

Equality Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit

Module 7.2

Welcoming Same-Sex Couples and Their Families



REMINDER

Theological reflections on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

A Theological Reflections on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion document is provided separately. All participants should have a copy of this when they attend their first session. It does not need to be considered in detail every time, but participants should be introduced to it at least once, and made aware that this is the starting point for all our work on EDI issues in the Methodist Church.

Module 7.2

Welcoming Same-Sex Couples and Their Families

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Opening worship

All praise to our redeeming Lord
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Holy God, before ever you made us, you loved us. Nor has your love ever slackened, nor ever shall. In love all your works have begun, and in love they continue. In this love our life is everlasting, and in this love we shall see you and be glad in you forever.

Amen.

(Julian of Norwich)

EXPLORE

1 Context

In 2014, the Methodist Conference received the report of the working party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships. Amongst the many recommendations from the working party, the Methodist Conference resolved:

“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.”

This session of the EDI Toolkit has been developed as part of the response to that resolution. It is a continuation of the ‘pilgrimage of faith’ on human sexuality, which itself was a resolution from the 1993 Conference:

“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.”

2 Diversity of scriptural and theological considerations relating to homophobia

Activity 1

Different perspectives on marriage – reflecting on the Gospels

Read Mark’s account of Jesus’ teaching in response to a question about divorce (Mark 10:1-12) and compare it with Matthew’s account of Jesus’ teaching on divorce (Matthew 5:31-32). Now consider John’s account of meeting a Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar (John 4:1-42).

- How do these accounts differ in how Jesus deals with relationships?
- Why do you think that is?
- Why do you think the early Church included differing, sometimes contradictory, accounts in the Bible?

Learning from the activity

There is a great variety in how Christians understand those passages of Scripture (amongst many others) and what they have to say about relationships today. This variety of views is not because some people hold the truth and others don’t. It is often the case that, following prayerful consideration of the Bible, Christians reach different understandings in the light of their experience, reason and tradition. There is often a creative tension in living with differences of view, through which we learn from each other.

Notice how Jesus’ interaction with the woman at the well is loving and hospitable.

There is a further reflection on Mark 10:1-16 in the EXTEND section.

2.1 Contradictory convictions

When considering matters of sexuality and sexual orientation, Methodists must not only consider the

legal and social context; we must also engage with the Christian theological tradition and with the divine revelation recorded in the Bible. The experience of the Methodist Church has been that there are differences in how we read the Bible and interpret what it says and means for Christian living today. We are not alone in this. A number of our Methodist and ecumenical partners are struggling with the same issues. The outcome of our deliberations, discussions and scriptural reflections on matters relating to same-sex relationships has not been consensus. At the present time, it seems that a sincere and prayerful reading of Scripture can lead some to conclude that same sex-relationships are wrong and others that they are within the will of God, with many others in between or undecided. This module does not alter that position but seeks to honour all those who continue to struggle with Scripture and context to find a way forward.

The 1993 resolutions committed the Methodist Church to a 'pilgrimage of faith', and called on all of us to respect our diverse range of scriptural understanding as we give dignity and worth to all within our fellowship.

2.2 The nature of Christian conduct

When considering matters of sexuality and sexual orientation, as with all other matters, a Christian's words and actions should be guided by the Bible's teaching on the nature of love (1 Corinthians 13), the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22 – 23) and Christian conduct (1 Peter 3:13 – 17). To do to others as you would want done to you and to love your neighbour as yourself are good guiding principles when dealing with difference.

Activity 2 - We are family

Look at the illustration in the activity pack, showing some different models of family we may find in our church communities today.

In small groups, discuss:

- What are the various types of family found in your church?
- What are the various types of family found in your community?
- How could family work and ministry in your context become more inclusive of different kinds of family?
- How are leaders in your church being trained and equipped to support family ministry in the diversity of your local context?

If you can think of other models of family, write them in the blank spaces. You may want to add more.

Learning from the activity

There is a great deal of diversity in family life.

Same-sex couples, with or without children, are part of the reality of our diverse community. Family ministry and family support have elements that are inward facing to the church community and outward facing to the wider community.

As Christians we are part of God's family and connected to each other as family.

www.methodist.org.uk/media/1846182/family_ministries_booklet.pdf

3 Equality law in England and Wales, and Scotland

3.1 The Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 replaced more than 15 anti-discrimination laws – with a single Act. The legislation covers:

- employment and work
- goods and services
- premises
- associations
- transport.

The Act states that discrimination occurs when a person treats another less favourably than they treat or would treat others because of a protected characteristic.

The Act identifies nine “protected characteristics”, including:

- sexual orientation
- marriage and civil partnership.

Discrimination is generally unlawful. However, the Act does provide some exceptions for religious organisations. It is illegal to discriminate against a person on the grounds of their sexual orientation. There is some further information in the EXTEND section (below) about the exemptions, but these are very limited. The exemptions only apply to religious organisations. Individuals cannot use their religion as a reason to discriminate against a person on the grounds of their sexual orientation.

4 Marriage and civil partnership

4.1 The law

Married persons and those in civil partnerships have the same legal and civil rights. The Equality Act 2010 predates legislation that introduced the marriage of same-sex couples. It makes it clear that couples in same-sex marriages have the same legal and civil rights as other married persons and those in civil partnerships.

The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 in England and Wales, and the Marriage and Civil Partnerships (Scotland) Act 2015, introduced legal provision for same-sex marriage. Religious organisations may opt in to same sex marriage but are not required to. The Methodist Church has chosen not to opt in to the solemnisation of same-sex marriage, or the formal blessing of same-sex marriage.

