

## 27. Marriage and relationships task group: Interim report

<b>Contact name and details</b>	The Revd Kenneth G Howcroft Chair of the Task Group
<b>Resolutions</b>	27/1. The Conference receives the Report. 27/2. The Conference adopts the proposed way of proceeding and timetable set out in paragraphs 12, 13 and 14 in the Report, and directs Districts and Circuits to ensure that appropriate arrangements are made for the relevant church bodies to fulfil them.

### Progress towards fulfilling the group's task

1. The Task Group wishes to share with members of the Conference and, through the Conference, the Methodist people, its progress in the tasks which it was set by the resolutions of the Conference in 2016. These were the preparation of “a new Statement of the judgment of the Conference on marriage and relationships” under Standing Order 129, and the “revisiting” and “consideration” of the definition of marriage, as required by the resolutions of the Conference in 2016. The group has made considerable progress towards fulfilling that task, but, with great regret, has to report that it cannot bring a draft text of a new Statement to the Conference in 2018 as stipulated in those resolutions. We shall explain below the reasons for this delay. We shall also recommend a revised process and timetable which will enable the Conference to agree a new Statement on these matters in 2020, as originally intended, after a period of consultation with the Church.<sup>1</sup> Finally, we shall indicate some of the group's developing insights into marriage and relationships, and set out some preliminary issues about which it wishes to raise awareness and asks the Conference to explore through a series of workshops.
2. In 2016, the Conference adopted Resolutions 29/7, 29/8 and 29/9 in the following form (*Daily Record 6/14/1 and 6/14/2*):  
29/7 *The Conference directed that a new Statement of the judgment of the Conference on marriage and relationships shall be prepared and that, as part of the process, the definition of marriage should be revisited.*  
29/8 *The Conference appointed a new task group, which shall include people with expert knowledge of matters of Faith and Order and marriage and relationships, to update the Statement and to oversee the process of*

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1 A draft Statement of the judgment of the Conference under Standing Order 129 has to be presented to the Conference in one year, then sent to the Connexion for study and response, before being brought back to the Conference, in its original or some revised form, in a subsequent year for adoption.

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*consulting with the Methodist people on the definition of marriage.*

- 29/9. *The Conference directed that the new task group shall report to the 2018 Conference with a draft text of a new statement which shall include:*
- a) consideration of all relevant Reports produced and Resolutions passed by the Conference... (sc. as set out in paragraph 3.5.1 of the 2016 report);*
  - b) consideration of the definition of marriage, including the matters raised throughout section 3 of ... (sc. the 2016) report.*

3. The task group was duly set up and consists of six ordained and two lay people. As its members, we have sought to recognise the diversity of experience and range of views and beliefs amongst Methodists about the matters remitted to us. We have acknowledged the particular experiences represented amongst us in the group, and the views that informed us as we began our journey. We are all committed followers of Jesus Christ and members of the Methodist Church. We had never worked together before and had to learn to know and trust one another as we worked together. In that, we have followed the “model statement on Living with Contradictory Convictions” set out in the report to the 2016 Conference as guidelines for how to conduct our discussions.
4. It is important to stress at the outset that the group was not charged with producing another report, but a new Statement, and, potentially, a revised Definition of Marriage. The Definition that the task group is charged with revisiting is that found in Standing Order O11A, particularly the first sentence of Clause (1): “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.” The latter part of that sentence (“a life-long union.... one man and one woman”) repeats a phrase from the 1936 Conference Statement on Marriage and the Family, which in turn echoed a phrase found displayed in some marriage Registry Offices prior to the passing of the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act 2013 that “According to the laws of this country, marriage is a life-long union of one man with one woman”. The Statement that the task group is charged with revising and updating is the one adopted by the 1992 Conference entitled *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*. That Statement predates the discussions of Human Sexuality which led to the resolutions on those matters adopted by the 1993 Conference (which can be found in Volume 2, Book VII, Section C, Part 11 of *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* on page 801 of the 2017 edition, available at [www.methodist.org.uk/for-ministers-and-office-holders/governance/cpd](http://www.methodist.org.uk/for-ministers-and-office-holders/governance/cpd)).
5. The group was quickly seized of the importance and magnitude of its task. It recognised that whereas the God whose gracious love creates, shapes and orders the world is unchanging, the social, legal, scientific and other understandings of the current age, in which we seek to live in obedient response to that love as individuals and in community, are changing rapidly. The group’s remit includes preparing a revised and updated formal

