

40. Working Party on Marriage and Civil Partnerships

Summary

The working party was asked to explore the implications of the same sex marriage legislation and to recommend whether the Conference should set in motion a process to revisit its definition of marriage [the life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman – SO 011A(1)]. This report sets out the process of consultation which the working party has carried out, and explores the main themes which have emerged from that process. It is clear that there is a wide range of strongly held views on many points.

Its conclusion is not to recommend that the definition of marriage be revisited at this point, but that there should be a two-year period of listening, reflection and discernment about relationships on a much wider basis, based upon thinking about living with contradictory convictions and the nature of the authority of the Bible. Within that context, there would be exploration of the implications of the divergence between the Methodist Church's teaching on marriage and the legal definition of marriage, including particularly the missional aspects. The question of whether to readdress the Church's definition would then be returned to in the light of this process.

In view of the connexional nature of the Methodist Church it is not recommended that the Church 'opts in' to the legislation whilst this period of discernment is taking place, but the Conference of 2015 should be asked to deal with the relevant questions in relation to ecumenical relationships and (non-Methodist) shared buildings.

The report also makes recommendations about:

- immediate work to be done on the question of homophobia;
- a revised set of guidelines about appropriate responses to requests for prayers and services for same sex relationships;
- a decision to be made by the Conference as to whether to extend its ruling on civil partnerships to legally contracted same sex marriages ie that there is nothing *per se* to preclude Methodist ministers and lay people from entering into them.

Contents

A. THE BACKGROUND

1. What is this report about?
2. What does the same sex marriage legislation do?
3. What is the Methodist Church's teaching on marriage?
4. The response to the 2012 government consultation
5. What is the current Methodist position on civil partnerships?

B. THE WORKING PARTY'S CONSULTATION PROCESS

1. Our general approach
2. The online consultation

C. SOME GENERAL COMMENTS

D. THEMES WHICH EMERGED FROM OUR CONSULTATIONS

1. What the Bible says
2. Marriage
 - a) Scripture
 - b) Purpose
 - c) The definition of marriage

- d) Broader questions about our teaching and practice
3. The relationship of the Church with modern society
4. The need for better understanding of sexuality and gender
5. An affirming Church
6. Conscience
7. 'A slippery slope'
8. Legal vulnerability
9. Connexionalism
10. Relationships with other Churches

E. SHOULD THE METHODIST CHURCH'S POSITION ON MARRIAGE BE REVISED?

F. RECOMMENDATIONS

G. PEOPLE AND PLACES

1. Memorial M29 (2012)
2. Should the 2006 Conference ruling on civil partnerships apply to legally contracted same sex marriages?

RESOLUTIONS

APPENDICES

1. Membership of the working party
2. Methodist documents considered by the working party
3. The 1993 resolutions
4. Responding to Requests for Prayers or Services of Blessing for Same-sex Couples (*CPD Book VII, Part 10*)
5. The questions asked in the consultation
6. Supplementary paper for the consultation

A. THE BACKGROUND

1. What is this report about?

1. "Marriage of same sex couples is lawful." In these seven short words, section 1(1) of the *Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013* enacted a fundamental change in the law of England and Wales. Of course, legal drafting is never quite as simple as that, and the 2013 Act goes on for another 64 pages to make detailed provisions on the implications of that change for the legal system, followed by a whole series of regulations and consequential legislation. *The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014* has been passed and will effect a similar change in Scotland once it comes into operation later this year.
2. But what about the implications for the Methodist Church? The Conference in 2013 set up a working party upon the recommendation of the Methodist Council to consider "whether the Church's position on marriage needs revising in light of changes in society, undertaking this consideration with reference to scripture, tradition, reason and experience". The working party's terms of reference are:
 - to consider the implications for the Methodist Church of a change in legislation covering same sex marriage;
 - to consider whether the Methodist Church's position on marriage needs revising in the light of changes in society;
 - to undertake the work directed by the reply to Memorial 29 (2012) [the reply referred this Memorial, asking for a review of the Church's current ruling as to not permitting the blessing of same sex relationships on Methodist premises,

- to the Methodist Council];¹
- to make recommendations for any changes in practice or polity.
3. The Conference in 2013 further directed the working party “to operate in ways that are open and inclusive so as to ensure that all voices are heard” and to make an initial report to the 2014 Conference.
 4. When the question of membership of the working party was raised at the 2013 Conference, the position was stated in the Order Paper as follows: “the working party’s terms of reference require it only to consider whether the Methodist Church’s position needs reviewing in the light of changes in society, rather than to make substantive proposals for change. If a revision is thought potentially necessary, it is expected that a further working party would be appointed to examine the substantive issues.”
 5. The working party has therefore seen its task as being to explore as fully as possible within this time-frame the implications of the legislation and the issues which it raises for the Methodist Church, so as to enable the Conference this year to consider what, if any, further work needs to be done.
 6. The details about the members of the working party are to be found in Appendix 1.

2. What does the same sex marriage legislation do?

7. The working party regarded one of its first tasks as being to identify as accurately as possible what legal changes are brought about by the 2013 Act², so as to avoid misunderstandings. As soon as was possible therefore, a set of ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ appeared on the working party’s web page on the Methodist Church website and has been updated as necessary. It can be found at www.methodist.org.uk/samesexmarriageactfaq
8. It is not intended to repeat the whole text here, but a few salient points need to be brought out. NB, this does not purport to be a comprehensive or authoritative statement of the law, but is based upon the common understanding of a number of lawyers involved in the life of various Churches in Britain.
9. The provisions have effect both in relation to people and to premises. To start with people:
 - From 13 March 2014, marriage of same sex couples in England and Wales became lawful (section 1(1), quoted above). Allowing time for the necessary notifications to be given, the first same sex marriage ceremonies took place on 29 March 2014.
 - Until 13 March 2014, the marriage of any couple who entered into a same sex marriage in an overseas country in which that was lawful was treated under the law in England and Wales as a civil partnership; from that date it has become a legal marriage without any

¹ The wording of the request contained in the Memorial, which came from the Birmingham District (Representative) Synod (Present: 115; voting for: 89; voting against: 20), was “that the ruling of the Conference should be revisited through the appropriate councils of our Church, giving attention to our understanding of ‘marriage’, ‘partnership’, and particularly ‘blessing’, reporting to the Conference of 2013, in the hope that we will allow the blessing of civil partnerships of gay or lesbian couples on Methodist premises”. The 2012 Conference referred it to the Methodist Council for consideration alongside any further issues then being raised by the Government’s proposals for same sex marriage. In 2013, the same Synod, in Memorial M37, supported the Methodist Council’s proposals for setting up the present working group, asking that the group be requested to report in 2014. The Conference’s reply to that Memorial stressed that whilst a report would be directed to be brought to the 2014 Conference, the working party need not feel that it must complete its work within that period in view of the range of questions raised by the issue.

² As pointed out above, there is parallel legislation in Scotland. This legal analysis is primarily based upon the 2013 Act covering England and Wales, but we have tried to indicate below where there are relevant different provisions. There is no equivalent legislation in the Isle of Man, Jersey or Guernsey (or in Malta or Gibraltar, which are stations within the South East District).

further steps needing to be taken.

- It will be possible for a couple currently in a civil partnership to convert this to a marriage. The regulations for how this is to be done are, at the time of writing, currently being worked out and it is anticipated that these will be in force by the end of 2014.

10. With regard to premises and the solemnization of ceremonies:

- From 13 March 2014, the provisions have come into effect to permit a religious organisation (other than the Church of England and the Church in Wales) to 'opt in' to performing same sex marriage ceremonies. The first stage for that would be a decision to apply to register the premises for same sex marriages (this being a separate registration from any existing one for opposite sex marriages).
- No such registration can take place unless
 - the 'relevant governing authority', ie in our case the Methodist Conference, has given consent for this; and
 - the application is made by the 'proprietor or trustee' of the building; on analogy with marriage registration at present, that would mean that, in respect of a Local Church, the Church Council as managing trustees would have to agree.

11. The legislation

- a) provides that no person can be compelled to conduct a same sex marriage, or be present at, carry out, or otherwise participate in such a marriage or consent to its being conducted; and
- b) amends the Equality Act to give protection to any person refusing to do any of these things

where the person's reason for refusal is that the marriage is a marriage of a same sex couple.

12. Where the use of the premises is shared between two or more denominations, except in certain defined situations where the use by one particular denomination is very limited, then no application can be made for registration for same sex marriages unless the 'relevant governing authority' of each of those denominations consents³.
13. In Scotland opposite sex marriages can be conducted (as well as by a registrar) by an 'approved celebrant' – usually, but not always, a minister of religion – but "religious" marriage ceremonies in Scotland have never been restricted by location as they are in England and Wales, where such ceremonies can only be conducted in a registered place of religious worship. The effect of the *Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act 2014*, once the relevant provisions come into force (probably not before 2015), is that a religious or belief body which is a 'prescribed body' may apply for a person to be registered to solemnize marriages between persons of the same sex. The 'opting-in' process is therefore in relation to people not buildings. The Act provides that no such body is under a duty to apply under the regulations to be prescribed, or if prescribed to nominate anybody, and no person who is an approved celebrant is under a duty to solemnize any such marriage.

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In the case of Armed Forces chapels the requirement is for the Secretary of State for Defence, before applying for registration, to consult with (but not seek consent of) the governing authorities of other religious organisations making 'significant regular use' of the building.

3. What is the Methodist Church's teaching on marriage?

14. The working party has spent a considerable amount of time reading and reflecting on what has been said in official Conference documents over recent decades. In addition a number of individual Methodists have offered us pointers to other materials and thinking, for which we are grateful.
15. Some of the Conference material is focused on marriage, some is about relationships more generally and some is more specifically on same sex relationships. A list of such documents is found at Appendix 2, which offers some guidance as to what may be useful for further study and reflection. There is rich material here which still offers much food for thought and discussion. It is sad that – as with so much of what is produced connexionally – it has not sufficiently found its way into our common life and thought.
16. Whilst many of the documents referred to deal with the Methodist understanding of marriage in considerable depth, not least the official Conference Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* (1992) and *Christian Preparation for Marriage* (1998), it would be true to say that until 2012 none of them was required to focus specifically upon the question that is now presented to the Church, ie the concept of “marriage” as applying to a same sex couple. However, the wording found in *Constitutional Practice and Discipline* ('CPD') and in the Church's authorised marriage liturgy clearly refers to marriage being between a man and a woman. The relevant texts are these:
17. Standing Order 011A was adopted by the Conference in 1998, as part of the report *Christian Preparation for Marriage*. There had been a previous provision in SO 830 about the appropriate procedure to follow in relation to marriage of divorced persons, but it did not contain any general statement about marriage. It was proposed that this Standing Order be adopted, to guarantee the rights of conscience of ministers in respect of requests for marriage and to summarise the fundamental convictions of the 1992 Statement and the Christian Preparation report referred to above. SO 011A provides as follows:

Marriage. (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 Methodist Church welcomes everyone, whether or not a member, who enquires about an intended marriage in any of its places of worship.

(2) Divorce does not of itself prevent a person being married in any Methodist place of worship.

(3) Under no circumstances does the Conference require any person authorised to conduct marriages who is subject to the discipline of the Church as a minister, probationer or member to officiate at the marriage of a particular couple should it be contrary to the dictates of his or her conscience to do so.

(4) A minister, probationer or member who is authorised to conduct marriages but who for reasons of conscience will never officiate at the marriages of couples in particular circumstances shall refer such couples to an authorised colleague who is not so prevented.

(5) The Methodist Church opposes discrimination on the basis of gender or race. Accordingly, if a couple is seeking to be married in a Methodist place of worship no objection to the performance by a particular minister, probationer or member of any duty in respect of their proposed marriage shall be entertained on such a ground. No minister, probationer or member shall perform the relevant duty or duties in place of the other person concerned or otherwise assist the couple to make the objection effective.

18. As to liturgy, **The Methodist Worship Book** (1999) contains the following wording in the Marriage Service, addressed to the persons about to be married:

*“A and C, with your families and friends,
we thank God on this day
for the gift of marriage.”*

It is the will of God that, in marriage,
husband and wife should experience
a life-long unity of heart, body and mind;
comfort and companionship;
enrichment and encouragement;
tenderness and trust.

It is the will of God that marriage
should be honoured as a way of life,
in which we may know the security of love and care,
and grow towards maturity.
Through such marriage,
children may be nurtured,
family life strengthened,
and human society enriched.

No one should enter into this lightly or selfishly,
for marriage involves the giving
of a man and a woman
wholeheartedly to each other.
Christ in his self-giving comes to our help,
for he loves us and gave himself for us.

A and C, you are now to share this way of life
which God has created
and, in Christ, has blessed.
Today we pray that the Holy Spirit
will guide and strengthen you
that you may fulfil God's purposes
for the rest of your lives."⁴

4. The response to the 2012 government consultation

19. It was against the background of that teaching, therefore, that a response was drafted to respond in June 2012 to the government consultation on "Equal Civil Marriage"; this was the three-month consultation process preceding the introduction of the Bill which in due course became the 2013 Act. The response clearly needed to be based upon the existing statements of the Conference on marriage. It was prepared by a small working group appointed by the Methodist Council and the Faith and Order Committee, consisting of Dr Jocelyn Bryan; the Revd Ruth Gee; Professor Judith Lieu; the Revd Dr Stephen Mosedale (chair) and the Revd David Warnock. The full response can be found at:
<http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/pi-equal-civil-marriage-consultation-response-0612.pdf>.