4.2 What is the attitude of the Methodist Church to same-sex marriage?

Within the Methodist Church there is a spectrum of views on human sexuality. The Methodist Church has not chosen to opt into the authorisation of same-sex marriage in Church, and has a definition that Christian marriage is a lifelong union between one man and one woman. But the Church does recognise the right of same-sex couples to have a legally formed marriage or enter a civil partnership, albeit not on Methodist premises. It also upholds the principle of not discriminating against a person's legal or civil rights. Further information can be found at:

www.methodist.org.uk/talkingofmarriageandrelationships

Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 – England and Wales
The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014 – Scotland

A summary of same sex marriage and civil partnership legislation around the Connexion can be found under frequently asked questions at:

www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/views-of-the-church/talking-of-marriage-and-relationships

5 Introductory case study

In teams of three or four, read the case study about Joe. Discuss and reflect on the questions that follow.

Case study – Joe

Joe is a gay man who has two children. He is happy in his local church, but this was his experience when attending an ecumenical carol service:

“It should have been really good. It was for most people there – but not for me or my children. Sadly, some folk who attend a different church were there leading worship and they have a real problem with my sexuality. They were their usual rude selves. Having been ignored, glared at by adults, teens and children and made to feel tremendously unwelcome, I was very glad to leave. It was so obvious that they didn’t want me there, and if I couldn’t be there, it meant my children couldn’t be either. It was such a deflating way to spend a night.

I just pray I’m never so horrible, rude and nasty to those I disagree with.

We had a good time later, when I took my children out for a treat which helped them enjoy a good evening and it took things off my mind for a bit. But this morning all the horrible behaviour of that encounter is all I can think of.”

Reflect and consider in small groups

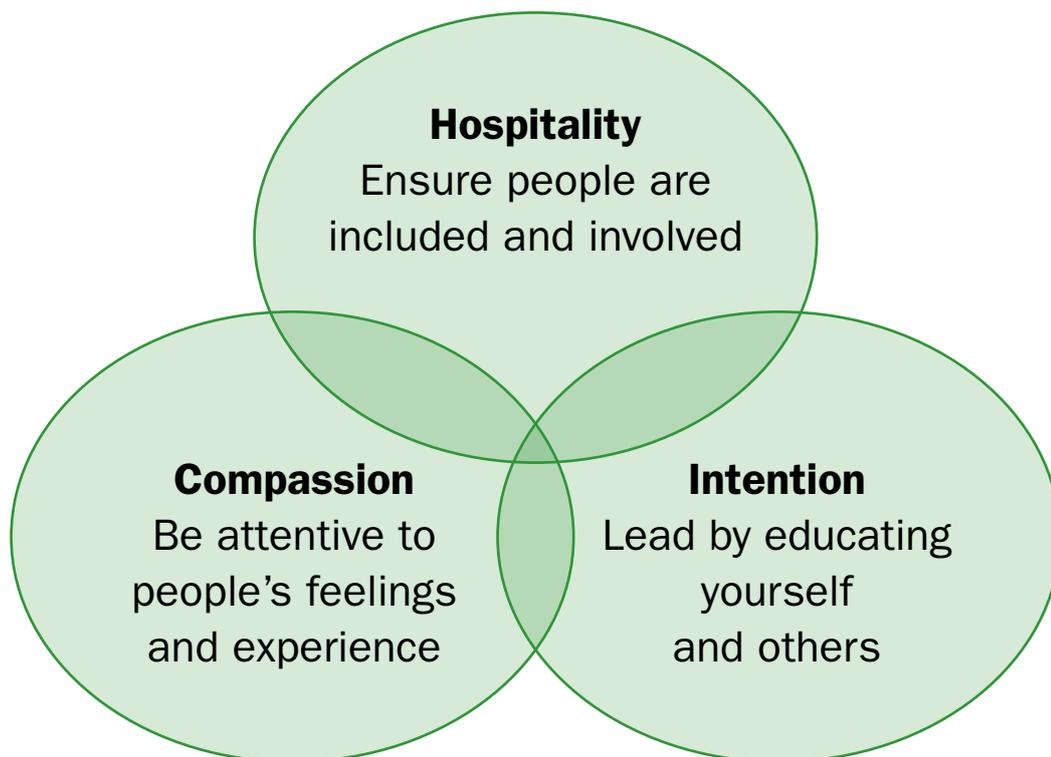
- How do we usually welcome people? And what was wrong here?
- In what ways do you experience welcome in the church?
- Thinking of a time you were made to feel unwelcome, what did it feel like?
- What does it feel like when a loved one, a family member, is bullied, rejected or ignored?
- The people who made Joe feel unwelcome did so in a number of ways. What words and emotions come to mind when you read this? How does such unwelcoming behaviour impact on Joe and his children?

6 Being welcoming

6.1 Principles of welcome

There are three principles to being welcoming:

- **Hospitality** – consider how you have experienced hospitality and when you have not. Ensure that people are included and involved.
- **Intention** – notice people and listen to them. Encourage and teach others, by example, how to be welcoming. Risk the hostile stares and attitudes of people who wish to remain unwelcoming.
- **Compassion** – be aware of other people’s presence, being attentive and reactive to their feelings.



6.2 Being welcoming in our relationships with others

As Church we can learn from Scripture in the light of our reason, but especially in the experience and tradition of our own history. This includes:

- a) Acknowledging that people have been ‘unwelcome’ – both Church and society have long histories of discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. This has damaged the Church’s relationship with LGBT people, many of whom feel unwelcome in churches. Acknowledging this is an important element of reconciliation and welcome.
- b) Considering how Jesus welcomed – Jesus not only welcomed people inclusively, but welcomed primarily those who had been made to feel unwelcome.
- c) Considering how the early Church learnt to welcome across boundaries of community, to include those who had been excluded – and find that God was already at work in them. In Acts 10/11, God welcomes first.

Activity

In small groups, discuss and identify how we can engage positively with each other. Then provide feedback to the wider group.

The following information is drawn from the Methodist Church's guidance, '*Positive Working Together*'. It offers advice which helps us to engage positively with each other in Church life.