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Statement of the Conference's judgment on marriage and relationships in general (including issues of cohabitation, serial-monogamy, polyamory, understanding and relating well to bisexual and transgender people, to name but a few), and not just on the possibility of the Church including same-sex marriage in its understanding of marriage (as the law has done in the civic sphere). This means that the group's task is great while its timetable is short.

6. The group has worked with commitment since the 2016 Conference. It has met nine times between September 2016 and March 2018, with some of those meetings being residential. It has also engaged in a lot of thinking, praying, research and writing in between its meetings (including four weeks of one minister's sabbatical). But in that period, there has been a change of Chair due to unforeseen circumstances, several bouts of significant ill-health among its members, and significant disruption caused by four of its members changing station.
7. Nevertheless, the group has made considerable progress. In October 2017, it informed the Methodist Council that it hoped to be able to bring substantial material to the 2018 Conference, but did not know at that stage how much. It therefore identified a twin-track approach as to how to bring its work to the Conference and how the consultation beyond might proceed. The first was based on the assumption that a draft Statement would be brought, as required, in 2018. The second addressed the situation should the group not be able to present a draft Statement in 2018, and is the basis of what is proposed below.
8. By January 2018 the task group had identified the broad outline of what it wished to propose. It had worked towards producing both a brief draft Statement and a longer report exploring some of the issues lying behind it; and it was in conversation with the Faith and Order Committee about both. It therefore informed the Council that it was now hoping to follow the track of bringing a draft Statement to the 2018 Conference.
9. Sadly, that is what the group is now unable to do. The delay is partly due to the reasons outlined in paragraph 6 above. It is also partly due to inherent difficulties in the task that the group has been set. The task group is aware that many people are looking, as a matter of urgency, for the Conference to decide one way or another how the Methodist Church should respond in its life and worship to the changes in the legal definition of marriage, which now include the possibility of same-sex marriage as well as heterosexual marriage. If such questions are primarily seen in practical terms, decisions about them are often dealt with by a report containing recommendations. As with all matters of policy, such recommendations should be based on prayerful discernment; careful reading, interpretation and application of the Scriptures; and rigorous thinking. At the same time, they are grounded in an agreed framework of the Methodist Church's theological understanding and teaching ("our doctrines").

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10. Changes to that framework, however, are not dealt with through a report with recommendations, but through a Statement of the Conference under Standing Order 129 such as the current task group is directed to prepare. Such Statements set out the formal judgment of the Conference on a major and wide-ranging issue of faith and practice. They have the highest degree of authority in the Methodist Church. They are relatively rare, and are intended to last for at least ten years, and to be able to stand alongside the formal statements of other Churches (even if offering different understandings and perspectives) and withstand the highest level of theological scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> Yet such documents are by their very nature long, and often cannot be made easily accessible to the majority of the Methodist people. This is demonstrated by the difficulty (documented in Conference reports over the last 20 years) in using the 1992 Statement on “Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage” to develop many resources for teaching, study and exploration on those issues as a whole, or to provide guidance requested by the Conference on ‘Cohabitation’ in particular (a topic now remitted to the current task group).
11. The task group recognises that many people, representing a wide spectrum of opinions, are concentrating their attention on the issue of same-sex marriage. There often appears to be an underlying assumption that the Conference already has an adequate definition of and statement about marriage from a Christian perspective<sup>3</sup> as it applies to heterosexual couples in the twenty-first century; and that the decision to be made is essentially one of policy as to whether that understanding can and should include the possibility of it being applied to same-sex couples, or must necessarily exclude them. Yet it is implicit in previous reports to the Conference (not least, that of 2016) that for a number of reasons the 1992 Statement, while containing much that is still relevant and helpful, is no longer adequately guiding the thinking and practice of the Methodist people even in so far as it applies to heterosexual couples. This has also become the conviction of the current task group, which is agreed in principle that the whole of the Methodist Church’s understanding and practice with regards to marriage and other significant personal relationships needs to be re-examined and, where necessary, re-stated. Some of the issues involved in this are set out below.