20. The summary of the response was this:

"The Methodist Church, in line with scripture and traditional teaching, believes that "marriage

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In the *Methodist Service Book* (1975) under "The Declaration of Purpose" are to be found words upon which the wording of SO 011A quoted above was partly based: "Marriage is given by God. It is not to be entered upon or thought of lightly or selfishly; but responsibly and in the love of God. According to the teaching of Christ, marriage is the life-long union in body, mind and spirit, of one man and one woman. It is his will that in marriage the love of man and woman should be fulfilled in the wholeness of their life together, in mutual companionship, helpfulness and care. By the help of God this love grows and deepens with the years. Such marriage is the foundation of true family life, and, when blessed with the gift of children, is God's chosen way for the continuance of mankind and the bringing up of children in security and trust. The union of husband and wife is in Scripture compared to the union of Christ and his Church, for he loved the Church and gave himself for it."

is a gift of God and that it is God's intention that a marriage should be a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of one man and one woman".

Our Church governance means that we would not be able to revise this position, even if we wished to, without an extended period of reflection and consultation.

Within the Methodist Church there is a spectrum of beliefs about human sexuality; however the Church has explicitly recognised, affirmed and celebrated the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men.

We do not believe that a distinction between "civil" and "religious" marriage is a helpful or correct one. Marriage does not have a different definition for religious groups, as against the state. Marriage is a single legal and social entity. Nor do we believe that the government should determine what is religious."

21. The Methodist Church in Scotland took a similar view in response to the equivalent consultation which took place there before the introduction of the Scottish Bill.
22. It might be added that initially the government's proposal was that churches should actually be precluded from conducting same sex marriage ceremonies. The working group's response to that point was to challenge it on the basis of religious freedom: "The proposals are intended to combat discrimination, but the option of a religious ceremony will still not be allowed for same-sex couples. Whilst the Methodist Church may or may not choose to affirm same-sex marriage, it is unwarranted interference for the State to make that decision for it by prohibiting what is permitted for heterosexual couples, namely a church marriage. For the purpose of religious freedom, if the government allows marriage of same-sex couples in civil venues, then it must allow religious bodies to make the same choice." As a result of responses from various religious bodies on this point, the Bill opened up the possibility of such marriages taking place on church premises, on the conditions set out above (paragraph 10).
23. Finally, whilst we have set out in this section the specifically Methodist documents which deal with the Church's teaching on marriage, it goes without saying that – as the summary response above makes clear – the Methodist position is set within the context of scripture and tradition shared much more widely with Christians over the years and across the world and we return to that below.

5. What is the current Methodist position on civil partnerships?

24. Civil partnerships were introduced by the *Civil Partnerships Act 2004*, which came into force in December 2005⁵. This enabled public and legal recognition for same sex relationships. At that stage it was not possible for the ceremony in which a couple registered their civil partnership to take place on religious premises.
25. The working party on the *Pilgrimage of Faith*⁶, reporting to the Conference of 2006, drew a clear distinction between civil partnerships, which were designed to provide legal recognition for a relationship, and issues relating to same sex relationships more generally. These wider issues were explored much more fully by the working party in that report (and its earlier 2005 report) but on this particular issue the working party recommended the following resolution, which the Conference adopted:

⁵ The Act applies in England, Wales and Scotland. In the Isle of Man, civil partnerships are permitted but there is no legislation to permit same sex marriage. In Jersey, but not in Guernsey, civil partnerships are permitted but neither jurisdiction has legislated for same sex marriage. The Gibraltar Parliament enacted legislation recognising civil partnerships in March 2014, and a bill legislating for civil unions was adopted by the Parliament of Malta in April 2014.

⁶ The *Pilgrimage of Faith* refers to resolution 6 of the 1993 Resolutions - see below.

“The Conference confirms that there is no reason *per se* within our discipline to prevent anyone within the Church, ordained or lay, from entering into, or remaining within a civil partnership. However, the 1993 [Derby] Resolutions do still apply. Those Resolutions apply to every Methodist, whether married, in a civil partnership, or single.”⁷

26. That working party went on to offer some general theological reflections on blessing and prayer, leading to its recommendations about where there is a request to offer prayers or conduct services of blessing for same sex couples. It drew a line between what would be regarded as the Methodist Church’s giving an ‘official’ blessing to a same sex relationship and what would be good pastoral practice in responding to such a request. The Conference adopted a resolution on the former point:

“The Conference confirms the conclusion of the Working Party that the [1993] Resolutions preclude the possibility of authorised liturgies being adopted for the blessing of same-sex relationships and that Methodist premises may not be used for such a purpose.”

27. The Conference directed that the guidance offered by the working party in response to a request for prayers or services of blessing for same sex couples be printed in *CPD*⁸.
28. The Equality Act 2010 removed the barrier which prevented civil partnership registration ceremonies from actually taking place on religious premises. Any application for approval of such premises by registration authorities can only be made with the consent of a specified body, which in our case would be the Methodist Conference. No resolution seeking its consent has come to the Conference.

B. THE WORKING PARTY’S CONSULTATION PROCESS

29. We were directed by the 2013 Conference to operate in ways that were open and inclusive, so as to enable all voices to be heard, and to achieve that we have undertaken several processes.

1. Our general approach

30. First, after preliminary explorations within the group itself about what we saw as the main implications and challenges of the legislation, we tested out our initial thinking through meeting a few ‘pilot’ groups. These included a range of groups such as a district meeting of Superintendents, a London-based youth group, a group of interested people within a Circuit. This assisted us in identifying the key points for further consultation and we are grateful to those who supported us in this way.
31. Based upon that work, we framed some questions upon which to seek the views of as wide a range of people as possible, through a consultation which was mainly but not entirely electronically based. We return below to this aspect of our work.
32. The online consultation, however, did not stand alone. We sought to engage directly in conversation with a number of key groups, or representatives of such groups. Other conversations developed as occasions arose in, for example, groups of ministerial students. The main groups consulted included:

The Connexional Leaders’ Forum
3Generate [11-18 and 18-23 strands] – see below
The Faith and Order Committee
The Law and Polity Committee

⁷ The 1993 Resolutions are to be found in Appendix 3 below.

⁸ It appears in the 2013 edition at Book VII, Part 10 and is set out in Appendix 4 below.

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion resource group, its sexual orientation stakeholder forum and its gender stakeholder forum
Methodist Evangelicals Together (MET)
Outcome: 'moving towards an inclusive church'
VentureFX

We are aware that recommendations on this subject came out of the 3Generate event last November, which are to be found in the report of the Children and Youth Assembly⁹, and members of the Conference will want to bear those in mind in reading this report.

33. Mindful of the varying jurisdictions within which the Connexion operates, contact was made with the Chairs of the relevant Districts to clarify the legal position as to marriage and civil partnership. The legal position is set out above¹⁰.
34. A session at the regular joint meeting of the Faith and Order Committee with the Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England was given over to exploring very helpfully the common issues which our Churches are facing about this matter.
35. A letter was sent by the chair of the working party to the Methodist Church's main ecumenical partners in England, Wales and Scotland, asking what, if any, effect upon their relationship with the British Methodist Church they might envisage if the Church were to embark on a consideration of its teaching as to marriage. Helpful replies were received from a number of these partners. We should mention also with appreciation the full and thoughtful response received from the Kirk Session (which also operates as the Circuit Meeting) of St Andrew's Church, Malta, a local ecumenical partnership between the Church of Scotland and the Methodist Church.
36. A similar question as to the effect on relationships with the Methodist Church in Britain was addressed to a wide range of Methodist and Uniting Church partners in the world church; a small number of these responded. Mindful also of the particular relationship with the Methodist Church in Ireland, one of the group engaged in direct conversation in that context.
37. Those members of Parliament (both MPs and Peers) who have some connection with the Methodist Parliamentary Fellowship were written to, to invite them to offer any reflections based upon their experience in dealing with the Bill in its passage through Parliament. Six replies were received, offering some interesting insights.
38. A few people approached the working party, offering to share their particular experiences or expertise with us. We respected and appreciated their willingness to become involved in matters which were of deep personal concern to them. In the event, however, we felt that in view of the relatively limited scope of our brief this year, and the even more limited period in which we had to work, it would not be helpful for them or us to take up their offers at this stage.
39. Finally, about 24 people¹¹ (and one Local Church) wrote to the chair of the working party, or in a few instances the President of the Conference, directly to state their views.

⁹ See Agenda Section 44.

¹⁰ See paragraph 13 and footnote 2 above.

¹¹ Nearly half of these being from one Circuit.

2. The online consultation

Its purposes

40. The working party was required to seek views from as wide a range of people as possible. This obviously pointed to some form of electronic consultation (whilst still being open to receive paper responses). It is important to stress at the outset what was, and more importantly what was not, the purpose of this part of the consultation process. It was certainly not to conduct a referendum on the issues – that is not the way that we as Methodists would expect to come to a mind on such matters. Nor was it an intentionally designed opinion poll of a selected representative group. It was intended to give a wide range of Methodists, and others interested, the opportunity to express their views on a number of questions, in such a way as to enable the working party to identify as many as possible of the issues which were on people's minds and hearts, with some indication as to the strength of those views.

Carrying out the consultation

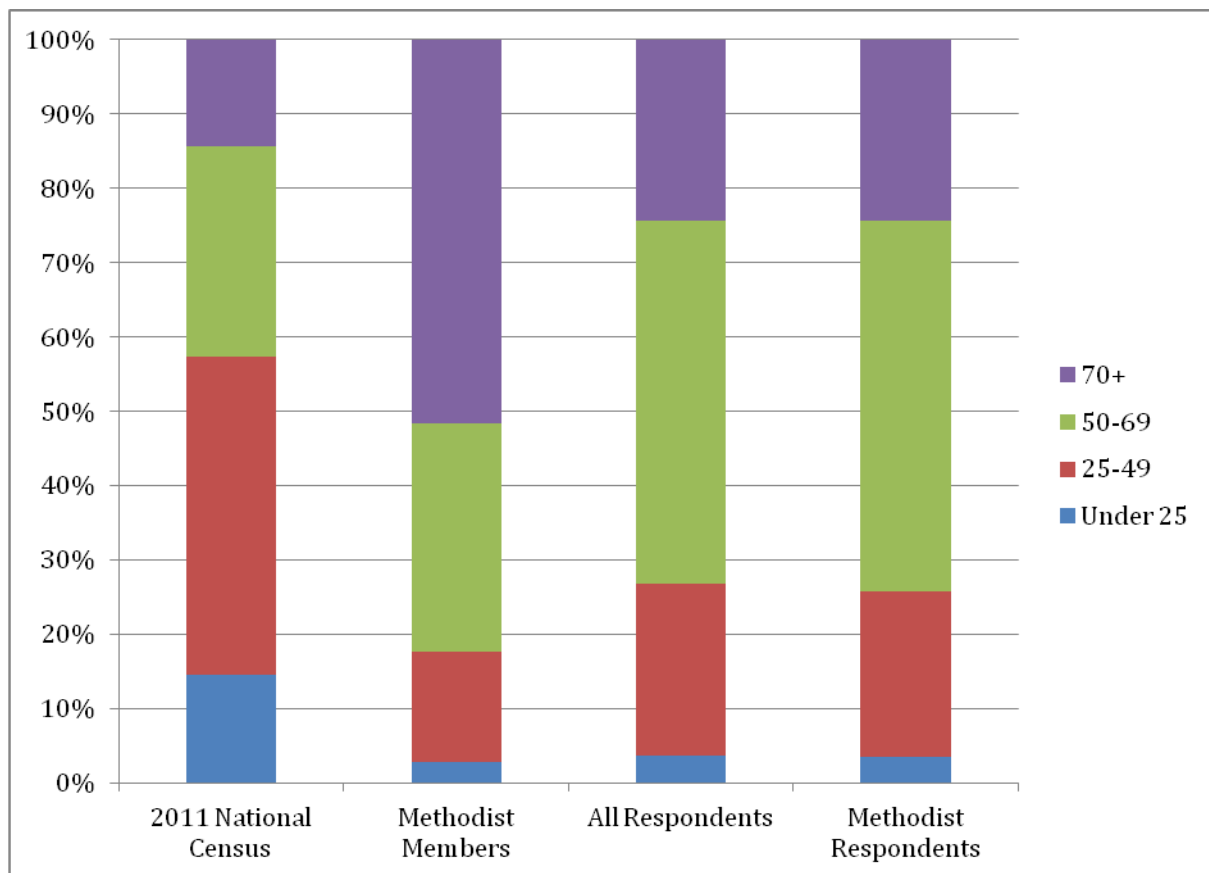
41. Given the short timescale between the working party's first meeting to plan the process and the deadline for submission of this report for the Agenda, we allowed the maximum period possible for this consultation ie from the end of November to 10 February. One or two people criticised the choice of time period as not conveniently fitting into the normal pattern of meetings such as Church Councils (and indeed completely unjustifiably imputed underhand motives to this). However, the volume and pattern of responses indicated a general readiness to engage with the exercise.
42. After the initial press release we publicised the existence of the consultation via various methods, including: information in the quarterly letter from the General Secretary to all ministers; reports or presentations to various meetings where district representatives were present to encourage the raising of the issue; a full page article in the *Methodist Recorder*; mentions on several occasions in *The Week Ahead* email which goes to District Chairs, communication officers and a wide range of other people, and in *E-News* which is the main Methodist e-newsletter (as well as wide promotion on social media). How to contact 'the Methodist people' remains a great challenge, in a much wider context than simply the present one, and we return to this below.
43. A few more comments on methodology follow, but first we must express deep gratitude to the members of the Connexional Team who assisted us in the design and subsequent analysis. The questions asked in the consultation are to be found in Appendix 5. So far as possible we sought to follow the language of the terms of reference under which we were appointed. A link was provided to a background document, intended to offer assistance to people beginning to explore these issues. This appears at Appendix 6 below.
44. The decision was taken to ask people to identify themselves as Methodists or not – it would have been impossible in a consultation like this to limit it to Methodists, or to verify the credentials of those who so identified themselves, nor did we wish to do so. The eventual outturn was that almost 90% put themselves into the 'Methodist' category, and we have no reason to suspect any widespread misdescription. The 'non-Methodist' responders in a number of cases identified themselves as, for example, members of other Methodist Churches eg in Ireland, or non-Methodist members in local ecumenical partnerships, and their views were helpful to our considerations.
45. Whilst many of the Church's statistics are and always have been based upon Methodist membership, we decided that in this context it would be appropriate to ask the question in the form "Do you currently attend a Methodist church in Britain?". Wherever possible we have compared the figures with equivalent connexional statistics.