Communication

- Pay attention to how we greet and address each other on an everyday basis, ensuring that we are at all times courteous, respectful and appropriate, regardless of the medium.
- Be mindful of the impact our communication has on others, making efforts to understand our communication from the perspective of how it is received by others.
- Be aware of how our power over others is communicated, taking measures to ensure that such power is not misused or abused.
- Only communicate about other people what we would be prepared to communicate to them face-to-face, unless there are overriding and justifiable reasons not to do so.
- Make an effort to check with others whenever we fear we may have upset or offended them in order to promote confidence and clarity in our relationships with others.
- Make time to genuinely listen to what others communicate to us, particularly when the situation is sensitive or personally challenging to us.

How we treat each other

- Treat every person fairly, equally and with dignity and respect.
- Behave at all times with integrity, honesty and openness.
- Adjust our behaviour, including language, if we understand it to be causing offence.
- Bring unfair treatment to the attention of others so as to avoid it being repeated.
- Challenge inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour we have witnessed, doing this in a constructive, sensitive and proportionate way.
- Respond to criticism of our own behaviour by genuinely listening to what is being said, remaining calm and reflecting honestly on its potential validity before responding.
- Be aware that at times we may lack self-awareness and that this may impact negatively on our behaviour.

Typical causes of conflict in church settings to be aware of

- Spiritual bullying – sometimes leaders or those in authority use their position to claim superior spirituality which they believe gives them the right to be directive about how others should live. This is not acceptable behaviour and should be challenged sensitively.
- Different perspectives – everyone sees the world a little bit differently. Therefore, try to understand the perspectives of others.
- Different values – whilst we are all part of one Church, which holds a core set of beliefs in common, we sometimes hold values which are at odds with the values of others in the Church. This tension is part of our discipleship.

All humanity is made in the image of God, created for relationship with God and with each other. This shared humanity of all people and the desire of Christians to grow in the knowledge of God, individually and collectively, is explored in the 2006 Conference Report *Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church*, which states:

Members of the Church are given the tasks of knowing themselves, recognising their uniqueness as well as their shared humanity. They are to reflect on their personal desires, convictions and sense of calling and to relate these respectfully to those of others. Such tasks can be achieved only in a community in which individuals are open to God and one another. By being open to one another, each individual's convictions, experience and insights, however diverse, are brought into conversation with each other.

APPLY and REFLECT

1 Case studies

This section contains case studies for you to consider in small teams. Consider at least two of the stories, but as many as time will allow.

Each of these is a true story, although names and some details have been changed to maintain anonymity.

At the end of each story, there are questions for you to consider. It may be helpful to refer back to the SCIP classification in the Introductory Module. Here is a headline reminder of the four dimensions of SCIP:

- Structural – eg legal and political structures, policies, committees etc
- Cultural – the cultural norms of a group or society, commonly held views
- Institutional – practices, how things are done
- Personal – personal behaviours and practices

At the end of each story there are questions for you to consider. Reflect also, as you read, on what the key words, emotions and issues are for the person in the story and for you.

Paula and Anne – stories from the mothers of gay or lesbian children

Consider these two contrasting stories, which have similar circumstances.

Paula's story

Paula is a widow and a member of her local Methodist church. She has two children, both of whom were baptized in the church and attended Junior Church. At 18 her daughter Rebecca came out and told her that she was a lesbian. Paula took this news quite badly. She was very surprised and had little information about homosexuality, and so was confused. This took a toll on her. She had many sleepless nights and became fearful that everyone would find out. Although some close friends were aware of the situation, Paula chose to hide the fact from others, including her minister. Despite this, news did reach the minister, but he felt unable to address the situation as Paula had expressed a wish that he not be told. One member of her group of friends suggested developing a support group, but this did not come to fruition.

Over the years Paula has come to terms with Rebecca's sexuality. But she still has sleepless nights, grieving for grandchildren she will not have and worrying about her daughter. Rebecca is not in a stable relationship and Paula worries that she is lonely. Paula wishes that there had been more support from the church community as a whole when her daughter came out and wishes now that the minister at the time had approached her.

Anne's story

Anne is also a widow and a member of her local Methodist church. She has three children, all of whom were baptized in the church and attended junior church. At 19 her son Simon told her that he was gay. Like Paula, Anne was confused and had very little information or knowledge about homosexuality. She struggled to know how to support her son. Anne was anxious and concerned, but several members of the church who knew Simon well and were prepared to listen to what she had to say, reassured Anne and Simon of their love and care for them. This gave Simon the confidence to talk openly about his feelings and helped him to be himself with his own family and the church family. When Simon met Tim, he was happy to introduce him to church friends. They are now married and have started on the journey to adopting a child.

Over the years Anne has come to terms with Simon's sexuality and is grateful for the support she and Simon received from the church.

Experience

- In your experience, how do worries about things that affect family members affect you?

Learning

- People in both Paula's church and Anne's church wanted to support them, but how did Anne's church make it a safe place for Anne and Simon to share their story?

Action

- What could you do to create safe, welcoming spaces for people – including those that the Church has traditionally been hostile to?

Terri's and Abi's story

Terri and Abi are a couple in a civil partnership, who are now considering marrying. They both worship in the church where Abi grew up. This is a big contrast to the church where Terri grew up and where several members of her family still worship.

Terri says that she finds welcome and affirmation in her new church, not so much in what is said, but in how people are. Affirmation, she says, often comes through little things like people not avoiding you or giving you disapproving looks whilst in church. Also using your name and the name and correct pronoun for your partner is important.

Terri and Abi both felt they were part of a church that was 100% welcoming and affirming for a long time because of how they were treated. One day, when it came to a discussion on same-sex marriage, prompted by the couple's announcement of their engagement, it became clear there was actually far more division of opinion. But those with opposing views to Terri and Abi were sensitive to this and afterwards checked they had not felt hurt by some of the things people were saying. Terri says that meant a lot and she was able to chat with them, acknowledging they knew people had different views – and that it was all right.