### A proposed way of proceeding

12. The task group is presenting this interim report to the Conference of 2018. It will make a presentation to the Conference in plenary session about the direction of its thinking, and

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2 A major example of such a Statement on faith and practice is that adopted by the Conference of 1999 on “The Nature of the Christian Church in Methodist Practice and Experience” entitled “Called to Love and Praise”.

3 The 1992 Statement talks of ‘The Christian view of marriage’ and ‘spiritual understanding of marriage’ in paragraph 65, and of ‘The characteristics of Christian marriage’ in Paragraph 70.

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then consult the members of the Conference in a series of workshops about their views on particular issues arising in that work.

13. During the 2018/2019 connexional year, the task group will work to complete the draft Statement, working with the Faith and Order Committee to ensure that it is rigorous, and will present it to the 2019 Conference. The main resolution before the 2019 Conference will be to the effect that the draft Statement be commended to the Connexion for study, discussion and response.
14. The Conference will also be asked to direct that the consultation period for study, discussion and response be from the end of the 2019 Conference to the end of January 2020. This would require bodies that are due to respond formally to arrange their times of meetings and agendas to make this possible.<sup>4</sup> It would allow time for there to be consultation with the Faith and Order Committee and for any revisions to the draft Statement to be made, before final submission of the Statement to the 2020 Conference (the same time as that in the process set out by the 2016 Conference). This will require the 2019 Conference to suspend SO 129(3) in respect of this item of business so as to enable the Conference to vote on the Statement in 2020 as opposed to the Conference in the next year but one, that is 2021<sup>5</sup>.
15. If, however, the Conference were to wish to retain a two-year consultation period, that period would be between the end of the 2019 Conference and January 2021, allowing time for any revisions to the draft Statement to be made and scrutinised by the Faith and Order Committee before final submission of the Statement to the 2021 Conference.

### Some preliminary issues

16. In this section we are not presenting a draft Statement under Standing Order 129, or even a formal, fully documented and rigorously argued report that sets out any of our potential recommendations. Instead, we wish to indicate briefly the general direction of our task group's explorations, and to raise with the Conference and the wider Connexion some important issues which will shape our final conclusions.
17. As we have worked, we have tried to be open and transparent with each other in dealing with the range of opinions held amongst us and within the Connexion as a whole about the issues before us. The following are but a few headlines. What sets the definitions

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Districts may wish to devote part of their autumn synod meetings to the draft Statement.

<sup>5</sup> SO 129(3) requires the Conference to give directions as to 'the form and duration of such study and discussion, the timing and consideration of any such response and the year in which the matter shall next be brought before Conference, being at earliest the next year but one. The Conference may at any time vary those directions.'

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of concepts like 'marriage' and 'relationships' for our Church: the state and the law; or philosophers, social anthropologists and other thinkers and opinion-formers; or divine revelation and Christian faith; or some combination of these or other factors? What do we have to say about these things in the light of contemporary scientific and social-scientific understandings? What do we have to say as a Church about what it is to be a human being? How do people best relate to each other? How do we best form primary social groups (such as families) today? What is it to be a gendered being, and what do we understand gender to be? What is it to be a sexual being and what do we understand sex to be? How is our sexuality best accepted as a gift of God, and best expressed to the glory of God? What roles do forms of cohabitation, other alternative forms of relationship, and marriage best play in all this? Does it make a difference whether any of them involve sexual intimacy or not? What is best if the relationships are heterosexual? What is best if they are same-sex? What is best if people identify as bisexual or trans? How do changing understandings of gender identity affect our understanding of others?