46. We also asked various other questions, to have some assurance that we were hearing from a wide range of people, whilst accepting that in many instances the size of the response or the nature of grouping meant that statistical analysis of the variations would not be possible or appropriate. We invited people to indicate the District in which their church was located, to check whether the responses were heavily weighted in any particular geographical area, and we also asked questions about gender, age, sexual orientation, relationship status and ethnicity.
47. There was provision for a return to be made on behalf of a group, whether an existing group or one specially convened for the purpose, and we return to that below.

Responses to the consultation

48. By the closing date, the consultation received a total of 4292 responses, of which 217 came from groups and 4075 (95%) from individuals; 87 responses were sent in by hard copy, the remainder electronically. It is notable that this number of responses is almost twice the number received in any comparable online connexional exercise.
49. We stress again here that we were not primarily concerned with a head-counting exercise, but with hearing the stories and concerns of those who took the trouble to reply. The analysis therefore, although having quantitative aspects, has involved a careful reading of the textual responses. Whilst we were greatly assisted by the Connexional Team staff who used a widely approved professional tool for qualitative textual analysis of this kind, every single return was also read by at least two members of the working party.
50. Analysis of the group returns proved more challenging. The groups included, for example, youth groups, class meetings, specially convened local or circuit-based meetings, as well as responses made on behalf of large membership organisations, notably MET. Where statistical analysis has been carried out they have not been included, because there was a range of ways of recording responses, from where one person completed a return on behalf of a couple or family to where a large group had met, some of these replies recording numbers of people for and against on particular issues and some not. However, they have all been carefully read and considered by several members of the working party, and we are particularly grateful to those who took the time to arrange for special meetings of groups, or to co-ordinate responses from members of their organisation. Overall the spread of opinions expressed in these responses broadly reflected those in the individual replies.
51. One final matter needs to be mentioned here, as some of what follows needs to be read in the light of it. Some four days before the end of the consultation period, there was a very significant 'surge' in responses – over 600 in one 24 hour period. This was far greater than to be expected simply because of the approach of the deadline, and indeed the rate declined after that although not to the pre-surge level of some 50-80 per day. An analysis of internet traffic, alongside the responses, suggested that this was not indicative of individuals completing the consultation multiple times – something about which some people had expressed fears but against which precautions had been taken. It became clear to us that it was more attributable to activity by one or more organisations to raise awareness of the consultation amongst their supporters or subscribers. This surge had a noticeable effect on the answers to the consultation questions, with a preponderance of replies which indicated a rejection of a change in the definition of marriage. The surge also saw the percentage of respondents who did not attend a Methodist church rise from 5.66% to the final figure of 10.15%.
52. While clearly the way in which an individual engaged with the process does not invalidate their opinion, it is important to draw attention to this phenomenon, in looking at some of the issues below. It may also raise questions for the Connexion more generally about our ability to communicate. Clearly – as we all know only too well – there are many Methodists who remain

unaware of what is produced connexionally. This surge reminds us that quite a lot of these people are nevertheless sufficiently electronically 'switched-on' to have other networks which they regard as their primary source for Christian communication. What are the lessons to be learnt from this?



The spread of responses

53. Here we offer just a few key indicators of the spread of responses. In each case the percentages exclude those who did not indicate the category into which they fell.
54. There were responses from every Methodist District, the volume of responses roughly proportionate in most instances to the relative size of the District measured by the latest figures for attendance at worship.
55. With regard to age, it will not perhaps come as a surprise that in an online consultation of this kind the proportion of responders in younger age groups was somewhat higher than that reflected in the membership figures for our Church. The table shown opposite offers this comparison, together with that of the national census¹².
56. The proportion of male : female Methodist respondents was 53% : 47%; this contrasts with the marked female bias in Methodist membership as a whole (31% : 69%).
57. 93.86% of people identified themselves as White British, 0.68% as White Irish and 3.02% as White Other, many of whom identified a particular country or region within the UK. The remaining ethnic groups comprised 2.44% of responses. Data does not exist for the

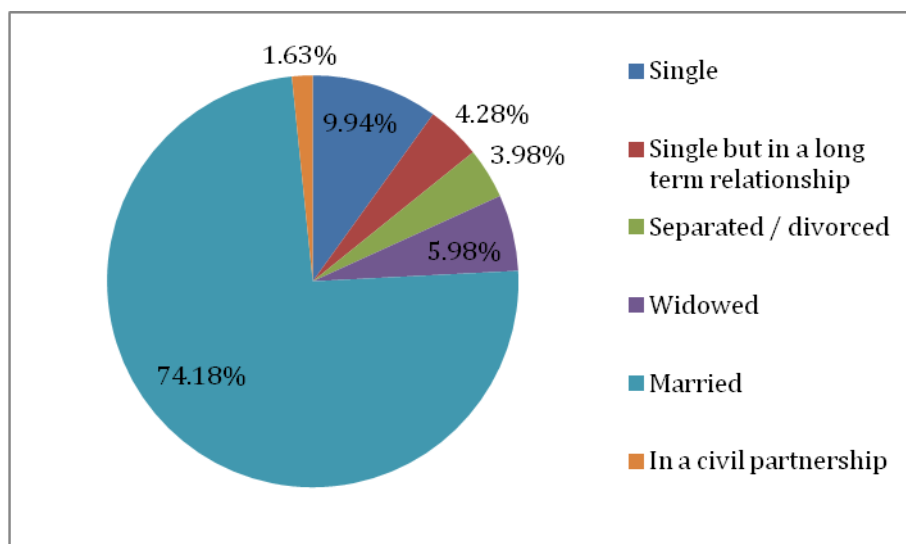
¹²

The working party is aware that the triennial Statistics for Mission will appear elsewhere in the Conference Agenda, but these were not available at the time that this report was compiled. It is not thought likely that there will be any significant impact upon the analysis presented here.

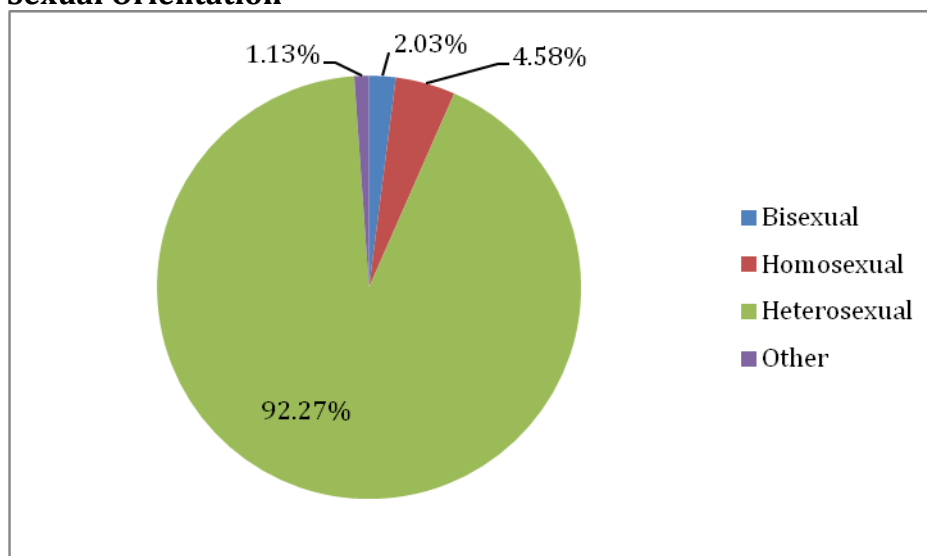
ethnic diversity of the Methodist Church as a whole to which we can compare these figures but they are probably not representative of Methodism in Britain.

58. The response rates as to relationship status and sexual orientation came out as follows:

Relationship status



Sexual Orientation



C. SOME GENERAL COMMENTS

59. Before going on to explore the implications of the legislation and the issues which our consultation processes have identified, it may be helpful to offer some general thoughts. Recalling our mandate, whilst we are not classifying these reflections under the headings of “scripture, tradition, reason, experience”, it will be obvious from all that follows in this section and the rest of the report that these various interwoven strands have been integral to our explorations.

60. First, to state the obvious, whilst it is legislation that has brought these issues onto our agenda at this time, the questions are far from being simply ones about definitions of legal concepts or the use of buildings. We start from the fact that they involve real people, whether people who have

been called to be fellow-disciples in the Church, or people to whom our mission is to offer the gospel of God's love in Christ. We have been moved by the stories which people have been able to share with us.

- *I am a Local Preacher and have met a number of reactions to my sexuality over the years (including pickets at churches where I have been leading worship and protests where certain congregation members hold their open Bibles in front of their faces when I am preaching) but have noticed a distinct change of attitude in the past decade as people recognise that I am in a stable and long term relationship - including an outpouring of concern and love when my partner was seriously ill some years back.*
- *As a gay Christian, I have come to the point where to worship in the church is almost impossible. I am only 30 so am very fortunate to have grown up in a world where homophobia was pretty limited to the ignorant and uneducated. When I told my school friends, they didn't care. When I told my family, they didn't care. When I told the school I work for, they didn't care. In every other single aspect of my life I am treated as an equal, with equal rights. The one place I am discriminated against is the place that is supposed to be my support and comfort.*
- *I am a person who experiences same sex attraction but understand that God's word speaks clearly throughout the Bible that the only context for sexual union and relationship is between a man and woman united in marriage (one flesh). I understand these experiences as part of my brokenness in an imperfect world. My choice is to remain celibate, the church is really important in providing the friendship and community for accountability and encouragement. It would be no help and very destructive if the church was to go away from clear Biblical teaching in this regard and therefore implicitly suggest to me that I should act on my attractions which I am sure will not bring happiness. The pain of my brokenness in this world is only for short time in the context of eternity and the joy of being with the Lord.*
- *My partner is a circuit steward. He came out just over a year ago and the love care and support he has received along with the welcome I receive when I join him at church has been overwhelmingly warm, positive and encouraging. Ministers, fellow churchgoers and friends have all seen our happiness as a couple and embraced our love.*
- *It is just important to note that while I am 'out' to all my friends, I am not 'out' at church. I cannot be myself there, and while I am heavily involved, I am essentially living a lie while at church for no fault of my own. I pray for the day that I can be as open and honest at church as I am outside church.*
- *I am a supernumerary Methodist minister in a committed relationship of 33 years and in a civil partnership since they became possible. I hope that in my lifetime I will be able to have that converted to marriage and know that what I believe is blessed by God might be blessed by our church.*
- *I am in a civil partnership and have been since 2008. My partner and I will convert to a marriage as soon as I am able. I am a member of the Methodist church and came to the church due to its inclusivity and welcome. We will remain members of the church no matter what the outcome.*
- *My wife and I are in our 47th year of a happy and faithful marriage. We have a heterosexual daughter and a homosexual son, and so have learned a great deal about human sexuality from the practical, real life experiences as caring and involved parents. Our understanding of this issue goes far beyond the academic. The greatest lesson we have learned is that human sexuality is NOT a choice, but is a given.*

- *We would be effectively condoning what is 'unnatural' - I speak as a father who has a daughter in a same-sex relationship which I am unable to approve despite she being obviously happier now than for 15 years.*
- *I am a straight woman in a long term relationship with a strong faith, I would love to get married in the church I grew up in however at present I would feel ashamed to, I feel unable to marry in a church that holds such different views to my own! I feel myself distancing from the Methodist church year after year as it disappoints me with its tentative steps towards making decisions I feel should have been made years ago!*

61. Even for those not intimately involved in such a story for themselves or their family, deep and fundamental questions are raised about the nature of their Christian calling, and for some people there are acute questions of conscience to wrestle with.

