

Response from the Methodist Church in Britain to the consultation on “Equal Civil Marriage”

The Methodist Church in Britain is one of the largest Free Churches and has a membership of around a quarter of a million people. This response uses the structured consultation questionnaire, but, given the constraints of the questionnaire, we also include an appendix giving further details of the Methodist Church’s response.

SUMMARY OF THE METHODIST CHURCH RESPONSE

- The Methodist Church, in line with scripture and traditional teaching, believes that “marriage is a gift of God and that it is God’s intention that a marriage should be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman”.
- Our Church governance means that we would not be able to revise this position, even if we wished to, without an extended period of reflection and consultation.
- Within the Methodist Church there is a spectrum of beliefs about human sexuality; however the Church has explicitly recognised, affirmed and celebrated the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men.
- We do not believe that a distinction between “civil” and “religious” marriage is a helpful or correct one. Marriage does not have a different definition for religious groups, as against the state. Marriage is a single legal and social entity. Nor do we believe that the Government should determine what is religious.

FORMAL CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Question 1: Do you agree or disagree with enabling all couples, regardless of their gender to have a civil marriage ceremony?

Disagree

Question 2: Please explain the reasons for your answer. Please respond within 1,225 characters (approx 200 words).

In line with scripture and church tradition our Standing Orders state our belief, “that marriage is a gift of God and that it is God’s intention that a marriage should be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman.” At the same time we have for nearly twenty years explicitly recognised, affirmed and celebrated the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men, and been committed to a pilgrimage of faith to combat

discrimination and give dignity and worth to people whatever their sexuality. Were the Methodist Church to examine again its understanding of marriage this would be through a lengthy process of consultation and theological reflection, which would also involve other Christian communities in the UK and elsewhere.

Furthermore we do not consider it helpful to define “civil marriage” and “religious marriage” as different institutions which are not equivalent in terms of who may enter into them. Marriage is the same legal contract whether entered by a civil or religious ceremony. But our main concern is the way that Government is assuming the right to define what is religious; religions must be free to themselves define the religious nature of all aspects and rituals of life.

Question 3: If you identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual would you wish to have a civil marriage ceremony?

This question doesn't apply.

Question 4: If you represent a group of individuals who identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual would those you represent wish to have a civil marriage ceremony?

This question doesn't apply.

NB. Church members within these categories, many of whom will be responding directly to this consultation in their own right, do not have a common response to Q3 and Q4.

Question 5: The Government does not propose to open up religious marriage to same-sex couples. Do you agree or disagree?

We believe that marriage as understood by the Church, should not be opened up to same-sex couples. However, as indicated in Question 2, we do not agree with the assumption that “religious” and “civil” marriage are two separate concepts.

Question 6: Do you agree or disagree with keeping the option of civil partnerships once civil marriage is available to same-sex couples?

Don't know. Whilst it appears strange to eliminate discrimination by opening marriage to same-sex couples but not opening civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples, the Church has no expressed view on this question.

Question 7: If you identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual and were considering making a legal commitment to your partner would you prefer to have a civil partnership or a civil marriage?

This question doesn't apply.

Question 8: The Government is not considering opening up civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples. Do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

Don't know. As with Question 6 this appears discriminatory, but the Church has never endorsed the idea of civil partnerships for couples who could marry.

Question 9: If you are in a civil partnership would you wish to take advantage of this policy and convert your civil partnership into a marriage?

This question doesn't apply.

Question 10: Do you agree or disagree that there should be a time limit on the ability to convert a civil partnership into a marriage?

Don't know. The Methodist Church has no expressed view on this.

Question 11: Do you agree or disagree that there should be the choice to have a civil ceremony on conversion of a civil partnership into a marriage?

Don't know. Whilst the Church has no expressed view it generally favours ceremonies to mark key personal life steps, so it would probably agree.

Question 12: If you are a married transsexual person would you want to take advantage of this policy and remain in your marriage while obtaining a full Gender Recognition Certificate?

This question doesn't apply.

Question 13: If you are the spouse of a transsexual person, would you want to take advantage of this policy and remain in your marriage whilst your spouse obtained a full Gender Recognition Certificate?