18. We recognise and value the considerable energies already spent by many Methodists in coming to understand differing perspectives on these topics. We became aware that for some the Church's current exclusion of same-sex marriage and general reticence about sexual relationships (both same-sex and heterosexual) and cohabitation are experienced as very demeaning and excluding. At the same time, some who cherish the traditional views and practices taught by the Church feel that their efforts in keeping to them are demeaned by suggestions that fresh understandings might be brought alongside them, and fear that they might be excluded by particular potential developments.
19. In dealing with these things, we have discovered how important it is to have guidelines for how to conduct our discussions. We have come to value highly the 'model statement on Living with Contradictory Convictions' set out in the report of the previous task group to the 2016 Conference. We recommend it to everyone seeking to share in this process of discerning God's will. We continue to respect the integrity of differing opinions and to "learn from one another as we travel together as fellow pilgrims" (as the report of the previous task group to the 2016 Conference put it).
20. We have therefore paid particular attention to how our Church might share in the process of discernment and develop a corporate vision of God's will for personal relationships in general, and marriage in particular. Methodists have often sought to bring together insights from 'the Scriptures', 'the Church's traditions', 'reason' (including developing scientific and theological understandings), and 'experience' (personal and social). But central to all the discussions over recent decades about the issues remitted to our task group has been the engagement with the Scriptures. Thus, the report of the Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships to the 2014 Conference stated that, as would be expected and hoped, the largest single issue raised in its process of consultation was the importance of the Bible in the Church's decision-making. It noted

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that the variety of views expressed suggested that the current argument in the Church is not over biblical authority as such, but, rather, scriptural interpretation and application. It also suggested that the range of responses to its consultation were a vivid illustration of how the various types of view that had been outlined in the Faith and Order Committee's report to the 1998 Conference, *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path*<sup>6</sup> interact in practice. That report indicated a range of ways in which Methodists use what is written in the Bible as a source for what they believe.

21. The 1998 Conference, however, did not choose to affirm only one of those ways of using Scripture as being correct. Nor has any subsequent Conference. So where a variety of views about the interpretation and use of the Bible, each of which the Conference has affirmed, lead to different or even contradictory conclusions about matters of belief or practice, the Conference has a difficult task in finding its way forward. This is the case in the issues before us now. As a task group, we have come to see that we can only proceed humbly, carefully, prayerfully, and in constant engagement with the Scriptures as we confer together to attempt to see how the principles of God's love might be embodied today. In the material that we propose bringing to the 2019 Conference, we shall say more about biblical texts and insights that relate to marriage and relationships in general, including same-sex relationships.
22. For example, many people (as demonstrated in the consultation reported in the 2014 report) refer to Genesis 2:24 as providing a definition of marriage: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh."<sup>7</sup> Care, though, needs to be taken that we do not simply take our contemporary understandings of marriage and read them back uncritically into the biblical narratives.
23. We have been fascinated to see how understandings of marriage have changed through the centuries. Methodist statements and liturgies about marriage have always seen it as a gift of God, and an institution in which God's love can be identified, accepted thankfully, dedicated to God and received again overflowing with blessing. Within that framework, they have moved over the years from seeing its purpose as being mainly about procreation, or the control of powerful sexual instincts and emotions, to being mainly about companionship and mutual support.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, the same biblical texts have been read and interpreted in different ways to support those understandings. This

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6 *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order*, vol. 2, pp 644-667.

7 New Revised Standard Version. Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:7 show Jesus quoting this text in the context of a discussion of divorce (which presupposes marriage).

8 The shifts are most noticeable in the sections of the authorised marriage services which are actually headed "The Declaration of Purpose" in the 1975 Methodist Service Book. The emphasis on procreation and the control of sexual instincts is found in services inherited or adapted from the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer. The shifts had already begun in the 1936 Methodist Book of Offices (following Methodist Union).

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developing nature of Christian understanding and practice means that we need to be in a constant, reflective and sensitive dialogue with the Scriptures.