In the church where Terri grew up, her Dad and sisters feel that matters of sexuality are just pushed under the carpet. Terri's name is never mentioned. It makes them feel rejected, so they may leave that church.

Experience

- When in situations where there are strong differing views, how does it feel to be told you are wrong?
- How does it feel to be ignored or treated as less important than someone else?

Learning

- What were the 'little things' that made a difference for Terri and Abi?
- Who in this story feels they are being pushed out of church?

Action

- What opportunities could you create in church to talk about matters of sexuality in a safe and inclusive environment?

Andy's and Matthew's story

Andy and Matthew are a married couple. They have recently moved into a new area with their children, Tom and Hannah, who are looking forward to making new friends at church. Matthew, in particular, was nervous about attending a new church. This was because he experienced hostility in a previous church, where he was ignored by most people and stared at by others, whilst some only spoke to him to tell him to repent. While both Andy and Matthew felt confident in themselves to deal with hurtful attitudes, they didn't want their children to be affected by any unkind behaviour.

They were pleased to find that their new church had actually spent time and prayer before adopting "all are welcome" as a church motto. Members of the church had decided to see themselves as people who look for God's gifts and grace at work in people and not make assumptions or judgements about people. Andy, Matthew, Tom and Hannah were able to feel at home quickly in this church.

Experience

- How have you experienced God's grace and blessing through other people?
- What experience do you have of meeting and learning about people who are different to you?

Learning

- What did Andy and Matthew want for their family?
- What did people in the church actually do to show that all are welcome?

Action

- Consider your church. Are there any 'gaps' in your welcome? Does/could anyone feel left out because of their, or a family member's, sexuality? And if so, what will you do about it?

David's and Philip's story

David is a minister who had been in a civil partnership with Philip since 2006. They married in 2015. Philip is a local preacher whose 18-year-old daughter from a previous marriage, Bethany, lives with them. David enjoys his life and work in the church, but dreads the stationing process. He feels this was stressful enough when he was younger and single, but since coming out as gay, and later marrying Philip, the process has been increasingly distressing for him. Five years ago, David found on several occasions he has been met by circuit stewards who changed their behaviour from welcoming to hostile on learning about Philip. Sometimes (and despite it not being part of the stationing process) this was followed up with deeply personal questions which, he observes, are not asked of ministers who are in heterosexual relationships or single.

For Bethany's sake David and Philip tried hard not to show that they were hurt by this, but even at 13 she could see it and felt angry about how her Dads were treated. Bethany says she would have left the church, had it not been for the fact that David was eventually stationed in a circuit with people who were loving and hospitable. She says: "People in those welcoming churches saw everyone as special".

Experience

- How does it feel to be under constant scrutiny?
- How does it feel when a family member is treated unfairly?

Learning

- What procedures have not been followed properly in this story?
- What are the consequences of David being treated differently to other ministers in the stationing process? Who is affected by those consequences?

Action

- Consider your church. What could you do to help people not to make assumptions or judgements about people, but to look for the image of God in others?

2 Learning points (summary)

Although there is a broad spectrum of views amongst Christians with regard to sexuality, the Methodist Conference in 1993 resolved that it will “recognise, celebrate and affirm lesbian and gay people in the life of the Church”.

Families are affected by the treatment of other family members.

Treating people with dignity and respect does not just mean avoiding being actively rude or critical. It means being interested in the other person as a human being. Acknowledging and dealing with situations where people have not been treated with dignity and respect is important too. Included in this toolkit is a useful resource produced by the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee entitled *Homophobia: Definition and Guidance: For Use in the Methodist Church*

If we see people ignoring and isolating someone, we can be different. We can be hospitable, compassionate and intentional in our welcome – and we can teach others by our example.

Remember the principles of welcome:

- hospitality
- intention
- compassion.

Thinking about your answers to the questions and issues raised in the case studies, you should now reflect on:

- what you have learnt
- what the stories might mean in your church
- what you will do.

EXTEND

For further study or personal reflection. Keep for use with other modules.

Note: The resources for scriptural and theological reflection provided in the EXTEND section of Sexual Orientation Module 7.1 also apply to this module.

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2. The Family (from *A Methodist Statement on a Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage, 1992* – Part A, the Family)
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1 Family activity

This activity is best used as a group discussion.

Discuss the following questions:

- What is family?
- What is the role of a parent?
- How is the Church like a family?

Section 2 below provides further material for reflection on this:

A Christian Understanding of the Family from *A Methodist Statement on a Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage, 1992*.

2 The Family (from *A Methodist Statement on a Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage, 1992* – Part A, The Family)