- *As a minister, in the last twelve months, I've been approached to bless a civil partnership, baptise a baby where one of the parents was transgender and baptise another baby where both parents were female and in a civil partnership. This is a real issue for everyday ministry - we can't ignore it!*
- *My views on same sex relationship has changed over the last year or so as I have listened to people from the LGBT group, and understand their needs for love and affection and even wanting to marry the same as everyone else. But still I cannot get over what God says in his word about man and woman coming together as one. About mixed families being the best role model for bringing up children, where possible and the way our bodies are made to fit together. That said I have gay and bisexual close relatives that I would want to have a happy fulfilled lives. So I have no real answer to what I believe on the one hand but see the results of that belief in the ones I love, in that they cannot have the same type of relationship that I enjoy as a married women at the moment.*
- *I find this very difficult as whatever [the] response [it] is going to be seen as loaded. In conscience I personally struggle with this, but need to find an integrity between pastoral care and theological persuasion, at this stage on the journey I have not got that far, but have moved a long way from 20 years ago.*
- *It pains me to say that I do not know whether my conscience will permit me to continue to be part of the Methodist Church [as a Superintendent Minister] if it chooses to liberalise its official position on sexuality and marriage. Even if local church councils and indeed individual ministers will be permitted the freedom to follow their own conscience on these things, I do not think my own conscience would permit me to continue to be part of a church in which its formal understanding of marriage is effectively redefined. I do not say this by way of a threat. I simply share it because I believe I must as a matter of integrity.*
- *Personally, if the church does not "opt in" I will have to leave the Methodist Church. I could not continue to attend a church that has actively chosen to discriminate against a minority group.*
- *While most people assume that same-sex marriage is an issue for gay men and lesbians, there is little understanding of the experiences and views of bisexual, transgender and intersex people. ... 1 in 2,500 people are intersex (born with ambiguous genitalia), yet the experiences of intersex Christians are mostly unheard. ... The experiences of bisexual Methodists are also invaluable: does it really make sense - to allow a bisexual to marry if they fall in love with someone of the opposite sex, yet not allow them to marry if they fall in love with someone of the same sex? ... Equally, there are transgendered Christians who marry and then have gender reassignment. In cases where the relationship survives intact, what then of the marriage? ... The legislation therefore has implications for intersex, bisexual and transgendered people, as well as gay and lesbian people, and I feel that the*

Methodist Church has not yet engaged with this fully at all levels.

62. For us all, there are real challenges to us in our individual and common life in a Church which seeks to embody and value diversity – our claim to be a ‘broad Church’.
63. What we are saying here is not of course new. For many people the whole area raises similar issues to those in the early 1990s, leading up to and following the 1993 resolutions on human sexuality¹³. For others, it is not primarily about that, but about the nature of marriage itself.
64. We name immediately a crucial issue which continues to be present at the heart of this exploration: the nature of the authority of the Bible. We will explore this further below, but how we as a Church and as individual Methodists interpret God’s word and the basis upon which we form our judgements as to the meaning and authority of certain texts is – and will continue to be – a matter which needs more shared exploration and dialogue.
65. There is then a cluster of questions around our tradition. Our Church is located within the Christian tradition of 2,000 years: what has that to teach us about marriage, in the very varying societal contexts in which the Christian Church has existed over the centuries? How does that speak into twenty first century British culture?
66. Within that tradition what distinctively Methodist emphases might we find, from our origins and what is sometimes described as our ‘DNA’? What is an authentically Methodist response which can hold together our call to discipleship and mission, and to holiness? More particularly how has our common life, with its insights and experiences, evolved over recent decades, not least since 1993 and the later Conference reports on the *Pilgrimage of Faith* which was embarked upon at that time? What strain does this whole quest put upon our connexionalism, at a time when in various ways the connexional principle is less obviously at the root of our common life?
67. Methodism’s missional shape continues to demand serious attention be paid to the voices that speak from outside the Church itself. We acknowledge the learning and wisdom that come from scientific research, academic enquiry or public debate and seek to allow these to inform our own theological reflection and help us better ‘serve the present age’. In affirming the reality of the activity of God in the life of the world, we do not give blanket endorsement to society’s passing fads. Rather, we engage in deep listening in order that we might not fail in our calling to recognise the Spirit at work. It could therefore be argued that the whole *raison d’être* for this report – a process of serious engagement with political and social change - is part of our ongoing commitment to placing reason alongside scripture, tradition and experience in our theological reflection.
68. These then are some of the overarching themes, which are dealt with in more detail below.
69. Our final comment here is of a different nature. Whatever the very differing views within the Church about these matters, our expectation and hope would be that Christians would respond as people of grace. There is an issue which we must therefore address at this point because of the concern it causes us. It arises in relation to the responses to the connexional consultation, and is about the tone and language in which some – indeed too many – of the replies were framed. This manifested itself in two ways.
70. First, the suspicions which were voiced about the methodology of the consultation all came from one direction and betrayed a fear – which proved unwarranted – that the process would be manipulated by “the minority gay lobby”. Some of the language in which the suspicions were voiced would, if used in other, eg racial, contexts, be regarded as inflammatory and

¹³ Set out in Appendix 3.

totally unacceptable.

71. Secondly, whilst we stress that we are only referring to a minority of responses, there were too many instances in the individual replies which left us feeling saddened and ashamed. Strong views were expressed from many different standpoints on these matters but there is no doubt that the preponderance of instances when this moved into what can only be termed rudeness and abuse was in referring in negative terms to homosexual people or conduct. We are far from saying that expressing opposition to same sex relationships amounts in itself to homophobia, and it is very unfortunate when the way that the opposition is expressed leads people who are considering these matters to write off what can be a properly reasoned position. But there is no doubt that there were instances which could only be labelled as homophobic; not all of these were from self-identified Methodists but too many were.
72. It is sadly the case that the anonymity of such a consultation, and the manner in which online communication tends too often to be conducted, may encourage this sort of expression of views. Social media can be misused in this way; this is an instance which brings it closer to home.
73. Whatever is the outcome of this current process, the Church needs to take note that for many people who would call themselves Methodists the *Pilgrimage of Faith* upon which we embarked in 1993 is not something with which they have been prepared to engage and indeed would vociferously disavow. Since 1993, work has been done on how we live with contradictory convictions¹⁴, and that will certainly need to continue and be more widely disseminated. We hope to encourage it by the way that this report is dealt with at the Conference this year. But the issue we have identified here is more acute than simply about learning how to live our common life together in all its diversity. There is a limit to what is acceptable and where that is overstepped it needs to be taken seriously in the same way that we as a Church have done in declaring that “racism is a denial of the Gospel”¹⁵.

D. THEMES WHICH EMERGED FROM OUR CONSULTATIONS

74. We now turn to some of the main themes which emerged, from our own explorations and conversations, from our consultations with key groups and partners, and from the wider consultation. (In reporting on the online consultation replies we are not grouping these themes under the different questions asked, as the same issue was raised in different places by different people or was identified by people as applying across the various questions.)
75. We could expand on the various themes at greater length, drawing on the theological and pastoral resources already available, but it is felt that what the Conference needs at this stage is an awareness of the range of concerns and the strength of feeling with which they are expressed. The order in which they appear below does not necessarily denote the weight of significance given to them by others, or by ourselves, and inevitably there is much overlapping. The examples we quote are usually typical of many more in the same vein.

1. What the Bible says

- *It is clear in the Bible that this is the truth and changing this will be going away from the truth.*

¹⁴

Report of the Faith and Order Committee, 2006, Section B. *Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church* (Conference Agenda pp. 237-250). A study guide was produced by the committee in 2007: *Understanding and Using ...* – to be found at http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/co_living_with_contradictory_guide_0707.doc.

¹⁵ SO 013B.

- *Christian theology, and its practical outworking in community, constantly changes: eg we now generally sit lightly, or reinterpret, St Paul's views on the place of women in the church and on slavery.*
 - *Our understanding of God's gifts has changed across the centuries as we seek to interpret the world around as it changes, using the building blocks of faith to try to understand what God is revealing to us. With the changes in society it is perhaps time to ask if the experiences of committed Christians in homosexual relationships are showing us that, yet again, God's gifts are far greater and have fewer limitations than we have realised so far. If the answer to that is yes, we need to change our position, if it is no our position should remain the same.*
 - *If other matters that can be supported even more strongly by scripture references [slavery, male domination, racism in Apartheid South Africa...] are now dropped as no longer convincing then why is scriptural re-evaluation not carried out here?*
 - *I hope that those who hold to such an interpretation of scripture that means that they cannot agree to same sex relationships being considered as Christian Marriage and who want to continue to hold (however painfully) that homosexuality is to be considered sinful will not be deemed intolerant, non-inclusive, narrow minded or any other negative appellation. It is possible for such conservative churches to be both loving and inclusive while at the same time holding in tension to such a view of Scripture and these issues.*
 - *Jesus taught us that the most important commandments are to love God, love our neighbour, and to love each other as He first loved us. I believe that in the case of gay marriage, these commandments outweigh or overrule any others.*
76. As would be expected and hoped, a large number of people signalled the importance of this in the Church's decision-making – probably the single largest issue identified in the online consultation.
77. When it came to the question of the interpretation of particular texts, there were basically two groups of passages which tended to be focused upon. For those for whom same sex sexual activity was the key question, the main texts which were cited by those objecting to it were of course the Levitical injunctions¹⁶ and the passages in the Pauline epistles¹⁷ – with a significant number simply pointing to the former. For those respondents concentrating on the marriage aspect then the focus was the creation narratives in Genesis, and Jesus's response to the question about divorce¹⁸.
78. There were many people who cited these passages simply as leading without question to the answer "no" to any change. Others accepted that those were key texts but offered interpretations which did not lead to the same conclusions, stressing the dynamic nature of biblical scholarship and theology. In particular, marriage as depicted so often in the Old Testament (eg polygamy, oppression of women) presented particular challenges.
79. Another group concentrated less on specific texts but still took a stance which was biblically based, upon the gospel imperative. "What would Jesus have done?" was a question asked by a number of people (not always arriving at the same conclusion!).
80. As we indicated above, this reminds us of the continuing debate in our Church (and more

¹⁶

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. These were often linked with references to the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19.

¹⁷ Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10.

¹⁸ Matthew 19:3-9 and (without the Matthean exception) Mark 10:2-12.

widely) about how biblical authority is understood and applied in the life of the Church. Clause 4 of the Deed of Union states that, “The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice.” The following clause makes the Conference the final authority on all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines.

81. The Faith and Order Committee’s report to the Conference of 1998 *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path*¹⁹ indicates a range of ways in which Methodists use what is written in the Bible as a source for that they believe. The Conference did not choose to affirm only one of these ways of using Scripture as being correct. The responses to the current consultation are a vivid illustration of how those various views come into play. For some, authority resides in particular texts and no further discussion is necessary. For others, there is a recognition that texts cannot be assumed to be directly applicable today without consideration of their original cultural context alongside our own. For yet others, there are principles for Christian practice which they derive from the Bible as a whole (for example the primacy of self-giving love, of showing bias to the excluded, of holding God’s justice together with God’s mercy, and of valuing diversity) which weigh more heavily than specific texts. The consultation suggests that the current argument in the Church is not over biblical authority as such but rather scriptural interpretation and application. There remains work to be done to move beyond the view of some in the Church that only their perspective, whichever it may be, takes the Bible seriously.

2. Marriage

82. Various strands of thought have emerged here.

a) Scripture

83. There is the link back to Scripture mentioned above – the creation ordinances in Genesis 2, and the words of Jesus in answer to the question about divorce. This connects directly to the form in which SO 011A(1) is expressed: “The Methodist Church believes ... that it is God’s intention ...”. For many respondents in the online consultation, that was the end of the matter: we know what God’s intention is because God has told us so clearly in the Bible. For others, whilst taking seriously the biblical witness, the quest fully to understand “God’s intention” is a continuing, dynamic one.

- *If the church sincerely believes that this is God's intention, then we have no right or need to alter this definition. It is unlikely that God has changed His mind despite the changing nature of 21st century Western society.*
- *It may be that God's intention is immutable but our understanding of that intention, as with our understanding of other of God's intentions, for example interfaith relations, may be clarified and enlarged with time and experience.*
- *We reflected on the Biblical foundation for the 'union...of one man and one woman' and were of the opinion that fitting in with Biblical description is not the same as a Biblical definition. In describing a position we would ask the Connexion to avoid using the questionable phrase/argument of 'God's intention'.*

b) Purpose

84. Linked to the question about ‘God’s intention’ was the question of purpose - what is marriage for? We refer above to the statements which appear in our marriage liturgies, but it was notable

¹⁹ *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order, vol. 2, pp 644-667.*

that a number of responders would describe it in different terms, with more emphasis being put, amongst those who would oppose any change, upon marriage as being primarily or solely for the purpose of procreation. We return to this below.

c) The definition of marriage

85. For many people there is no doubt that the major problem with the legislation as they see it is that the word 'marriage' has, in effect, been 'hi-jacked' for what some of them see as political purposes. They would say that it was not open to take a word with a rich theological meaning in the tradition of the Church, and indeed as hitherto used much more widely to refer to a fundamental element of our society and of many others, and pour into it a meaning which it cannot sustain. This concern manifests itself in various ways, as we outline here.
86. i) For some people it leads them simply to refuse to accept the usage of the word in relation to same sex relationships, and only to refer to it in that context in inverted commas, or as 'so-called marriage'. Whilst acknowledging that view, and knowing that a number of Christian groups would follow that path, we have not done so in this report. The working party on the *Pilgrimage of Faith* wrestled with this question of language²⁰: "It is important for our Church to be clear about the particular meanings it gives to words and phrases such as 'marriage' (which it uses only to refer to the commitment of one man and one woman to each other) However, the Church also has to acknowledge the limits of its power to influence the development of language in everyday usage. The Working Party is very conscious that terms such as 'gay marriage' ... are used in popular discourse in ways that the Church does not own." Since then, the usage of the word marriage in this context has become not simply a matter of popular discourse but of legal definition, and an adoption of that usage in this report in engaging with the issues raised by same sex marriage, both within the Church and in wider society, does not denote any lack of seriousness about the underlying questions at stake – the whole report bears witness to that.
87. ii) A number of responses to us suggested that, given the Methodist Church's response to the 2012 consultation, it would cast doubt upon the Church's credibility to depart from it so soon. That would be an understandable reaction if it were simply a matter of our saying "that's what we thought in 2012 and this is what we think in 2014". But it must be recognised that the 2012 response was very properly based upon the understanding of the Church's teaching and practice at that point. The response itself acknowledged that there might be the possibility of this position being revised, in the long run and after "an extended period of reflection and consultation", and it is precisely this point which the present working party has been asked to think about.
88. iii) The much more fundamental point is that we are now confronted by the fact that civil society has indeed moved to a definition and concept of marriage which differs from that which is embedded in the Church's teaching and practice. The 2012 response, based upon that teaching, stressed²¹ that a distinction between "civil" and "religious" marriage was not helpful or correct, as marriage was a single legal and social entity regardless of where the legal contract was entered into. The response went on to object to the attempt to confine the "religious" to matters of buildings and activities such as hymns and religious readings: "for us and for almost all religions the whole of life is religious, including a civil marriage, especially if between religious believers".
89. We have been reminded in the consultation that the history of the Christian Church offers a

²⁰ Conference Agenda, 2006, p. 310 para E4.

