

## Working Party on Civil Partnership and the Legal Definition of Marriage

<b>Contact Name and Details</b>	<b>Susan Howdle</b> – Chair of the Working Party SRHowdle@ukgateway.net
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1. Members of the Methodist Council will recall that this working party was appointed by the Conference of 2013 with the following terms of reference:
  - a. To consider the implications for the Methodist Church of a change in legislation covering same-sex marriage;
  - b. To consider whether the Methodist Church’s position on marriage needs revising in the light of changes in society;
  - c. To undertake the work directed by the reply to Memorial 29(2012) [a Memorial from the Birmingham Synod seeking for a review of the Conference’s ruling that blessing of civil partnerships should not take place on Methodist premises]
  - d. To make recommendations for any changes in practice or polity.
  
2. The working party was required to bring an initial report to this year’s Conference, and it was envisaged that if there were a recommendation for more work to be done in relation to the church’s position on marriage a further working party would be appointed to examine the substantive issues.
  
3. The working party brought a short report to the October 2013 Council indicating the work which was planned to be done during this initial phase, and this work has now been completed. This includes:
  - the provision of a “Frequently Asked Questions” web page, to offer basic factual information on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013.
  - meetings with pilot groups to elicit initial views as to the range of issues raised by the terms of reference.
  - a much wider consultation to inform the working party’s thinking and recommendations, bearing in mind the mandate to operate in ways that are as open and inclusive as possible.
  
4. This wider consultation has, in the time available, been undertaken in a number of ways. Members of the working party have taken part in a number of groups exploring the issues, for instance 3Generate, the Connexional Leaders’ Forum, the Equality Diversity and Inclusion Forum. The chair of the working party has sought the views of ecumenical and world church partners as to the possible impact upon the ongoing inter-church relationships of any decision by the Conference to embark on a review of these issues.

5. The wider consultation has also involved seeking the views of individuals and groups via a survey of opinion on certain key questions. The survey was open to be completed electronically or via a hard copy, and was publicised in a number of ways. It is important to stress that this did not purport to be in any sense a referendum, but was a way of enabling people to express views and concerns. It elicited well over 4,000 responses, with a number of these being sent on behalf of groups convened specially to consider the issues. There were responses from every District. All this has required a considerable amount of support work by staff at Methodist Church House to enable the data to be examined both quantitatively and qualitatively and the working party is very grateful for that. Each return has been read by at least two members of the working party. Much more detail about this will be contained in the Conference report which will explore the various issues in the light of what has been said, both in the survey and through the other means of consultation.
6. The working party has met residentially to consider possible ways forward and will meet again to agree the text of the report to the Conference. The working party has also offered some ideas to the Conference Business Committee about what might be helpful and constructive ways for the report to be dealt with in the Conference.
7. There is one point upon which the Methodist Council may wish to take a view. The working party is not at this stage indicating its likely resolutions, and emphatically no inferences are to be drawn one way or another from the fact that this point is raised, but it is important to plan ahead. *If* the working party were to recommend further work to be done, then the Conference of 2013 envisaged the appointment of a further working party for this purpose. It may be helpful for the Council to consider how the nominations for such a working party would be brought to the Conference, for instance by the appointment of a small group to work on this.

**\*\*\*RESOLUTION:**

**34/1. The Council receives the report.**

***Further resolutions in respect of para 7 will follow.***