Definitions

1. The word 'family' is used of a wide range of groupings of people, living in very different relationships and bound together in various ways. In our own society it is most often used of a couple and their children, if any – the so-called 'nuclear family'. These children may be theirs by birth, adoption, fostering or some other relationship of caring. They may also include the children of one partner by a previous marriage or partnership. A single parent with one or more children similarly constitutes a family.
2. The word 'family' may also be used of larger groups. These include:
 - a) The 'extended family' or an older couple, their children and grandchildren, who may live in more than one household. There may also be a more extensive web of uncles, aunts and other relations.
 - b) In some ethnic groups, the strength of common beliefs, customs and expectations produces whole communities which think of themselves as large families. These are rather similar to the tribal families, as we refer to them, of the Old Testament.
 - c) Other communities with strong family characteristics are formed by groups of people who live under a single roof, share a rule of life and may pool some or all of their resources. They may be seeking to create richer forms of family life than that of many 'nuclear' families.
3. These various uses of the word 'family' show that kinship (by blood relationship, adoption or marriage) is an important element. But in the identification of a group as a family, another significant factor is self-understanding – the way the individual members perceive themselves, their desire to find enrichment through relationships with others in the group and their recognition of the duties and obligations involved in membership of the group.
4. Thus the Christian tradition recognises three main types of family:
 - a) the **kinship-related family** (blood relationship, adoption or marriage);
 - b) the **household family** (of common obligations and privileges) (Cornelius' 'family' in Acts 10, for example, included slaves and probably widows and orphans living as one household with the kinship-related family); here is perhaps the germ in the Christian story of those forms of family life so common today – in which stepchildren and step-parents and other children, young people and adults not formally related by either kinship or law, live together and become bonded through shared need and mutual caring;
 - c) the **'family of faith'**, constituted by the call of God, comprising as 'sisters' and 'brothers' those who respond to that call. This is the worldwide 'family of faith' (Galatians 6:10, NRSV), the Church, which each individual Christian experiences locally.
5. The kinship-related family is a human reality. It is the first of God's creation ordinances (Genesis 1-2), which came into being that human life might continue in the physical sense and flourish in the social, personal and spiritual senses.
6. The kinship or 'household' relationship is the setting of the physical, mental and personal nourishment essential to growth. How that nourishment is made over to us – generously or meanly, tenderly or roughly, reliably or unpredictably – will influence us throughout our lives. Consciously or unconsciously, we relive and, to an extent, repeat these early experiences in all our subsequent

relationships, including our own later family life. To be able to recognise and reflect on this is a significant contribution to all adult life relationships – a way of overcoming harmful effects of early life experiences.

7. The kinship-based family cannot provide us with all the relationships we need. Although it assists us vitally in becoming established as persons, it is unlikely to be sufficient for our mature development. While some find fulfilment in developing the relationships within the parental home, the majority of people subsequently establish another family (which may or may not be based on marriage) or live alone.
8. In the face of the criticism that is levelled nowadays at both the nuclear and the extended family as institutions, the Methodist Church nevertheless affirms that the family remains a permanent and necessary unit of social and personal life. It is the primary form within which God intends his children to share in common life and experience. As we have said (paragraph 5), it is an 'order of creation' – instituted for the care and nurture of the young and mutual benefit of the different age groups.
9. In the Christian view, the 'family of faith' has a significance of a different order to that of other 'families'. Not only can it make up for their deficiencies, it is a 'gospel' community in which the renewing and healing power of redemption in Christ is declared and experienced. In the Gospels, Jesus clearly gives his family of faith priority over his kinship family (Matthew 12:47 – 50, Luke 14:26), although this did not mean that the important needs of his kinship family were neglected (witness the account in John 19:27 of his commissioning the Beloved Disciple to take Mary into his own extended family on the day of his crucifixion).
10. To summarise: Christianity regards the family as an essential feature of the created order. But in each generation it has to be completed in new, adult, relationships, and for all it can be transcended through membership of the family of faith. Thus, in probably most cases, Christian family relationships consist of father, mother and child or children, supported by the extended family and the family of faith. There are, however, increasing numbers of situations where, by choice or necessity, Christians are living in other familial forms – as described in paragraph 4(b) above. To all family life the Church should offer its pastoral support and care.

Parenthood

11. Recognising that Christianity has no exclusive definition of what constitutes a family (it is ready to recognise familial characteristics in many forms of human relationship), it has a particular concern about one aspect of family life: parenthood.
12. The imagery of parenthood runs strongly through Christian theology and liturgy. God is frequently referred to as 'Father'. But the Biblical imagery of God is not exclusively masculine. Feminine qualities also are attributed to the Creator (as, for example, in Isaiah 46:3 and 66:12, Hosea 1:1-4 and Luke 13:34).
13. As Creator, God is the source and nourisher of creation and of all loving relationships. Women and men are made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). The maleness and femaleness in each of us derives from a life which is a living relationship in itself: a life in trinitarian community. We are created out of relationship, for relationship. Longing for a quality of loving worthy of that origin, the partners in a family may draw on the resources of God. They are enabled to inspire, forgive, 'start again' – in a word, to 'develop' one another – in a way which is compared in the Scriptures to the role Christ performs in relationship to the Church (Ephesians 5:25-33). As Christ inspires, forgives, begins again and again with his Body, the Church, so a husband and wife are to develop one another in the fellowship of their marriage.

14. The first obligation upon parents is to give their children love, care and security. Inevitably, and rightly, the children will be nurtured within the values and faith of the parents; however, as they grow into maturity and responsibility they must be free to choose their own values, lifestyle and religious commitment. There are no requirements parents can make of children in these matters, beyond those imposed by the law of the land. God too grants his children this ultimate freedom – to love him spontaneously, to ignore or reject him or to seek other values and ‘goods’ (ie gods). The tensions and pains that this process involves are an inevitable part of parenthood, but they are also a means of personal growth for both parent and child.
15. Parenting, even ‘good enough’ (as against ‘perfect’) parenting, is an exacting task. The intense feelings generated in family life are not all positive and can include anger amounting to hate and the desire to split apart. Family life calls for time, energy and emotional and spiritual resourcefulness – all aspects of what the Christian tradition means by love. It requires mutual forgiveness, resilience and honesty, a lifestyle that is consistent with the principles being professed and a willingness to respect the growing independence and uniqueness of the child. Such qualities do not come easily. They need to be consciously nurtured under the grace of God.
16. But parenting can also be a source of much joy and fulfilment and a means of personal growth for the parent. The joy of parenthood is referred to in many of the patriarchal stories and in passages such as Psalm 127:3-5 and John 16:21. Even the pain and heartache which many parents experience may stimulate growth. Often the most difficult aspect of parenthood is that of encouraging the child to grow up and become able to cope with life independently, make free decisions and enjoy a freely accepted personal faith. The child on becoming adult must be able to leave home, form adult relationships and become a parent too, developing a new sort of relationship with his or her parents. There are warnings within Scripture to parents who allow their children too little freedom (Mark 7:9-13, Ephesians 6:4) to respect their parents. Jesus showed the need children feel to be independent (Luke 2:41-51).
17. The task of parenting begins with the childhoods of the parents themselves. Their own experiences when young will influence strongly the way they bring up their children. In a more immediate sense, the task begins with the establishing of the marriage and the home. It continues as the basic physical needs of the child, for food, warmth, shelter and protection, together with the child’s needs for emotional security and acceptance and help in learning the skills necessary for adult life, are all met.
18. Nurture includes enabling the growing person to discover what is acceptable behaviour and what is not, what is right and what is wrong. A vital part of parenting is teaching values and standards. It includes introducing children to the reality of God, the practice of prayer, the awareness of his presence and knowing and doing his will. Finally it includes the encouragement of personal commitment to God in Christ and membership of His Church, although the crucial challenge may come from outside the family. All this flows from the ‘solemn obligation (that) rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism’ (Methodist Service Book, 1975). Above all, parenting requires from parents the assurance that the child matters uniquely to them and that whatever happens the child(ren) will not fall out of the range of their love. Human parenting thus offers insights into the way God treats us, his children (eg Psalm 103:13, Luke 11:11-13).
19. At the heart of the family’s existence is the mystery of the powerful bond which holds most parents and children together. Motherhood and fatherhood involve intense feelings of caring, belonging and commitment (hence the wisdom of Solomon to recognise the power of this emotional bond in the incident recorded in 1Kings 3:16-27). This mystery is deeper than the genetic connection between parents and children. It is God’s providential ordering of human existence. It is a bond which makes for continuity between one generation and another, the handing on of both personal characteristics and of values, of faith.