²¹ Paragraph 20.

rich variety of experience, not limited to what has been the parallel system which has operated (in England and Wales) since civil registration became possible in 1836. Even within the Christian context, it could be said that there is and has been no single entity called 'marriage'. People have mentioned to us the movement from arranged marriages to the modern ideal of a love-match, and changes in the relative weight of authority between the partners, in the distribution of roles, and in property rights. And there have been times and places where a divergence between the Church's teaching and that of the surrounding society has been in evidence. Perhaps the clearest example of that throughout the centuries, and even today, has been the challenge for many Churches of operating a marriage discipline which differs from that of the surrounding culture in seeking to address the question of polygamy.

90. One possible response to this – as suggested by a number of people – is to withdraw from involvement in the actual solemnization of marriages. This would serve to draw a clear distinction between the parts played by the state and the Church in the inception of a marriage, the Church's function being to offer a blessing where requested and where the marriage is in accord with the Church's teaching²². Again, this would not be new within the history of the Church – the earliest evidence (Ignatius ca 107 AD) is that Christians were expected to have their unions blessed (but not contracted) in church. There are many countries where this would already be the norm. Clearly this would serve to 'distance' the Church from the concept of marriage which society has now adopted; views on the positive and negative effect of this would vary greatly.
91. iv) A separate but related reaction to the changed definition of marriage comes from those who, whilst acknowledging the positive nature of so many loving and committed same sex relationships, question why there was seen to be a need to go further than the civil partnership legislation which accorded to people in such relationships all the legal recognition and protection required, by seeking to alter the nature of an institution which has been viewed as the 'bedrock of society'. Others would recognise that it is precisely because of all those fundamental resonances which marriage carries that the same recognition and ability to be at the centre of, and contribute to the stability of, society is sought by those in committed same sex relationships. This was very much to the fore in the debates in Parliament, and in our conversations with various groups.
- *While I accept that words can change their meaning over time, it is both wrong and unnecessary to attempt to change meaning by Act of Parliament. ... I have come to accept that many homosexual and lesbian people who are Christians wish to have their union blessed and supported by their fellow Christians. I am quite happy with this.*
 - *I believe that gay couples wishing to marry in church would be reinforcing rather than diluting the concept of marriage. Through marriage they would be making a visible commitment to a stable and loving relationship as part of the wider church family.*
 - *Our understanding of marriage is very much determined already by our cultural environment (and always has been, in my view) - other cultures and societies (Christian and non-Christian) view the nature of marriage differently. The current legislative changes concerning same sex marriage give us the opportunity for a radical review of our understanding of marriage and the purpose of the Church in this changed and changing context.*
 - *The Church has a traditional understanding of what it understands by marriage: the secular authority has a different one. There is no fundamental reason why the Church*

²²

Some people also advocate it as a protection against possible legal action for discrimination, a point with which we deal below.

should change its view simply to conform. Any change in the Church's view should be as a result of a change in the theological basis for marriage. Civil partnerships are different from marriage and carry different implications. There is no reason why the Church should not wish to bless the union of people who love each other: arguably it should be keen to do so!

- *Marriage is a particular relationship, defined as above. Other relationships, equally mutually supportive, exist but marriage is unique because of its procreative potential.*
- *Whilst I struggle with the use of the word 'marriage' to describe the relationship between two people of the same sex (and continue to think through the implications of this), I believe we should be able to allow same-sex couples to confirm their love for one another and their commitment to one another before God just as a heterosexual couple can.*

d) Broader questions about our teaching and practice

92. It is clear that the consultation evoked many other responses which raise questions about our teaching and practice as Methodists in relation to marriage which are not directly about the simple question of our attitude to same sex marriage but which are very pertinent to our Church's life. This led people to different conclusions: some would say that we should therefore focus our attentions on these as more pressing questions; others would see what is happening as a symptom of our failure to uphold and encourage the central Christian concept of marriage. We outline a range of these issues here.

"A life-long union"

93. Many people pointed out the presence of this phrase in the Church's teaching, but drew different conclusions from it.
- *The Church has moved several times on its understanding of marriage in the past and moved forward whilst allowing Members to hold opposing views in good conscience. If we can do it over divorce (on which Christ is far clearer than he is on loving gay relationships) then we must not be afraid of doing it on the issues currently being discussed.*
 - *If one were to look at the state of the institution of marriage in today's society, I cannot see how it is treated by the majority of the population as a 'gift from God', given the high rate of divorce, materialism surrounding marriage, and the speed at which marriages are entered into. It is my belief that the sanctity of marriage is being eroded. It's my belief that the church should act as a role model and disseminator of information on the practice of good marriage. The problem being that it has less and less of a voice due to exclusivity.*
 - *In a society where the divorce rate is so high, and so many children are born outside marriage, with the ensuing problems this causes for the emotional and material stability of those children, we need to keep teaching the Biblical foundations of marriage, and to give help and advice through the church to how to strengthen marriages and family life.*
 - *I have always been grateful to the Methodist church for allowing my parents to marry when my father was a divorcee. I hope to remarry in church as a divorcee myself. I think of the Methodist church therefore as the church of second chances and I would like to see this openness and inclusivity extended to allow same sex marriage.*

"between one man and one woman"

94. There are points to be made by those who would challenge the 'dichotomy' which is implicit here. "Provision is a must for transgender and inter-sex state persons; we need to disabuse ourselves of the notion that people come in exactly two distinctly recognisable types of male and female; the physiological reality does not support this" was one of the comments made to

us by the Gender Stakeholder Forum.

95. The point was also made to us that we have not as a Church really begun to take seriously the provisions of the Gender Recognition Act 2004. Whatever the outcome of the present deliberations, there are implications for the Church to think about in relation to people who have legally changed their gender. At its most extreme (as raised by one or two respondents), does the objection to the state's right to declare two people of the same sex as married equally apply to its right to declare somebody 'created male by God' to be female and vice versa? More practically in the context of the current Act: a marriage which started as one between people of the opposite sex will now continue in existence (if the parties so desire) as a same sex marriage where one of them has gone through gender reassignment. What would be the appropriate response of the Church?

"We marry any opposite sex couple indiscriminately and without proper preparation"

96. We are not aligning ourselves with this view, but reporting that it appeared with some frequency as a perception. Different people drew different conclusions from it. Some expressed the pain of being part of a same sex couple at the heart of church life, being denied what 'outsiders' could so easily have. Some would say that the pastoral and missional significance which many ministers place on responding positively to requests for marriage (and re-marriage) from people who are not otherwise involved with the Church would be equally important for same sex couples. Others would want the Church to focus much more upon marriage preparation and yet others would want to see ministers take a much stricter line in their marriage policy in any case.

"What about people who are living together without being married anyway?"

97. This was a major theme that emerged. Many people felt that there needed to be more recognition of where we are as a society and as a Church in this regard. 'Cohabitation' featured in many answers to question 5 of the consultation (see Appendix 5). It was pointed out that this was not simply a 'young people's issue' about 'sex before marriage'. There are many people who are part of the life of our Church and holding office in it who for various reasons are not, or not yet, married but are living together in a heterosexual partnership. And for most members of the Church, this is a very present reality amongst their extended family.
98. It is a subject which has been at the forefront of thinking at 3Generate for some years, and the Faith and Order Committee worked on resource material for that purpose. The Conference in 2013 pointed to the importance of this material, once produced, being made more widely available to enable different age groups throughout the Methodist Church to engage with the issue of cohabitation.

"(Heterosexual) Marriage is the right context in which to create and nurture children"

99. For some people, as mentioned above, this was expressed in the form that *the* purpose of marriage was to procreate. Many others would suggest that marriage in the traditional Christian view has always included within it the concept of raising children who are genetically related exclusively to the couple involved, which cannot be true of same sex couples, and that this calls into question the appropriateness of calling the relationship marriage. On the other hand, there are those who would question any necessary linkage today between marriage and the potential for, or presence within the marriage, of children.
100. A number of people took the opportunity to raise a series of other concerns about the complexity of family relationships and parenthood in our society and whether the Church has fully thought through the implications of present and possible future scientific developments. These included, for example, same sex adoption; surrogacy arrangements; the genetic possibility of 'three-parent' children.

“There are much more important issues about relationships and attitudes in our society”

101. Some examples of the issues were:

- the need to take more seriously the problem of abusive relationships;
- the lower status of girls and women in some of our communities;
- the pornographic treatment of women and sexualisation of young people;
- female genital mutilation.

3. The relationship of the Church with modern society

102. It will be recalled that the working party’s brief, as described in the report to the 2013 Conference, is to consider whether the Church’s position on marriage needs revising “in light of changes in society”. That has been uppermost in our minds and is the phrase we used in our online consultation question. To a number of respondents that in itself was problematic: in effect, they would object to re-thinking what the Church, in accordance with Scripture and tradition, believes about marriage simply because of changes in society. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds ...”²³ was quoted. Amongst that group were those who would object in any case to embarking upon such a process, and others who would wish to do so but for different reasons.

103. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that for many of us, the current debate presents acute questions as we reflect on our calling to mission. The change in public attitudes to relationships and conduct which within the memory of many of us was punished as criminal²⁴ has been very significant. Even on what has clearly been a divisive issue, a reading of the opinion polls in the period leading up to and since the legislation on same sex marriage indicates generally a majority of people in favour except in the oldest age group (over 60 or 65, depending on the poll), with stronger support among younger people. This is the case both in England and Wales and in Scotland (with very slightly higher numbers in favour in Scotland). Both in the House of Commons and Lords, and in the Scottish Parliament, the strength of the majorities voting for the legislation, and the spread across the parties, also bear witness to the reality and significance of this change of attitude.

104. How then in this context are we to offer Christ? This has emerged in various comments made to us. For some, it raises questions about the ‘credibility’ of the Church – not always resulting in the same answer.

- *What the traditionally minded among us might construe as being "counter-cultural for the sake of the Gospel" will be seen by the world as behaving like dinosaurs. Whatever we say needs above all to be wise. ... If the Church is to have any credibility in its moral teaching it needs to get real about all this.*
- *We are already compromised in our witness and we will not be able to claim that we are spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land. As a result we lose both our distinctiveness and our credibility.*
- *I can see no justifiable reason why Conference should not alter the Methodist stance. It would be pastorally disastrous not to, it would destroy our credibility in the wider World, and it would give to those outside the Church, that the Methodist Church is (a) behind the times, (b) deeply prejudiced and (c) uncaring and welcoming of irrational prejudice and*

²³ Romans 12:2.

²⁴ Until the passing of the Sexual Offences Act 1967.

fear.

- *The credibility of Christianity, in the arenas of inter-faith dialogue, may be undermined by a moving away from the traditional position on marriage.*
- *If the Methodist Church backs off from an affirmation that a same sex relationship can be a gift from God then it will confirm that the gospel is not for those who would define themselves as homosexual, bisexual or transgendered. If it is not for these people then it is not for their mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, neighbours and work colleagues. In short the gospel is increasingly marginalised and the Church has nothing to say about honesty and faithfulness in relationships.*
- *It should make a clear statement at an early date that it will not be supporting same sex marriage. It will be then, I believe, be surprised by how much credibility it gains from being simple straightforward and clear.*

105. Some people ask “what is God saying to us through these events?” Again, the answer can differ: at its most extreme, there is the suggestion that this is a time of great testing and challenge, where we are to witness to God’s truth over and against our contemporary culture (to be ‘counter-cultural’); others point to this as an example of God working through the political and social movements of our time to lead us forward into new insights.

106. An important related question arose: does the amount of time and concentration the Church focuses on this issue in itself detract from its mission? Whilst many people argued that it was a significant issue of justice, one strong response which came through was the call for the Church to engage with and challenge society on what they saw as much more pressing matters: issues of poverty and welfare, economic and social justice internationally, peace and war, climate change. On the other hand, for some people many of the fundamental social problems they saw in our society were attributable to the eroding of traditional marriage and family life – of which same sex marriage was yet another example – and this was precisely where the Church’s mission should be focused.

4. The need for better understanding of sexuality and gender

107. A number of respondents have pointed to specific pieces of research and more generally to the growing body of knowledge and understanding about human sexuality and its development. We have not undertaken any comprehensive survey of the scientific literature, and do not believe that it would be helpful for the Methodist Church to do so on its own. We refer later to other work which has been undertaken upon which we can draw. But it is vital that if we are to engage with these issues in the wider public arena, we do so on the basis of the best possible information. That is not just for the sake of ‘credibility’ but because we do indeed value what our God-given reason reveals to us of God’s continuing purposes in the world.

