

Marriage and Relationships Task Group

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Status of Paper	Final
Action Required	Discussion
Draft Resolutions	52/1. The Council receives the Report.

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	To enable the Council to discuss the current status of the Marriage and Relationships programme, and guide the task group if required.
Main Points	<p>The Marriage and Relationships programme, including a related project on homophobia guidance, is progressing on resolutions 40/3 and 40/4 from the 2014 Conference. It is managed through the Marriage and Relationships Task Group, in consultation with the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee.</p> <p>The report outlines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources to support the Marriage and Relationships discussions across the Connexion including those: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Already agreed by 2014 Conference ○ Proposed by the Task Group, some of which will require input from the Faith and Order Committee • Development opportunities for those facilitating discussions (including a 24hour development event and conference workshops). • The current situation in relation to the use of shared premises. • Other work that contributes to delivering resolutions 40/4.
Background Context and Relevant Documents	2014 Conference Resolutions 40/3 and 40/4: Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships
Consultations	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee

Summary of Impact

Faith and Order	The Faith and Order Committee will need to discuss and affirm the proposed additional resources.
Financial	Costs already included in the project's budget
Legal including impact on other jurisdictions	To explore the implications of same sex marriage legislation for the Church.
Wider Connexional	Future discussions to take place at district and circuit level; to be managed by districts.
External (eg ecumenical)	Discussions with ecumenical partners are taking place as part of the programme

Marriage and Relationships Task Group

1. Background

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the progress on implementing decisions of the 2014 Conference in relation to Marriage and Relationships (M and R) and guidance on homophobia; specifically resolutions 40/3 and 40/4 of the report to the 2014 Conference from the Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships. (See appendix 1 for further details.)

2. Summary of progress

2.1 Resources to support conversations across the Connexion

2.1.1 Resources proposed by the Task Group

The following three resources will form the basis and theological context upon which conversations across the Connexion should take place:

- a) Living with Contradictory Convictions. (There is hoped to be a special edition of *Roots* focusing on 'Living with Contradictory Convictions'.)
- b) A Lamp to my Feet and Light to my Path: The Nature of Authority and the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church.
- c) The Guidance on Homophobia has been tasked to the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, in consultation with the Marriage and Relationships Task Group. A joint working group has been established and is progressing this work.

2.1.2 Proposed additional resources

Additional resources may include:

- a) Other publications already published and/or in the public domain that have been recommended as potential resources.
- b) A History of Marriage (with particular reference to Methodism)
- c) Biblical/theological reflection Study Guide on marriage for local preachers' meetings, house groups and classes
- d) A study guide on how to facilitate discussions, using the resources provided.

However, these additional resources are dependent upon capacity to develop them and whether they can be fitted into the timeline for the programme taking into consideration any relevant approval process.

2.2 Development opportunities for those managing the conversations

- a) The Chair of the Task Group presented at the Connexional Leaders' Forum and discussed with District Chairs the timetable and arrangements for managing the conversations. A guidance note will be sent to all Districts, who are asked to nominate two persons to facilitate discussions within districts.
- b) A Workshop has been planned to take place at the 2015 Conference, with guidance on how to use the resources.
- c) All the district facilitators are being invited to a development event (to be held at Cliff College) on 2 and 3 October.

- d) The Districts will be asked to report their conversations back to the Task Group in February 2016, as a report to the Methodist Council on progress will need to be prepared in April 2016.

2.3 Shared Premises and ecumenical discussions

The legislation requires all denominations sharing premises to 'opt in' before shared premises can be used for same sex marriage, regardless of the ownership of the premises. The Task Group discussed the possibility of testing the mind of the Conference as to whether the Conference as the governing authority would consider opting in to the legislation just to allow non-Methodist buildings that were shared buildings to be registered for same sex marriage. The Ecumenical Officer was consulted and he discussed this matter with his ecumenical colleagues. It has been confirmed that denominations with whom local Methodist churches share buildings are fully accepting of the need for the Conference to consider this matter over a two year period before making any decisions about opting in or not and no urgent decision is required.

2.4 Other matters

- a) Divergence between Methodist Church and legal definitions of marriage.

Whilst it is partly addressed through the proposed resource on the history of marriage, further work is required on resolution 40.4.b.iii (to 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 now applying in England, Wales and Scotland). It is envisaged that proposals will be made to the 2015 Conference as to the application of Standing Orders which provide benefits and provisions to spouses and married couples.

- b) Welcoming same sex couples

Independently of this programme of work, the Connexional Team has developed, and is currently piloting the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit. Within the toolkit there is a module on sexual orientation which can be used in relation to resolution 40/4.b.iv (to 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).

*****RESOLUTION**

52/1. The Council receives the Report.

Appendix 1

The Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnership resolutions were:

- 40/3. The Conference adopted the recommendation contained in paragraph 148 and directed the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion committee, in consultation with the group appointed under resolution 40/4 below, to work, as a matter of priority, on the production and dissemination of clear guidance on what is, or is not, to be regarded as homophobia and, if thought appropriate, on a formal statement for the Conference to adopt on this matter.
- 40/4. a) The Conference adopted the recommendation contained in paragraph 157 and appointed a task group on marriage and relationships to be responsible for the implementation of the work. It recognised the significance and therefore the need for adequate resourcing and support of this work.
- b) The Conference directed that the tasks which the group shall work to implement shall be as follows:
- (i) to seek to engage the Church more widely in exploring the two major themes of
 - i. living with contradictory convictions, and
 - ii. the nature of the authority of the Bible by drawing upon the existing material produced connexionally and identifying other ways of resourcing and encouraging these conversations throughout the Church;
 - (ii) within that context, to encourage and facilitate across the Connexion the process of reflection and discernment referred to in Resolution 40/2;
 - (iii) to 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 now applying in England, Wales and Scotland. These explorations should include
 - i. the missional challenges involved
 - ii. the tradition and experience of the Christian Church in living in contexts where its values, teaching and practice as to marriage have not been shared with those of the surrounding society
 - iii. the considerations for and against the continued involvement of the Methodist Church in the solemnization of (opposite sex) marriages;
 - (iv) to 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;
 - (v) drawing as appropriate upon the theological material already produced by the Faith and Order Committee and in collaboration with that committee, to develop resources to help people to explore the teaching and practice of the Church in relation to cohabitation;
 - (vi) to look at the range of other issues raised by paragraphs 92 to 101, to investigate what material is already available or could, within the financial and personnel resources available, be produced in order to encourage wider discussions about marriage and other relationships;

- (vii) to work with the EDI committee on the task directed by Resolution 40/3 above;
 - (viii) to 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, and report to the Conference of 2015 on any action recommended to be taken;
 - (ix) to carry out the work recommended to be done in paragraph 179 and report to the Conference of 2015 about any Standing Order amendments required;
 - (x) in the light of its explorations and experience of working on all these issues, 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.
- c) The group's task shall be primarily to oversee and coordinate the work listed in b) above, and it is anticipated that it will identify sub-groups or individuals to undertake particular tasks.
- d) The group shall work wherever possible collaboratively with the relevant members of the Connexional Team, and in consultation with the relevant connexional committees, in particular the Faith and Order Committee.
- e) It shall also seek to work as far as possible with ecumenical partners who are engaged in similar explorations at this time.
- f) It shall report regularly to the Methodist Council upon how its programme of work is being implemented, seeking the advice of the Council as to priorities where necessary.