20. It is within the family especially that we learn to consider other people besides ourselves, to share with others, to forgive and to be forgiven, to give and to receive and to be reliable, and many other attitudes and practices which derive from and contribute to loving and caring. These need to be experienced by the growing child as aspects of a whole Christian life. They may be focused in simple family rituals: grace at meals, prayers together, celebrations on family occasions and the great Christian festivals, as well as in active participation in the Christian congregation. To establish these family routines and rituals is a challenge to the contemporary nuclear family. They may be easier to establish and maintain when older generations are involved as well.
21. Moreover the family is intended by God to be the setting within which we learn to care for those outside our own kith and kin. Hence the stress in Scripture on practising hospitality. In the Old Testament this was fundamental to corporate life. It meant especial concern for the 'stranger'. In the New Testament, hospitality is an essential aspect of Christian living (Luke 14:12-14; Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9) and the life of the leaders of the churches (Titus 1:8). Within the life of the family and its practice of hospitality, God's grace is experienced. There is mutual giving and receiving between the older and younger members of the family and between the family as host and the stranger welcomed in its midst.

The local household of faith

22. The Christian household can become a focus for Christian teaching and living, Christian worship and prayer. It can also be a place of mutual care and concern, compassion and helpfulness, giving and receiving, sharing and discipline, forgiving and being forgiven. It is a place for celebration and recollection. These same family virtues should also characterise the life of the local Christian congregation. Its fellowship brings together a wide variety of people of all ages and life situations to meet in worship and service as the local embodiment of the extended Church – extended through time and space.
23. The local church is referred to in the New Testament as the '*household of God*' (Ephesians 2:19) or '*household of faith*' (Galatians 6:10). For some single or lonely people it may well be the only place where they presently experience some of the good family life referred to in the previous paragraph. The local 'household of faith' too has its special rituals, its celebrations and feasts, its sharing of everyone's gifts and resources. Its life points forward to the great celebration in God's Kingdom when all God's people will gather round the table and all will receive enough to meet every kind of need (Luke 14:15-23; Revelations 19:9).

The role of government and the Church in supporting the family

24. Since the family is the most formative influence upon children and one of the most significant social institutions, there is a major responsibility upon all organs of society, especially government, to ensure the stability and flourishing of family life. This places obligations upon society-organised-as-government to enable families to obtain the provisions necessary to life itself and to participate as citizens in society: food, clothing, housing, adequate education, health and family support services, as well as a just, reliable and accessible framework of law.
25. The Church is also required to support and develop family life, to nurture its young people into understanding the purposes of the family and to help them establish families of their own. It is a major obligation of the Church to offer caring, compassion, help and understanding to families experiencing distress or difficulty. All families have tensions and crises. By the content and style of its worship, preaching, teaching and prayer the Church must encourage the realisation that no family is perfect, but that with God's help difficulties can become creative as they are worked through and learned from. Indeed, to share the burdens as well as the joys of family is one of the privileges of Christian marriage.

26. For most Christians, their service of God and his kingdom will be through fulfilling their daily obligations as partner, parent, neighbour and worker. For some, however, service to God may require a costlier response. The call of God may demand that we deny ourselves the consolations of the family 'for the sake of the kingdom of God' (see Luke 12:51-53). 'Vocation' can cut across all other considerations, demanding of some that they do not marry at all (see 1 Corinthians 7:25, 32). Service of God will demand of all of us that we treat everyone within reach with justice – either personally or through corporate or political action. And we must always be ready to acknowledge the kinship of others seeking to follow Christ's way (see Mark 3:31-35).

Adoption and fostering

27. Adoption is one of the responses of couples who find themselves unable to conceive. But it is important to recognise that some adoptions are by couples who already have children and who are offering their parenting ability in providing a home for a child who needs one.

28. The primary function of adoption or fostering is to meet the needs of the child or young person, not the needs of the couple. But the interests of the two parties are not to be separated in this way. In successful adoption the needs of both child and adults are met. The starting point may be circumstances in which a child's needs are best met by the provision of a new family. Adoption can provide hope, love and a future for both parents and child which had otherwise seemed most unlikely, particularly where the child has special needs or is emotionally damaged or where the parents were unable to have children themselves.