This question doesn't apply.

Question 14: Do you have any comments on the assumptions or issues outlined in this chapter on consequential impacts? Please respond within 1,225 characters (approx 200 words).

No comments although there are many consequences for the Church.

Question 15: Are you aware of any costs or benefits? that exist to either the public or private sector, or individuals that we have not accounted for? Please respond within 1,225 characters (approx 200 words).

No

Question 16: Do you have any other comments on the proposals within this consultation? Please respond within 1,225 characters (approx 200 words).

The proposals are intended to combat discrimination, but the option of a religious ceremony will still not be allowed for same-sex couples. Whilst the Methodist Church may or may not choose to affirm same-sex marriage, it is unwarranted interference for the State to make that decision for it by prohibiting what is permitted for heterosexual couples, namely a church marriage. For the purpose of religious freedom, if the Government allows marriage of same-sex couples in civil venues, then it must allow religious bodies to make the same choice.

Moreover the legislation will create different groups in society, e.g. same-sex married couples in distinction from those in civil partnerships; married couples whom the State has allowed to get married in church and those whom it has banned from doing so; people who have a civil marriage and people who have what the Law calls a “religious marriage” even though religious groups would not recognise such a distinction.

We object to the attempt made to define religion in terms of buildings and activities such as hymns and religious readings; for us and for almost all religions the whole of life is religious, including a civil marriage, especially if between religious believers.

Please see the appendix below for further details of the Methodist Church response to the consultation on Equal Marriage

Contact: Rachel Lampard
Methodist Church House
25 Marylebone Rd, London NW1 5JR
020 7467 5248

Appendix – Background to the submission by the Methodist Church

In March 2012 the Government launched a 12-week consultation on how to provide equal access to civil marriage for same-sex couples. Since 2005 civil partnerships have enabled same-sex couples to have the same legal rights and responsibilities as opposite-sex couples (with the exception of some differences around eligibility for some pension rights and laws around adultery and non-consummation). But the fact that they are not able to say they are married is seen as discriminatory (e.g. a requirement to declare marital status may reveal a person's sexuality). Government makes clear that it does not intend to change the way religious groups define or solemnize marriage, and that it will retain civil partnerships for same-sex couples who do not wish to marry.

Currently *"The Methodist Church believes that marriage is a gift of God and that it is God's intention that a marriage should be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman."* (Standing Order 011A (1)). This constitutional and theological definition is reflected in the introduction to the Marriage Service in the *Methodist Worship Book*, which begins by stating that, *"A marriage ceremony is a formal occasion when a solemn, legal contract is made between a man and a woman"*. It is therefore clear that the Methodist Church could not currently use the word "marriage" with reference to a same-sex relationship, and our response to Government has to say this. Were the Government to proceed, any further theological response would require extended consultation and reflection.

Moreover, the Methodist Church does not endorse the view expressed in the consultation document that marriage may have a different definition for religious groups than for the State. In the Church's understanding, the ceremony differs only insofar as, *"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."* (Methodist Worship Book, p367). At heart, marriage is at present the same legal contract whether entered by a civil or religious ceremony. The Methodist Church is therefore concerned at the Government's intention to create two kinds of marriage, what it calls "civil marriage" and "religious marriage", and not just two kinds of ceremony related to the same institution. It should further be noted that what makes a marriage religious in the Government's view has nothing to do with theology or with our awareness of the presence of God in our lives, but only with the kind of building in which it is solemnized, and the use of such elements as hymns and religious readings in the ceremony. The Methodist Church does not recognise such a description of "religious".

The Methodist Church's view on Human Sexuality was expressed in resolutions adopted by the Methodist Conference in 1993. The relevant resolutions read as follows:

"(4) The Conference reaffirms the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality; namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it ...

(6) The Conference recognises, affirms and celebrates the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men in the Church. The Conference calls on the Methodist people to begin a pilgrimage of faith to combat repression and discrimination, to

work for justice and human rights and to give dignity and worth to people whatever their sexuality.” (*Reproduced by direction of the Conference in the Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Book VII Guidance, Part 11*)

As a result of these resolutions, the Methodist Conference took the decision in 2006 that, whilst there is no reason a Methodist cannot enter into a civil partnership, Methodist premises may not be used for blessing civil partnerships. (*Previous Reference, Part 10*). The Methodist Church endorses the Government’s wish to combat discrimination on grounds of sexuality, but resists the redefinition of “marriage” and the distinction between two sorts of marriage, religious and civil, as the means to do this.