5. An affirming Church

108. A significant number of respondents to the online consultation, and responses from various groups we have consulted, not surprisingly stressed Methodism’s commitment to the values it has expressed and repeatedly affirmed in seeking to move towards a Church and a society which is fairer and more inclusive. They offer the examples of where the Christian Church has been prepared to move in that direction over the centuries with positive, life-affirming effect, particularly with reference to eg slavery, the treatment of women and apartheid. They see that in this particular area, it is instead society which has led the way, with the Church generally resisting or at least not embracing this movement. For them, this is not just a matter of the Church’s lack of credibility, but a failure to live by the values of the Kingdom of God. This is something which has been stressed by people working in chaplaincy contexts such as higher education institutions who point to the potential negative impact on their mission and ministry

in such contexts where the public bodies have a very clear and strong commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.

109. For others, however, the calling to live according to God's will leads in another direction: to offer to a broken society and world a vision of holiness and restored relationships with God and one another through turning back from what they would see as a sinful path.

6. Conscience

110. From a number of people, particularly in the light of the themes we have just explored, the issue of conscience has emerged strongly. The legislation stresses the right in conscience for anybody to refuse to conduct or take part in a same sex marriage ceremony. Conversely, there are those who would point out that respect and protection need to be given too to those who, having seriously considered the Church's teaching on marriage and equally seriously what they discern as the Spirit's leading at this time, feel constrained to take a course which may inevitably bring them into conflict with what the Church is officially saying.

7. "A slippery slope"

111. A number of online responses opposing any change invoked the argument that one step in that direction brought us onto a slippery slope (or was "the thin end of the wedge"). The ultimate consequences were spelt out in such terms as: if we permit this, then why not ... polygamy, moving on to more extreme (and in our view offensive) suggestions such as incest, paedophilia, bestiality.
112. Reason leads us to consider carefully the possible long-term implications of any step which we take, but we would suggest that to fail to take an appropriate step because we cannot be sure of where the journey will end is to abandon altogether the notion of moral responsibility which is such a central aspect of being human. That is precisely what this present process is about: to consider carefully what the possible next steps should be.
113. Above we have outlined some of the major themes that emerged from consideration of the main issue: our response as a Church to the legislative and social recognition of same sex marriage. There is then a cluster of issues which are perhaps more institutionally focused, and partly related to the use of our buildings.

8. Legal vulnerability

114. A number of respondents raised questions about the choice currently offered to churches to opt in or not, and the nature of the legal protections provided in the legislation for those who refuse to take part, and whether they could be challenged in the courts.
115. It is not for this report to offer a legal opinion. The government offered assurances that the protection offered by the various statutory provisions was as robust as it could be made. Obviously we are not in a position to predict the result of any future litigation, still less any future legislation, but that would be something which would fall to be considered at that later stage. We believe that at this stage, the substantive reasons for opting in or not need to be considered, rather than refusing to do so simply on this basis.

9. Connexionalism

116. As explained above, for any same sex marriage to be solemnized in a Methodist building in England and Wales, the requirements would be that:
- the Conference has opted in ie has given its consent to this being done;
 - the local managing trustees have been granted registration for this purpose by the registration authority;

- the authorised person under that registration is willing to conduct that marriage²⁵.

117. This takes us into the question, mentioned above, of how our connexional principle is 'lived' in our Church today – something that is not unique to this issue²⁶. Where is the balance to be struck between, on the one hand, achieving some common mind and purpose and, on the other, enabling decisions to be made, on the basis of subsidiarity, at a level that is sensitive to local context? Put at its most extreme this emerges as a tension between those who threaten to leave Methodism if the Conference opts in to permitting a same sex marriage to be solemnized anywhere in the Connexion and those who say that it should be purely a matter for local decision so the Conference must first opt in so as to allow this freedom to be exercised.

- *Connexionalism is a much cherished element of the Methodist Church. To consider opting in would inevitably lead in due course to different Methodist churches having differing responses to the nature of marriage. This could in turn lead to confusion, conflict, and an undermining of connexionalism.*
- *Connexionalism doesn't mean all thinking exactly alike. The Conference, by opting in, would allow for local churches to express their pastoral care for gay couples if they wish to hold marriages in their premises. An opt-out would impose the same position on ALL local churches. And it would be a disastrous position in terms of our mission and pastoral care.*
- *The Methodist Church is a connexional Church and this would introduce a new factor in making decisions on stationing of ministers. The matter of same sex marriage is fundamentally a moral one and could and very likely would lead to some form of partition.*
- *We are a diverse denomination. While most of the time I take the highly Connexional view that Conference decides and local Societies do, I think that on this matter the best option for unity in diversity is for Conference to opt in and allow local Societies to make their own mind up on the matter - opting in can be worded in such a way in the report and resolutions as to make clear Conference is not taking a particular view on marriage but simply removing the barrier to local Societies making their own decisions on the matter.*
- *We have to opt in and allow local church councils and ministers to make their own decisions. Opting in is the only way we do not force anyone to go against their conscience.*
- *As a Methodist, personally I have no issue with same sex marriage. However I can see that such a decision would be divisive in local churches and circuits. We need to take a stance for the whole of the Methodist Church and this means keeping the status quo.*
- *If Conference chose to opt in so that local churches could make their own choices this will prove divisive but that would reflect where we are as a people.*
- *Whatever is done in the name of Methodism in one place is done in the name of us all and so whilst conflicting practices which declare marriage to be one thing in one place and one in another may be acceptable to congregationally organised denominations they will cause significant difficulties in a church with a shared discipline, and immense problems for those who wish to remain within the connexion and uphold our current view of marriage as*

²⁵

As explained above, the issues around 'opting in' in Scotland are more focused upon the authorisation of persons to conduct marriage ceremonies.

²⁶

The 2013 Conference, in dealing with the report on *Larger than Circuit*, directed the Faith and Order Committee to reflect on this, with a view to bringing a report to the Conference of 2015.

Methodists.

- *My fear is that this will cause issues within Circuit, we would need to draw deeply on wells of grace to move forward together.*

118. But this is a broader point than simply about opting in. To be a connexional Church also says something about the place of the Conference at the heart of it. It may be that “it was ever thus”, but we have sensed in our conversations a more individualistic approach these days, so that more people sit more lightly to the dictates of the Conference than in earlier years.
119. Whatever decisions the Conference makes this year, these issues are with us. People have pointed to the stationing implications, with increased difficulties in achieving satisfactory matches. These differences would be seen most acutely in the opting-in situation, whether between different churches in a Circuit, or ministerial colleagues, or a church and the minister in pastoral charge. But more broadly, it is clear that the deeply-held differences of view about this subject have the potential to lead to the possibility of uneasy relationships. At its most extreme, this was seen as a ‘church-splitting’ issue with predictions being made about the number of people who would leave Methodism depending on the various outcomes.

10. Relationships with other Churches

120. The working party has throughout its processes borne in mind the significance of our relationships with other Churches and faith communities in Britain, as well as our links with world Methodism. It is important that the Conference is aware of these wider contexts and therefore we set out them out at some length here.
121. The first main aspect of our consultations with partners was the letter sent to a wide range of autonomous Methodist conferences and united churches across the world. It does not need to be spelt out here that some of them are in cultural and legal contexts very different from our own, where indeed any form of homosexual behaviour is treated as a serious criminal offence. Some (such as the United Methodist Church) find themselves deeply divided about these questions. Several are in jurisdictions which have already adopted similar same sex marriage legislation²⁷. We have also borne in mind the global inter-connectedness of Methodism today, with the wide range of Methodist fellowships from these different traditions, worshipping here in Britain. Any decisions which the Conference makes must clearly be very mindful of our place within the global Church, and the inter-church, interfaith and personal relationships which are involved here.
122. It is not surprising that the handful of replies we received from overseas partners revealed considerable differences. Three – Nicaragua, Cuba and Papua New Guinea – strongly called upon us to abide by the word of God as they found it revealed in the Bible. “The social protection of a sexual practice different to that established by God is reprehensible and offensive to what God intended for the human race. We do not believe that it is appropriate to allow this kind of sexual preference in the Church of God²⁸.” There were warnings about the effect on the relationship between the Methodist Church in Britain and the global Church which, it was said, would lose confidence, trust and belief in British Methodism. Reference was also made in the response from Papua New Guinea to the ongoing issue of polygamy which the Church there is called upon to address.
123. The other two came from countries where similar legislation is in force. The New Zealand response shared with us the pastoral letter written by the President and Vice-President

²⁷ At the time of writing this report, there are 17 such countries and several sub-national jurisdictions.

²⁸ The Methodist Church in Nicaragua, translated from the Spanish.

acknowledging the diversity of views within their Church, and recognising that it was for individual ministers and individual parishes to come to decisions about the appropriate response to the legislation. For the Church in Uruguay, the historical context has clearly played a major part in the development of the Church's view. Their draft pastoral document shared with us reminds the reader that the Methodist Church maintained its firm position in defence of human rights during the dictatorship and goes on to set this subject firmly in the context of the Church's mission to take "a firm stance on the defence of human rights and rejecting all forms of discrimination and judgement".

124. As mentioned above, letters were written to a number of our Partner Churches in Britain. We did not ask for their own views as such, but about the effect on any ecumenical relationships if the Conference were to embark on the process of revisiting our teaching on marriage. The responses received were generally along the lines that they understood the reasoning that might lead the Conference in this direction, and would wish us well if that were the course which we adopted, whilst recognising that in some local situations this could cause tensions. A helpful reply was received from the United Reformed Church National Synod of Scotland, reminding us that the issues are somewhat different there because of the Scottish legal situation, where the celebrant, not the premises, is authorised.
125. It is a subject with which many of our Partner Churches here are wrestling at the same time as us. Whilst we may differ, for instance, as to whether marriage is to be denoted as a sacrament, there is no doubt that we share a tradition which has regarded marriage as founded upon the relationship between a man and a woman. It may be helpful to mention at this point some of their thinking.
126. There are two major reports which offer in-depth study of many of the issues mentioned in this report relating more generally to human sexuality. The first is the Church of Scotland's Theological Commission on Same-Sex Relationships and the Ministry, which explores very fully biblical and other issues of human sexuality 'within the communion of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church'²⁹. The second is the Report of the Church of England's House of Bishops Working Group on human sexuality (the *Pilling Report*), published in 2013³⁰. This report has substantial sections on 'arguments about science' and 'arguments about Scripture' (with an analysis of the various texts and a dissenting statement by one of the members of the group), and some extremely helpful theological reflections. In response to this report a two year period of facilitated conversations is taking place throughout the Church of England as to how it lives with conflicting and deeply-held points of view regarding same sex relationships, and this is intended to involve ecumenical and interfaith partners.
127. Since the introduction of the legislation as to same sex marriage, various Churches have been involved in processes of considering the specific implications of this³¹ and we mention these to illustrate the range of approaches.
128. The Church of England's House of Bishops has issued a *Statement of Pastoral Guidance on Same Sex Marriage*³². It points out that there is now, for the first time, a divergence between

²⁹

http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0014/13811/20_THEOLOGICAL_2013.pdf; the report was received by the General Assembly in 2013 which affirmed the Church's historic and current doctrine and practice in relation to human sexuality but agreed in principle to permit those Kirk Sessions who wished to depart from that doctrine and practice to do so in order to permit the ordination or induction into a charge of a minister or a deacon who is in a civil partnership. The relevant legislation is being considered by the 2014 Assembly in May.

³⁰

Church House Publishing, 2013; http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1891063/pilling_report_gs_1929_web.pdf.

³¹

This is not a complete survey (most obviously, the position of the Catholic Bishops Conference is not dealt with here) but it indicates some approaches taken by the churches with whom we have closest links in terms of shared life and buildings, where they have made a public response.

³²

<http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2014/02/house-of-bishops-pastoral-guidance-on-same-sex-marriage.aspx>.

the general understanding and definition of marriage in England as enshrined in law and the doctrine of marriage held by the Church of England and reflected in the *Canons* and the *Book of Common Prayer*. The Act provides no opt-in mechanism for the Church of England because of the constitutional convention that the power of initiative on legislation affecting the Church of England rests with the General Synod, which has the power to pass Measures and Canons. But there are still issues which have had to be considered.

129. With regard to the question of access to the sacraments and pastoral care of people in same sex marriage (and any children they care for), the Guidance states: “Those same sex couples who choose to marry should be welcomed into the life of the worshipping community and not be subjected to questioning about their lifestyle. Neither they nor any children they care for should be denied access to the sacraments.”

130. However, in relation to clergy and ordinands, the Guidance, based upon the Declaration of Assent required of clergy before ordination and affirmed on any new appointment together with Canon C 26 as to manner of life expected of clergy, states:

“25. The Church of England will continue to place a high value on theological exploration and debate that is conducted with integrity. That is why Church of England clergy are able to argue for a change in its teaching on marriage and human sexuality, while at the same time being required to fashion their lives consistently with that teaching.

26. Getting married to someone of the same sex would, however, clearly be at variance with the teaching of the Church of England. The declarations made by clergy and the canonical requirements as to their manner of life do have real significance and need to be honoured as a matter of integrity.

27. The House is not, therefore, willing for those who are in a same sex marriage to be ordained to any of the three orders of ministry. In addition it considers that it would not be appropriate conduct for someone in holy orders to enter into a same sex marriage, given the need for clergy to model the Church's teaching in their lives.”

It must be recognised that this Guidance is to be seen in the wider context of the ongoing conversations initiated by the *Pilling Report*, and individual bishops are already engaged in offering their pastoral reflections upon it. The issues for our two churches are in some senses different because of the canon law implications, and the response which we received to our letter from their Council for Christian Unity acknowledged that sister churches will wish to approach this issue in a way which is appropriate for them. The response, however, stressed the high sensitivity of this area for the continuing relationship of our two churches, as an outworking of the Covenant between us, concluding “we will continue to take very seriously the implications of being in a Covenant relationship with the Methodists for how we undertake our different processes within overlapping time periods. It will therefore be important to consult and communicate developments at every stage of the process”³³.

