to consider the findings of current academic research. The discussion needs to be multi-disciplinary, engaging theologians, those with pastoral expertise and experience, social scientists and people from other related disciplines. (The work of the theologian Adrian Thatcher offers helpful pointers to the effectiveness of such a multi-disciplinary approach.) Whilst addressing the issues within a Methodist context and from a Methodist perspective, the discussion also needs to be fully ecumenical.

Many outside the Church see it as irrelevant to where most people are on these issues. Our internal discussion should help us better to engage in the public debate.

2 Response to proposed legislation

What is our response to suggested changes in Civil Registration as outlined in *Civil Registration: Vital Change*? If ministers are to become 'religious celebrants', able to conduct marriages anywhere so long as 'the solemnity and dignity of the occasion are not compromised', how do we ensure that Christian marriage continues to be an expression and the concern of the whole community and not simply a private matter? Would we prepare Guidelines for ministers on appropriate ways of ensuring Christian understandings of the nature of marriage are expressed under the new arrangements? Would we envisage at least some marriages taking place in the context of a normal Sunday service?

How do we respond to suggested developments regarding civil partnerships?

What are the implications and challenges for Churches if civil celebrants are in future to offer baby-naming ceremonies and secular marriage reaffirmation services?

3 Response to documents and debates in the Church of England

What is our response to current discussion in the Church of England, especially *Marriage in Church after Divorce* and *Just Cause or Impediment*? What are the implications of those reports for Methodist churches?

4 The role of churches and ministers

Different responses to the issues dealt with in this Report reflect, among other things, different understandings of the role of the Church in relation to its wider context and the society in which it is set. Some would argue that our role is merely to marry or bless the marriages of members of the church. Others are convinced the Church has a wider role, and cherish the Church's involvement in people's rites of passage even if the people concerned have no ongoing links with the church. Many ministers see this involvement as a significant aspect of the church's engagement with people's lives, and as a pastoral and evangelistic 'opportunity'.

A more general question, linked with the former, is whether marriage etc. are about the minister's role or about that of the whole church? If the latter, policy and practice need developing in the local church (and should not just be dependent on the minister). Current practice is very varied and there may be some virtue in greater consistency of practice, levels of fees, etc. We need to consider both our national practice and how people in local churches become more involved in this aspect of the church's ministry (e.g. through participation in the delivery of marriage preparation).

5 Developing support for marriage, family life and relationships

How shall we continue to develop our marriage preparation practice and involve more people in its provision? How might we develop more support for marriage and family life at all stages through the life cycle? What is the role of churches, members and ministers in responding to domestic violence, the abuse and neglect of children and other continuing problems faced in many families?

When is the best way, time and place to develop ministers' good practice in marriage preparation, marriage practice, etc.? Is this part of initial training, probation, or are there other appropriate ways and moments?

What are the continuing needs for resources in these areas?

Resolutions

1. Conference receives the Report on *Marriage in the Methodist Church 2002*.
2. Conference reaffirms its commitment to the Policy for Marriages and the Guidelines and Directions for Good practice contained in the 1998 Report on *Christian preparation for Marriage*.
3. Conference encourages churches and ministers to continue to develop best practice in marriage preparation and other support for family life at all stages in the life-cycle.
4. Conference affirms its belief in the importance of the Methodist Church's contribution to the ongoing public debate on issues to do with marriage and other personal relationships and also affirms that people's family and other personal relationships are a significant focus for the Church's pastoral concern and practice.
5. Conference directs the Secretary for Pastoral Care and Personal Relationships, in consultation with other appropriate members of the Connexional Team (including the Secretary for Faith and Order, Formation in Ministry staff, Women's Network and the Co-ordinating Secretary for Church and Society) to work on the matters raised in Section VI and produce an action plan to achieve a response and to build this into the Connexional Team Development Plan for 2003-2004 onward.

Resources and references

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