3 Exploring Mark 10:1-16

Mark's Gospel provides much food for thought about marriage, divorce and relationships, and is further explored here. This is not an extensive exegesis of Mark 10:1-16, but a set of questions that may help explore the nature and purpose of human relationships and family life.

The question from the Pharisees is about the legality of divorce under religious law, which allowed a marriage to be ended for a husband's convenience, by issuing a legal document. But Jesus refers to that practice being given "*because of ... hardness of heart*".

- Does this imply a difference in the understanding between God and humankind about the purpose of marriage?
- Is Jesus challenging the inequality in the legal and religious practices around marriage and divorce, which disadvantage one party more than another?

Jesus says (in v.6) that "from the beginning" there was marriage. Mark also records Jesus speaking of "male and female".

- Is the emphasis, as some argue, that marriage is only between a man and a woman?
- Or is it, as others argue, that Jesus was emphasising "from the beginning", meaning that before legal contracts or religious rites, God brought a couple together through love and attraction?
- Could it be both? Or neither?
- How do these different interpretations affect our various understandings of the nature and purpose of human relationships?

In verses 7-9, Jesus speaks of a man maturing and moving away from his own blood relatives and joining in a new union. Jesus also says, "What God has joined together, let no one separate" – ie neither law, nor religion – only God.

- How does this sit with our understanding of marriage and divorce in the real contexts of human relationships today?
- Whilst this fits some of our ideas easily (eg holding faithfulness in marriage as a Christian ideal), what about the circumstances that make us feel uncomfortable about relationships (eg when a relationship has been abusive)?
- Are there circumstances where 'God has joined together' but the Church has not?
- What might God be saying to us today through the lives of faithfully loving couples, married or otherwise, including same-sex couples?

In verses 10-12, the disciples and Jesus discuss this further – as the Church still discusses such matters today. The Church has struggled with and worked through the circumstances in which divorce and remarriage are or are not acceptable and there are still grey areas left for pastoral consideration.

- If this is so for divorce, what other aspects of human relationships are as complex?
- Do we have to agree with other people's experience and understanding of their relationships in order to love and respect them?

Mark immediately moves on (verses 13-16) to tell of Jesus saying that being like little children is the pattern for receiving the kingdom of God.

- What has this to say about the preceding passage?
- How do little children understand adults' relationships?
- What are the qualities in family life that matter to children?

4 Homophobia*: definition and guidance

This is a resource produced by the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee of the Methodist Church. It sets out a definition of homophobia and guidance on what is considered to be and not to be homophobia. This is a separate publication to this toolkit and can be downloaded from the Methodist Church website.

Definition (summary)

Taking into consideration our history, our context and our reading of Scripture:

Homophobia is any statement, policy or action which denies the image of God in another person due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation; which is treating someone in a discriminatory manner because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

Homophobic attitudes, words, and behaviours are inconsistent with the nature of Christian conduct and a violation of the worth and dignity of all people.

Homophobia can be experienced in a number of ways, including:

- a) physical violence or emotional or psychological abuse, including the threat of or incitement to such behaviour. These may also be deemed hate crimes in law
- b) applying stereotypes and assumptions to people based on their sexual orientation
- c) using language that is hostile, hurtful or offensive in its intent
- d) abusive or coercive 'spiritual practices' – ie demanding or requiring repentance or participation in healing or other types of service.

As a Church we would want to affirm that it is not homophobic to:

- a) disagree on matters of scriptural interpretation or to hold and express a view that same-sex activity is wrong (provided that is not repeatedly targeted at an individual because of their sexual orientation)
- b) have lots of questions to ask, although the boundaries of personal space should be respected
- c) 'get the language wrong' when talking about sexual orientation. It is more important to speak honestly and respectfully about our feelings.

This definition should be read in the context of the whole document.

* A more general definition of homophobia, taken from our glossary in Module 1, is:
Literally an irrational fear of gay and lesbian people, but with a wider meaning of any belief, policy or action that discriminates against them or incites hatred towards them or caricatures them. The Church says that homophobia is any statement, policy or action which denies the image of God in another person due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

5 Dos and don'ts

A quick guide for straight people to welcome LGBTQI* people

DO...	LOVE	DO NOT...	FEAR
DO...	remember that all people are made in God's image.	DO NOT...	treat LGBT people as less than made in God's image.
DO...	take an interest in LGBT people – listen and be aware of who they are.	DO NOT...	intrude or scrutinise.
DO...	recognise, affirm and celebrate LGBT people – and assume that LGBT people and/or their families are part of Church life – so be welcoming in advance.	DO NOT...	be spiritually coercive, such as requiring LGBT people to repent, when their faithfully lived reality is different to yours.
DO...	challenge and question stereotyping and marginalising of LGBT people.	DO NOT...	judge or make assumptions about LGBT people.
DO...	remember that families are diverse and that children thrive in loving relationships, in all sorts of families, including parents who are same-sex couples.	DO NOT...	forget that family members are affected by the treatment of their LGBT family members.

* **Note: LGBTQI** – an umbrella term (sometimes just LGB, LGBT or LGBT+). LGB referring to people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual; T referring to transgender people; Q for people questioning or non-conforming to gender identities or sexual orientations and I for intersex people who do not identify exclusively as male or female.

6 Additional reading

In addition to the case studies in this module, the following resources are also recommended:

- **EDI Toolkit, Module 7.1, Sexual Orientation**
which includes further case studies.
- **We Are Family – Family Ministries Research Report 2015**
a connexional resource for working with families, in the context of the diverse definitions of family life in the 21st century.
www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/families/resources/family-ministry-research-project

Closing worship

Romans 12:9-16

A litany from the worship resources for *Living with Contradictory Convictions in Church*

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was imagination,
and imagination stepped into our dreams.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was creativity,
and creativity stretched the web of our being.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was diversity,
and diversity danced with possibility.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was challenge,
and challenge whittled away prejudice.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was equality,
and equality released trapped wings to fly.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was value,
and value accepted difference with joy.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was integrity,
and integrity clothed truth and justice.