24. The task group also recognises that the term 'marriage' has covered a wide diversity of practices and meanings not just in the Church, but more generally through time and across cultures. In Britain, the Marriage Act 1753 ('Lord Hardwicke's Act') led to the assumption that the Christian understanding of marriage and that of the state and wider society were co-terminous. That assumption still implicitly affects the way many Methodists think of marriage today. But over the years across wider society, marriage has generally come to have more of a shared legal and civic meaning, rather than a religious meaning (although, for a significant minority, a religious aspect to marriage is still important). Partially, at least, a gap has opened up between the two, as shown most explicitly by the Marriage Act 2013, which created a category of legal and civic marriage for same-sex couples, irrespective of the traditional teaching of the Churches.
25. That, in turn, has made us look carefully at whether there is a distinctively Christian way of understanding and practising marriage and other significant forms of personal relationship. To put the point theologically about just one aspect of this, what do we think God is doing when people come to be married, and when we conduct a wedding service and offer the couple support as they seek to work out and live out its implications afterwards?
26. That in turn raises the question of what status any guidance has that the Church offers to people concerning their practice or conduct in marriage or other forms of personal relationship. The most obvious example here is that in its 1993 Resolutions, the Conference formally reaffirmed an aspect of what it understood to be the traditional teaching of the Church about marriage and other relationships, namely that there should be "chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it". Whilst the focus of discussion since 1993 about the application of that resolution has tended to be on homosexual relationships, the first phrase of it in particular ('chastity for all outside marriage') refers to human sexuality in general, and to all forms of sexual relationship, not least heterosexual ones.
27. One possibility is that pronouncements by the Conference of this type are intended to be statements of disciplinary standards for its members, officers, and ministers. The 2006 Conference adopted a resolution that stated that the 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality are part of 'our discipline'. This resolution was the outcome of a report that indicated that 'our discipline' is 'binding upon all within the Church' unless only certain officers and institutions are specifically mentioned in particular standing orders or resolutions of the Conference. Yet monitoring and regulating such discipline across all in the Church would be highly problematic.

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28. Another possibility is that such resolutions are expected to have little or no effect on how people behave, or, at most, will be matters of private aspiration and conscience. It has been argued that, in making pronouncements such as the one quoted above, the Conference has put before all church members (lay and ordained) the responsibility of examining their aspirations and practice in the light of the 1993 Resolutions. In other words, the onus is on each member in his or her conscience to reflect on whether their behaviour fits within them.
29. As a task group, however, we are minded to see them in a stronger light, as more than private aspirations. They are in this sense teaching about how gospel values apply in particular contexts and situations. That is why in paragraph 17 above we phrased questions in terms of what we believe to be 'best'.
30. With these contemporary questions about marriage and other significant forms of personal relationship in mind, we believe that the Church can provide afresh, spiritual and ethical insights into marriage. While recognising the importance of the legal and civic side to marriage (in which the Church has historically declared marriages to have been effected under the law of the land and registered them accordingly), we are exploring the possibility of offering an emphasis on the qualities of holy relating.
31. We have therefore been looking at what the Scriptures teach about holy relating and in particular at the biblical understanding of divine and human love. We have applied this not just to marriage, but also to other significant relationships. Against this criterion, we are able to evaluate issues of casual sex, cohabitation, heterosexual marriage, and same-sex marriage and relationships. We have come to see that the key aspect in all relationships is the Christ-like quality of the way in which people relate. We are minded to offer a vision for all significant relationships that they will be built on self-giving love, commitment, fidelity and loyalty, honesty, mutual respect, equality (including gender equality), and the desire for the flourishing of the other and self. It is through that self-giving rather than through self-seeking that the 'self' flourishes and begins to experience 'life in all its fullness'.
32. We are therefore wanting to offer to everyone, whether they are Christian or not, the Methodist Church's vision of marriage. In summary, such marriage is a socially recognised deepening of committed relating, which usually has a sexual dimension. It is primarily about companionship rather than sex, procreation or economics (although at times these latter aspects are not insignificant). Its purposes are for the honouring of God through the flourishing of the person, the couple, the family and the wider social group. It bears the hall-marks of Christ-like relating. It is, above all, part of God's creative ordering of the universe, through which God's grace and love may be experienced and shared.
33. This brings us to the particular issues about which we would like the Conference to confer in workshops. They interlink, but the main emphasis is distinct in each.