131. The Scottish Episcopal Church is embarking upon a Conversation during 2014 – within an agreed framework there is intended to be a whole Church discussion about same sex relationships, in which the emphasis will be on listening, personal sharing and theological reflection, collaborating through difference and shaping a direction together – ahead of any subsequent synodical debating and decision-making process.

132. The United Reformed Church has not arrived at any decided view yet about the issues which the Act raises. It has recognised a wide range of views about this area over a number of years, and argued in response to the consultation on the Bill for freedom to allow individual Local

33

See also the report of the Joint Implementation Commission in section 21 of the Agenda, at paragraph 40

Churches to make decisions about registration in their own context (as is currently the case in relation to ceremonies for the registration of civil partnerships). Nevertheless the General Assembly is regarded as the relevant 'governing authority' which would have to decide whether to opt in. A task group (with which our working party has had helpful contact) has been working this year to produce resource material to enable the issues to be explored before and at the meeting of the Assembly this year. Whether or not the Assembly will arrive at a consensus as to the way forward will depend upon the conversations when it meets – which is the week after our Conference.

133. Whilst the United Reformed Church reflects our own in needing a central decision – although within its polity the greater autonomy of the local congregation contrasts with our connexionalism – for the Baptists the decision is essentially one for each Local Church, and the Baptist Union Council is encouraging prayerful reflection on these issues.
134. As mentioned above, the Church of Scotland General Assembly in 2013 dealt with the *Theological Statement on Same-Sex Relationships and the Ministry*³⁴. With regard to the specific question of marriage, we understand that some thought has been given as to whether the Church should continue to celebrate marriages in the way that it does now or possibly seek to move towards the practice common on the continent of all marriages being civil but with couples having the option of a church blessing afterwards. It has been recommended that no immediate decision be taken but the possibility be kept in mind.
135. A particular issue arises for Methodism in the many instances where we are in partnership with other churches locally, and particularly in the sharing of buildings. The situation to which we refer arises if the Conference were to decide not to revisit the definition of marriage or opt in to the use of Methodist buildings for solemnizing same sex marriages. There would then still be questions about buildings used by, but not owned by, the Methodist Church. There are various different settings in which this could happen, involving various legal provisions under the Act³⁵, but to take a simple instance: if Methodists were sharing the use for worship of a URC-owned building and if the URC centrally opted in and the local URC trustee body resolved to apply to hold such marriage ceremonies, registration could not take place unless the Conference consented to this application. If the local Methodists would wish this to happen and saw it as a way of nurturing their growing life together, are there ecumenical considerations to be brought into play in distinguishing between opting in in relation to Methodist buildings and consenting to the registration by others, or would the Methodist position require a veto to be exercised in line with its decision as to Methodist buildings?
136. In this Section D we have explored in some depth the issues which have emerged from our consultation and considerations in relation to the same sex marriage legislation (we deal below with questions directly related to civil partnerships). These are the 'implications' which we were directed by the Conference of 2013 to consider and report upon. Against that background, then, we turn to the next question we were asked: what are our conclusions about "whether the Methodist Church's position on marriage needs revising in the light of changes in society"?

E. SHOULD THE METHODIST CHURCH'S POSITION ON MARRIAGE BE REVISED?

137. We have set out above the various issues which have emerged through our broad consultation, so that the decision that the Conference needs to make upon this question can be as well considered as possible.

³⁴ Paragraph 126.

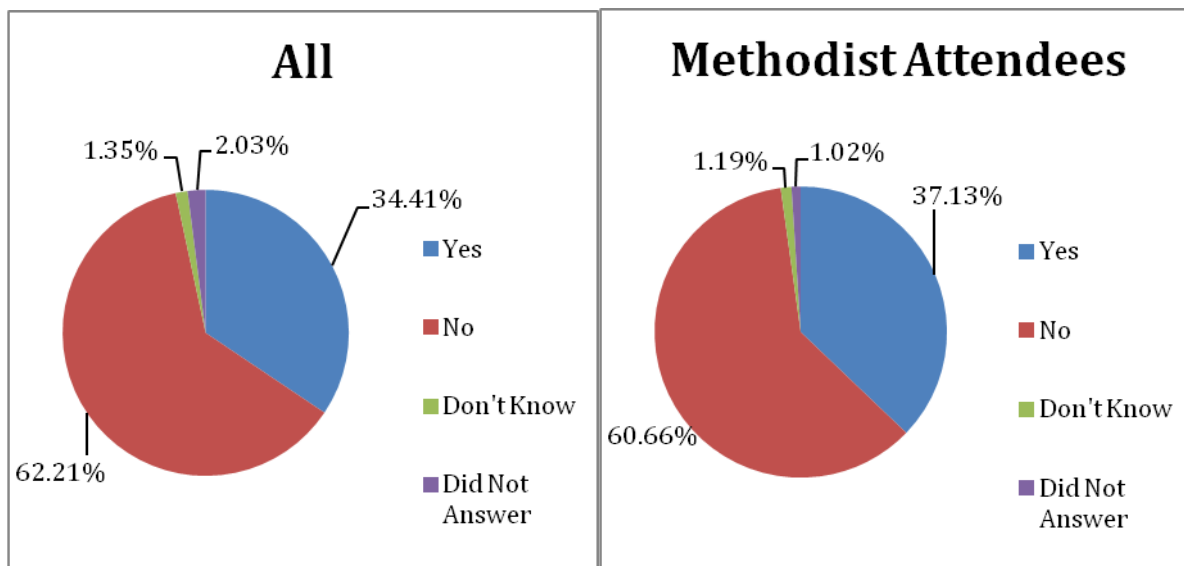
³⁵ eg multi-denominational settings such as higher education chaplaincies.

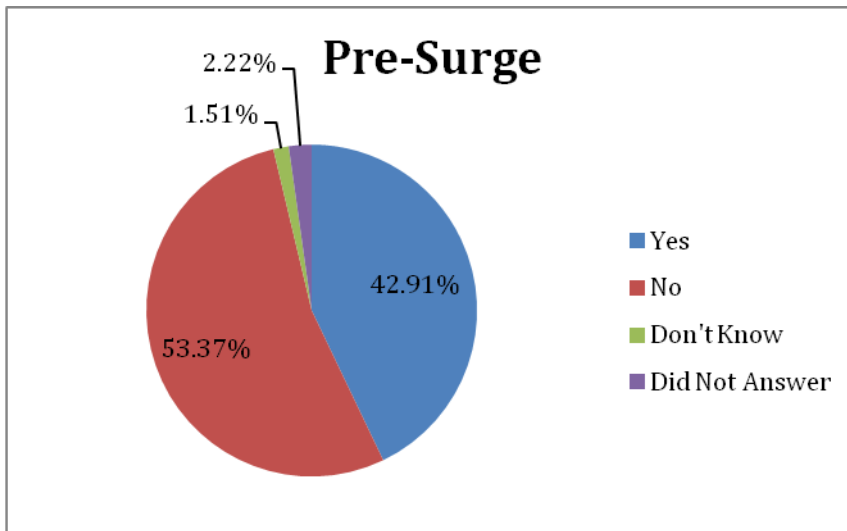
138. To form part of that consideration, although not its sole determinant, we now offer the results of **what our online consultation revealed** in answer to the question phrased as follows:

“The Methodist Church's position on marriage is this: "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." In the light of changes in British society do you think the Methodist Conference should be asked to look again at this position?”

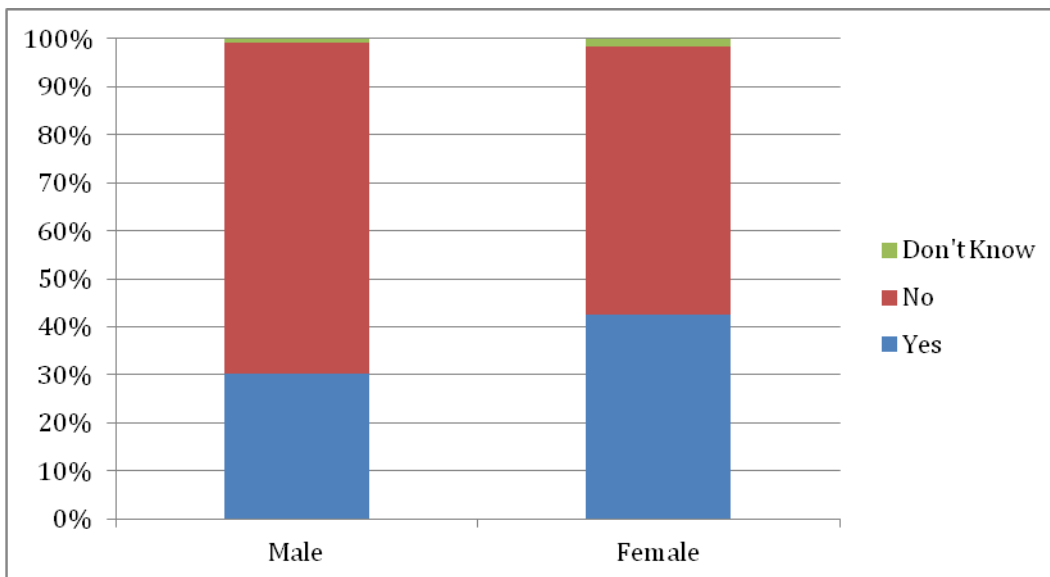
139. We remind the Conference of what was stressed earlier: this was not designed to be a referendum or an opinion poll, but an opportunity for people to offer their views. The commentary which respondents offered showed the complexity of even such a question as this. There were those who answered “yes” but said that this was because they wanted the Conference to debate (and in many cases to restate more clearly) the present position; others answered “no” because although they personally wanted at least a debate they feared that this would be too divisive at this time. As indicated above, for many of those answering “yes” and indeed some who answered “no”, the use of the phrase “in the light of changes in British society” was unhelpful, as they felt that theological and scriptural debate should form the basis of any debate or change. Another area of overlap lay in terminology with a number of “no”s arguing that marriage should remain between one man and one woman with a different term found to affirm same sex relationships, and some giving the same reasoning but concluding “yes”.

140. We set out the overall position right, in terms of the total number of individual respondents and then of those identifying themselves as Methodists. We have also indicated where the figures had reached before the late ‘surge’ referred to above.

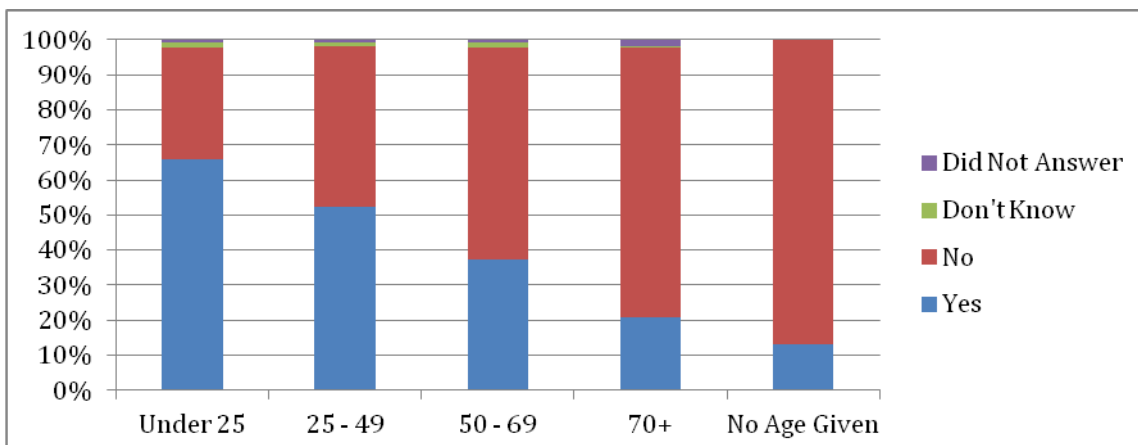




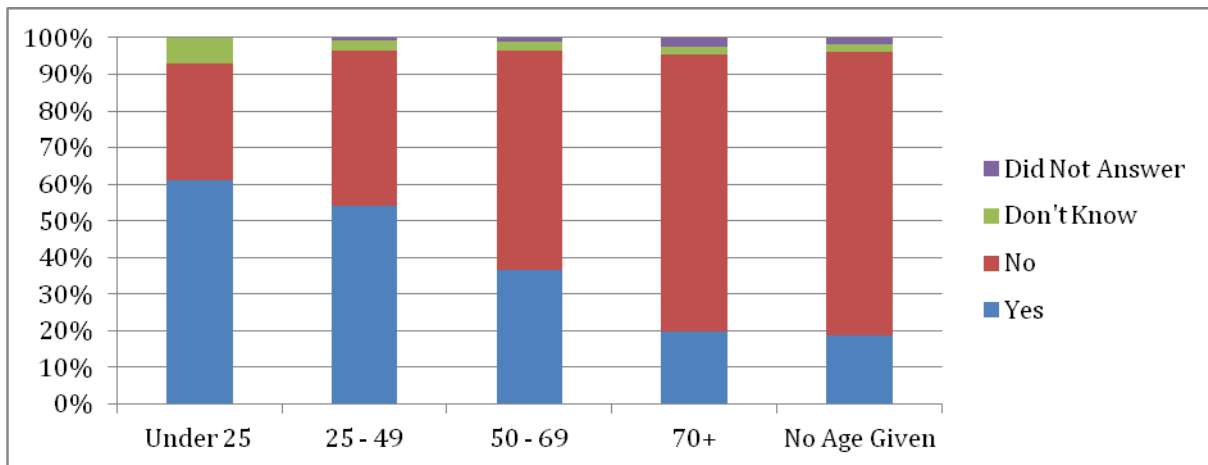
141. We pointed out earlier on that there were fewer female responders than might have been hoped for, given the gender balance within the Church as a whole. In answer to this question the breakdown as between male and female responders was as follows:



142. If we look at the breakdown by age, it will be seen that there was a majority saying "yes" in the categories up to the age of 50.