Sing praise to God who reigns above
Singing the Faith 117

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was welcome,
and welcome outstretched its arms in love.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was hope,
and hope filled the chasms of despair.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was peace,
and peace hovered like a dove.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was joy,
and joy came as an unexpected gift.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word was love,
and love filled the life of promise.

In the beginning was the Word.
And the Word became flesh,
and the flesh brought new meaning to birth.

And the Word lived among us, as a human being.
And we beheld God's glory,
full of truth and grace.
Amen.

APPENDICES

Activities

1. Activity 1 – Different perspectives on marriage
2. Activity 2 – We are family

Activity 1 – Different perspectives on marriage: reflecting on the Gospels

Read Mark's account of Jesus' teaching in response to a question about divorce (Mark 10:1-12) and compare it with Matthew's account of Jesus' teaching on divorce (Matthew 5:31-37). Now consider John's account of meeting a Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar (John 4:1-42).

- How do these accounts differ in how Jesus deals with relationships?
- Why do you think that is?
- Why do you think the early Church included differing, sometimes contradictory, accounts in the Bible?

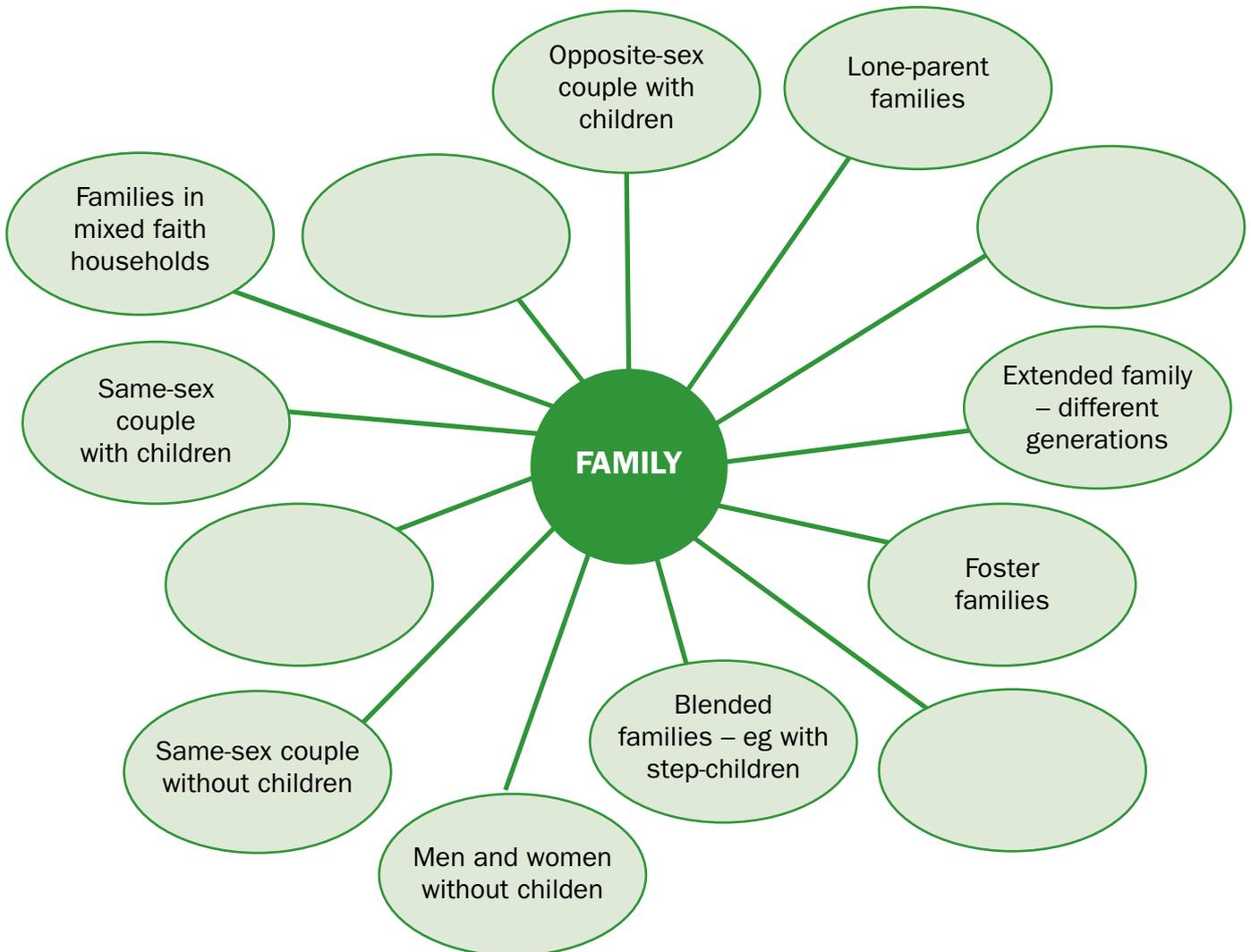
Learning from the activity

There is a great variety in how Christians understand those passages of Scripture (amongst many others) and what they have to say about relationships today. This variety of views is not because some people hold the truth and others don't. It is often the case that, following prayerful consideration of the Bible, Christians reach different understandings in the light of their experience, reason and tradition. There is often a creative tension in living with differences of view, through which we learn from each other.

Notice how Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well is loving and hospitable.

Activity 2 – We are family

Look at the following illustration showing some different models of family we may find in our Church communities today. There are some blank spaces – because only some examples have been given.



If you can think of other models of family, write them in the blank spaces.

In small teams, discuss:

- What are the various types of family found in your church?
- What are the various types of family found in your community?
- How could family work and ministry in your context become more inclusive of different kinds of family?
- How are leaders in your church being trained and equipped to support family ministry in the diversity of your local context?