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### **A. Sexual intimacy and cohabitation**

What guidance, if any, should the Church offer on expressions of sexual intimacy within marriage and outside marriage? Are such matters purely the concern of the people involved, or do wider society and the Church (speaking as Christ's body in the name of God) also have a legitimate view? If so, should any guidance only be offered in negative terms (eg "you shall not be violent, abuse or exploit"), or can more positive ways of speaking about holy, Christ-like relating be found?

Similarly, what guidance, if any, should the Church offer on cohabitation and other forms of personal relationship (whether or not they involve sexual intimacy)?

Are they to be seen as alternatives to marriage, complementary to it, or even as legitimate preparation for it?

How can the Church live out its beliefs in these areas through such means as liturgies, pastoral support, and renewed teaching and guidance?

### **B. Marriage under the law and in the Church**

What should the relationship be between civic or legal marriage, on the one hand; and marriage as understood more deeply by the Church, on the other? In some other countries, the marriage service of the Church can only take place when a marriage under the law of the land has already been contracted and registered.

Would decoupling the civic ceremony and the church service in the UK strengthen or weaken the Church's understanding and practice of marriage, and its standing in and influence on society? Would it enable the Church to put the emphasis more on the quality of the relationships being developed, and on the spirituality of the union rather than on its social nature as a marker of status?

If so, how in these circumstances should we preach and offer the gospel? Should the Church welcome everyone, whether or not a member, who enquires about a marriage service in any of its places of worship? Should it look for an openness to God in them, not necessarily a developed understanding of the Christian faith? Should the Church, as part of the vision of marriage it offers, also look for and encourage the qualities of holy relating in every couple? Is the marriage service an act of worship in which the people representing the Church and the couple concerned thank God for the blessings of God's grace and the love from each other that they had already received; commit themselves in faith to accept and return that love in every way they can through the changing circumstances of life; return the blessing to God in the form of thanks and praise; and receive their relationship again from God, recognised, transformed and overflowing with blessing?

### **C. Heterosexual marriage and same-sex marriage**

How might the Church manage the practical implications should it choose not to affirm same-sex marriage as part of its understanding and practice of marriage? Are there tensions between the 1993 resolutions (particularly that on chastity and fidelity) on the one hand, and, on the other, the current 'exception' or 'conscience' clauses which do not prevent Methodists entering civic same-sex marriages? If so, how might they be resolved?

Similarly, how might the Church manage the practical implications should it choose to affirm same-sex marriage as part of its understanding and practice of marriage? Should there be 'exception' or 'conscience clauses' for ministers who do not wish to conduct such services (as there are for those who do not wish to conduct marriages for divorcees)? Should there be 'exception' or 'conscience clauses' for Local Churches who do not want same-sex marriage services to be conducted in them, or would principles of connexionalism and equality mean that any Local Church that wishes to conduct heterosexual marriages should also be required to be open to conduct same-sex marriages?

34. We are on a challenging journey in which we have experienced, and sometimes been surprised by, joy. What we have set out in this interim report shows the trajectory of our work, but is not exhaustive of all that we have done. We have tried to indicate some of our developing insights into marriage and relationships, and some of the issues with which we are grappling in order to fulfil the large and important task that the Conference has remitted to us. We will listen very carefully to the views expressed in the workshops. We shall then work in conjunction with the Faith and Order Committee and bring the fruits of all our reflections to the 2019 Conference.

### **\*\*\*RESOLUTIONS**

**27/1. The Conference receives the Report.**

**27/2. The Conference adopts the proposed way of proceeding and timetable set out in paragraphs 12, 13 and 14 in the Report, and directs Districts and Circuits to ensure that appropriate arrangements are made for the relevant church bodies to fulfil them.**