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# GOD IN LOVE UNITES US: Managing Group Conversations

The following information and guidance is provided to support you and your group in prayerful discussion of *God in love unites us*, the Report of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group 2019, whether you are facilitating, for example, a District Synod, Circuit Meeting or a local church house group/class meeting. This leaflet is a checklist of things you may wish to include in discussing the Report.

Advice on preparation beforehand, plus additional resources and study materials are listed online: [www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19](http://www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19).

The Report itself, a *Study Guide* to the Report that introduces each theme in the Report and poses questions for you to consider in your discussion session(s), and a supporting film to introduce the Report are provided online to download at [www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19](http://www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19) or are available to order from **Methodist Publishing**.

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## SUGGESTED OUTLINE FOR THE CONVERSATION

### 1. Introduction

Outline the purpose of the session:

Our aim is for the Church to have meaningful, grace-filled conversations about the Report, *God in love unites us*, remembering that we are all made in the image of God (see more on this theme in the *Study Guide*).

The purpose of this conversation is to support and/ or inform a decision-making process that will take place at district synods. It is an opportunity for people to hear and understand one another, deepen their relationships and enable us all to move forward together as Church in communion.

Offer a brief overview of the Methodist Church's journey and current position on relationships and marriage, or have some of the ancillary documents from the website on tables for people to look at as they arrive (see [www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19](http://www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19)):

When we consider Scripture, we find that on some subjects such as ways of relating, relationships and sexuality, there is a diverse and changing range of views and there is a wide range of ways in which Christians understand and interpret Scripture. This prompts a great deal of reflection for the Church, and we live with contradictory convictions. In short, there are some things where we disagree, and we have agreed to disagree for the time being, but we do so with respect for other people and their understanding of the Bible.

Over the last 25 years, the Methodist Church in Britain has been on a pilgrimage of faith and has come to a number of decisions, which are not to be the focus of this discussion, but are the context in which the current conversations will take place.

These include:

- In 1993, the Methodist Conference stated that it recognises, affirms and celebrates the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay people in the Church.
- In 2010, the Methodist Conference responded to the Equality Act, which stated that it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of someone's sexual orientation, with a commitment to become an inclusive Church.
- In 2013 the Conference resolved that both ordained and lay Methodists may form a civil partnership.
- In 2014 the Conference agreed that Methodists may enter a civil same-sex marriage without conflict to our discipleship or ministry. There is also a definition of and guidance around homophobia.

## 2. Prayers/devotions

Set this conversation in the context of worship and frame it with appropriate prayer. (Materials are available on the [Singing the Faith Plus](http://www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19) website and or can be accessed via [www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19](http://www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19))

### 3. Ground rules

Draw up ground rules for the conversation with the group members if possible; these are an integral part of the process. Explain that these rules set the boundaries and tone for the conversation and ensure you have the group's permission to intervene if things get difficult. The rules should include the following and individuals should agree to:

- listen to understand without interrupting
- respect the feelings, experiences and views of other people
- listen to different views and question in a constructive way that enables learning
- respect confidentiality (within the constraints and limits of safeguarding)
- take responsibility for their own learning and share, as well as receive, learning
- be aware of the potential impact of the subject on themselves and others
- assume no one means to hurt them
- be aware of how much they are speaking (NB the facilitator may need to give speakers a time-limit, and be aware of dominant voices that speak often, which they should gently seek to control)
- speak and act in a way that best enables others to hear and understand, even if they do not share their view
- speak for themselves without making generalisations – use 'I' statements rather than 'we' and 'us' or 'they' and 'them' statements.

### 4. Exercise to gauge strength of feelings

Ask the group these two questions separately:

**Question A** How passionate are you about your relationship with God?

**Question B** How passionate are you about the subject of marriage and relationships?

For each question, ask the group to arrange themselves in a line across the room, with those who feel most passionately about the topic at one end and those who do not have strong feelings about it at the other. Encourage the group to chat to each other to work out where they come in the line.

Remind the group that their passion for the topic will impact on how they engage in the forthcoming conversation, and draw out sensitively that those who are most passionate will probably have the most to say.

Remind the group that when we feel passionate about something, it is easy to get into a more argumentative conversation, or make sweeping statements and not carefully consider how we may best say what we need to say, and to do so in a way that will be easier to hear. There is, though, a way of expressing strong views that enables grace to prevail and holds together those who may differ in theological understanding.

## 5. The conversation

The exact format of your group's conversation about relationships and marriage will depend on context and timescale, but could include showing and discussing the supporting film or working through the *Study Guide*.

## 6. Widening the perspective

You may want to enhance your study by considering other material to give a voice to those not in the room. Have conversations round the table and in pairs about the material. Ask people to record their feedback on a flipchart and share the comments with the whole group.

Prompt discussion with questions such as:

- What have you learned that is new?
- What has surprised you?
- How do you feel about the video you have watched?
- What do you think of the section of the report you have looked at?

## 7. Feedback

Give feedback on discussions as invited by your district (remind those gathered of the aim of this session, referring to the ground rules if necessary).

## 8. Close with prayer.

You may like to use this prayer from the *Study Guide*:

**Merciful God,  
help us  
to speak in love what is in our minds,  
and to hear in love what is said by others;  
to feel in love what is in our hearts,  
and to sense in love what is in the hearts of others;  
to confer in love to discern your truth,  
and to be open in love to your guiding Spirit.  
Through our disagreements guide us;  
in our agreements direct us.  
Together may we share the mind of Christ,  
in whose name we pray.  
Amen**

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