The Methodist Church is well aware that the area of same-sex relationships is one in which we have to learn to live with contradictory convictions. The Conference decided in 1995 and 1996 not to revisit the resolutions above, and has reaffirmed them since, most recently in 2008. The topic of homosexuality also prompted both the 1998 report on the Methodist understanding of scripture, *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path*, and in 2006, a report on *Living with Contradictory Convictions*. The conclusion of the latter reads,

“How does the Church then live ‘with contradictory convictions’? In short: by seeking, with God’s help, to be a body which remains open to God, and to welcome all those who are prepared to share and critically compare their personal stories with the story of God within a commitment to do this with each other.”

The same report addresses the Methodist Church’s engagement with changing views within society (paragraph 7.3), particularly the liberalising of attitudes regarding such matters as sexual behaviour. Believing the Christian Faith to be fully relevant to the world in which we live, the Church both seeks to form and influence public perception, whilst also, with the help of the Holy Spirit, learning through what happens in society at large. The Government’s stated determination to press ahead with same-sex civil marriage may well lead the Conference to judge that it is timely to look again at its convictions, with a view to deciding whether it should accommodate such a redefinition and its consequences. This would be consistent both with the pilgrimage referred to in Resolution (6) and with the 2002 Conference report, *Marriage in the Methodist Church*, which suggested that “We need to discuss very basic questions like what and who is marriage for?” Clearly Resolution 4 on Human Sexuality will have quite different possible interpretations if we are to have two kinds of marriage, that which the State recognises and that which the Church accepts.

There will be a number of other consequences for the Methodist Church to face if it refuses to recognise as marriage in the eyes of God a civil marriage where the couple are of the same sex. Our ability to live with contradictory convictions will be challenged in a new way should the State expressly endorse one conviction held among Methodists over against its alternative held by others. We may need to ask whether the new laws regarding marriage might also affect our stated views of divorce. Or again, how might the situation that is created undermine our commitment to offer pastoral care and support to those Christians preparing for marriage, or who are already married? The Church is currently pleased to have opportunity to offer marriage preparation to couples not marrying in church and marriage enrichment courses to all; when these groups begin to include same-sex couples would our practice need to change? Whilst the issues raised relate to lay and ordained

people, the Church does have specific guidelines on the stationing (i.e. the allocation of ministers to the places where they will serve) of married ordained couples. Would these apply equally to legally married same-sex couples? These are just example of the kind of questions that will have to be addressed.

Other tasks for the Church might also be inferred from this Consultation. We offer one example. Whilst celebrating the participation of lesbians and gay men in the Church, we have to date said nothing about transgender people, a group given particular attention in the Government proposals. [At present a person who is married or in a civil partnership must divorce before they can be granted a Gender Recognition Certificate acknowledging that their gender has changed. The new proposals would enable a married couple to remain married if one changed gender, or a couple in a civil partnership to convert their relationship into a marriage if one changed gender.] We offer no guidance to ministers where a church marriage is requested by an opposite-sex couple where one has been through gender reassignment. Can a church which is Arminian (that is, insistent that God's grace is offered to all people and that it should proclaim this), continue to overlook this group?

Our formal responses to the Consultation, based on what the Methodist Church has till now declared, are given in the response to the questionnaire. However, Methodist doctrine is shaped with reference to reason and experience as well as scripture and tradition. So when society takes steps that are at odds with existing declarations it is proper for the Methodist Church to look again at its understanding, and determine with some urgency whether that position should change or whether the Church should affirm its stance. We would not wish to find ourselves counter-cultural merely by default.

Dr Jocelyn Bryan
Rev Ruth Gee
Professor Judith Lieu
Rev Dr Stephen Mosedale (chair)
Rev David Warnock

(Group appointed to respond to this consultation by the Methodist Council and the Methodist Church Faith and Order Committee)

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