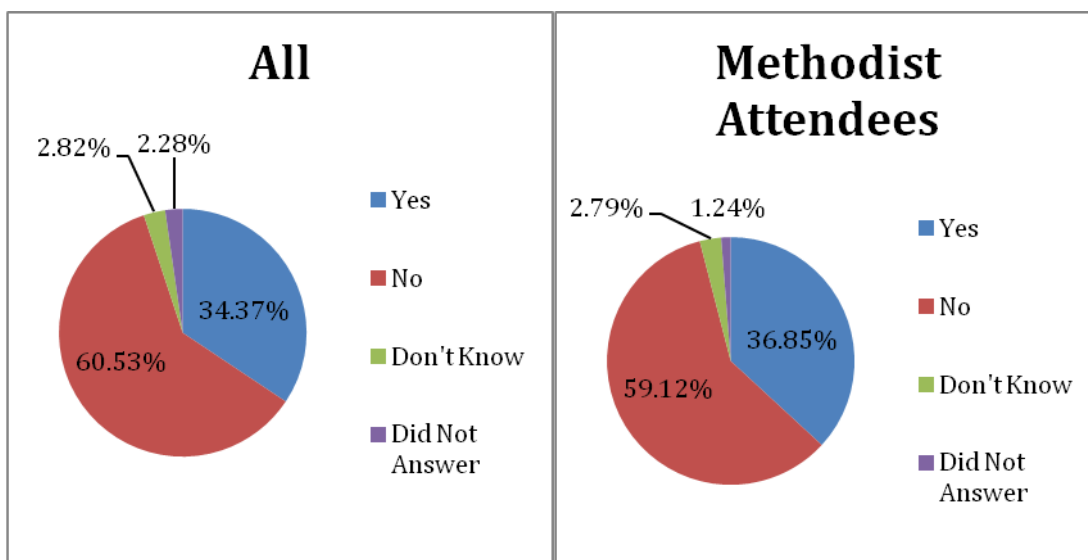
143. Similar results emerged in answer to the question whether the Conference should be asked to consider 'opting-in' for the registration of buildings (see bar chart below and pie charts overleaf).

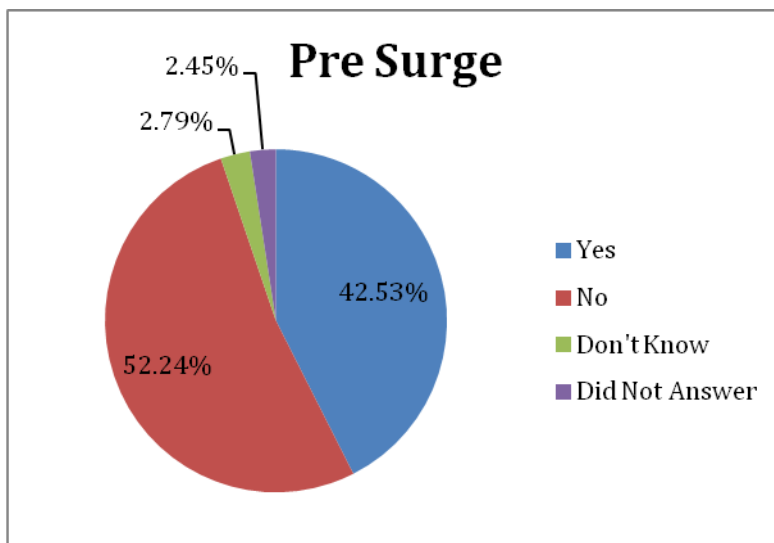


Our conclusion

144. We have carefully weighed all the various considerations, including the figures just quoted. It is obvious that at this time there is not – nor did we expect there to be – a consensus as to whether and how to move on this question.

145. **We have concluded that this is not the time to recommend to the Conference that a group be appointed to work on a revision of our teaching on marriage.** There needs to be an extended time of listening and reflection as we continue to explore together what we can discern of God’s purposes for us, rather than making any such decision at the present time, and our resolutions are designed to help this process to happen. We respect the fact that there may be some among our Partner Churches who will move more quickly on this, to respect the rights of individual congregations to have same sex marriage ceremonies on their premises or individual ministers to conduct them in the name of the Church. However, we are a connexional Church, and **our further conclusion is that it would not be consistent with what we have just said to recommend that the Conference at this point opts in to permit same sex marriages to be conducted on Methodist premises or for Methodist ministers to conduct such marriages elsewhere.**





146. Having said that, however, all that we have reported above indicates that there *is* much work to be done, and to ignore the seismic legal and social change which has taken place in a short period of time would be not just foolish but a denial of our calling to share in God’s mission. In the next section, we set out the various steps which we believe should be taken.

F. RECOMMENDATIONS

147. As we have indicated, whilst we are not recommending that a group be appointed to review the Methodist Church’s definition of marriage, there is much work still to be done. It goes without saying that in all these areas we should not be duplicating work that is already being effectively done by others, or seeking to do separately what we could do much more effectively together with ecumenical or other partners. But we indicate below the various tasks which we see as being needed, and conclude with our recommendations about how these can be taken forward.

148. First, there is the urgent concern which we mentioned earlier about homophobic attitudes³⁶. There will be many who would see the Church’s unwillingness to revisit its definition of marriage at this time as a denial of our commitment in 1993 “to combat repression and discrimination, to work for justice and human rights and to give dignity and worth to people whatever their sexuality”. That feeling may be reinforced by what we report above about the tone and content of many of the online replies we received. Some intentional work needs to be set in train to address these attitudes, by the production and dissemination of clear guidance on what is, or is not to be regarded as homophobia and, we suggest, a formal statement for the Conference to adopt on this matter. We recommend that the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion committee³⁷ be directed, as a matter of priority, to work on this.

149. Secondly, if we are to move into a genuine period of discernment, there is the equally important but longer-term task of learning to listen to and respect the deeply held convictions of others within the Church. Resources have been developed about this, not least the work on

³⁶ Paragraphs 71ff.

³⁷

We understand that this committee is proposed to be formally constituted by the Conference this year – Agenda, section 32 (Methodist Council Report).

living with contradictory convictions and on the nature of the authority of the Bible referred to above. These have not been widely used. We recommend that serious attention needs to be given to how, using these or other resources, conversations on these fundamental aspects of our common life together as a Church can be encouraged, guided and facilitated much more widely. We understand that, besides those resources already produced, work is already being done to move forward on this by offering a range of resources from a wide variety of backgrounds, to be accessible on The Queen's Foundation Birmingham website (www.queens.ac.uk). We also appreciate what MET offered to our consultation in this regard: "We feel that the church should provide more support and theological resources so that at all levels within the church, including at 3Generate and other youth forums we might be better Biblically informed in our discussions of relationship issues. MET is ready to play its part in contributing to that process".

150. Thirdly, and turning more specifically to the question of marriage, we find ourselves now in a situation where the Methodist Church's official position on marriage is not in accord with the definition and concept of marriage upon which our civil society operates, legally and socially.
151. As we indicated above, there is more work to be done in thinking about this in the trajectory of Christian history and tradition and the Church's experience of living in contexts where its values, teaching and practice as to marriage are not shared with the prevailing culture in wider society. This may include consideration of the 'separation of functions' option referred to above³⁸. But it is also part of a much broader question, about the missional challenges of being part of, and witnessing within, that culture to the gospel of Jesus Christ.
152. Linked to that are pastoral considerations, as many of our respondents stressed: we are not going to be able to offer marriage ceremonies for same sex couples who may seek them. But there are many other contexts in which people who are in same sex marriages may seek to be involved in the life of the Church. It is important that they and any children they care for are welcomed into the life of the worshipping community and have access to the sacraments. Are there pastoral and teaching resources already available to be drawn on for this, or does more work need to be done?
153. Fourth, there is a separate group of issues which emerged from our consultation, as spelt out in paragraphs 92-101. We are not saying that all of the points which were made to us are of equal significance or urgency, and we need to recognise the limited resources available to the Church and the need to identify priorities. However, we suggest that it would be helpful for a group to reflect on these and suggest any further steps which might be taken. In many cases, this is not a matter of doing further work but of looking at excellent material which is already available and seeing how it can better find its way into the Church's bloodstream. However, we would identify the following as needing further attention:
 - a. A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage was adopted by the Conference as a Conference Statement in 1992. A 'Conference Statement' technically means one which is "intended to be a considered Statement of the judgment of the Conference on some major issue or issues of faith and practice, and framed with a view to standing as such for some years"³⁹. The statement still contains much which is of great value, but not surprisingly, after 22 years of change in Church and society, we need to ask whether it should be updated or perhaps whether the Conference should be asked to resolve that it should be seen as a significant record of the Church's thinking at that time but not now having the status of a Conference Statement.

³⁸ Paragraph 90.

³⁹ Standing Order 129(1).

- b. The Conference has already signalled the importance of continuing to think about the issues around cohabitation and further work needs to be done to provide the resources to enable this to be engaged in honestly and sensitively across the Church.
154. Finally there are issues which may need to be addressed in the short term.
155. One is the question of the Conference's position where Methodists are sharing (non-Methodist) premises for worship. As indicated above, there may be instances where the relevant proprietor or trust body wishes to apply to be registered to solemnize same sex marriages and requires our Conference's consent to do so. It is not clear yet whether any such situation is likely to arise; it might be in relation to a local church congregation or it might be, for instance, in the setting of a multi-denominational building in a higher education institution. It would be possible for the Conference to say now in advance that it refuses any such consent because of the Methodist teaching on marriage, or conversely that ecumenical or missional considerations require that such consent should be given. On the other hand it may wish the situation to be considered in more depth than this working party has been able to do within the time constraints, with a report considering the implications to be brought to the Conference of 2015. To test the mind of the Conference we are proposing the latter.
156. Other more immediate issues to address are dealt with in Section H below⁴⁰.
157. Above, in paragraphs 150 to 156, we have suggested a major programme of work, whilst stressing that not all of it may prove possible and that a realistic timescale and budget (including for a significant input of support staff) is needed. Even with those caveats, there would be far too much for any one working group to do here. But we recommend that the Conference appoint a task group on marriage and relationships to oversee the various pieces of work, reporting regularly to the Methodist Council and seeking its approval for its proposed programme and priorities, with a view to bringing a report on the key issues and proposals for any further work to be done to the Conference in two years' time. So far as ever possible this work should be done in collaboration with our ecumenical partners. Those involved will also need to be mindful of the recommendations of the Children and Youth Assembly, mentioned above, in relation to ongoing work⁴¹.

G. PEOPLE AND PLACES

158. The pieces of work which we are recommending to be set in motion above have various time-frames. As we have stressed throughout, however, the legal changes are with us here and now, and have immediate and deep impact upon the lives of individual Methodist people, lay and ordained. Two main areas need to be dealt with.
159. 1.) The first relates to the work we were asked to do upon the response to Memorial M29 (2012)⁴². This asked the Conference to revisit its 2006 ruling⁴³ that the blessing of same sex relationships should not take place on Methodist premises, "in the hope that we will allow the blessing of civil partnerships of gay or lesbian couples on Methodist premises".
160. Since 2012, the landscape of this whole area has quickly changed. The same sex marriage legislation with which this report deals has been enacted and is now in force, so that civil partnership is not the only means by which a same sex relationship can have official public

⁴⁰ Paragraphs 163 and 179.

⁴¹ See Agenda Section 44 .

⁴² See the text in footnote 1 above.

⁴³ Paragraph 26 above.

recognition.

161. During the passage of the Bill, questions were asked about the future of civil partnerships, and so the Act mandated the government to conduct a review of civil partnerships in England and Wales. That review was embarked upon through a public consultation between January and April 2014. It was made clear in the consultation that the government had not developed any definite policy proposals but was putting forward potential changes suggested by others. Three main possibilities were identified: abolishing the legal relationship of civil partnership and converting existing civil partnerships into marriages; stopping new civil partnerships being registered but retaining existing ones; opening up civil partnership to opposite sex couples.
162. A short response has been sent on behalf of the Methodist Church, based upon the Conference's existing stance, advocating the retention of the status as there will still be a need for a legal partnership for those same sex couples who do not wish or do not feel able to enter into a same sex marriage as now defined. No comment was made about the extension to opposite sex couples as the Conference has not declared its mind on that matter.
163. It may be that in the coming months, the government produces draft proposals for significant changes in this area. It will be important that the implications of any such proposals are reviewed and if necessary reported on to the Conference as soon as practicable. We recommend that the group which we are proposing to the Conference to oversee work across the whole area of marriage and relationships should have the responsibility of doing this.
164. The situation about civil partnerships as such is therefore a fluid one: even if no legislative change is enacted the reality must be that many of those people who would previously have chosen to enter a civil partnership will now opt for a same sex marriage, and for those already in a civil partnership the process for converting this legal status to a marriage will generally be through completing required documentation rather than going through a separate ceremony⁴⁴.
165. We have, however, considered the question in the broader terms of the Conference resolution of 2006, ie the blessing of "same sex relationships".
166. Three main themes emerged from our consultations on this. First, as the Birmingham Synod identified, one of the issues is about the meaning of 'blessing'. Strong views were expressed on this.
 - *At times ministers of the church are called to bless instruments of war, video projectors, pets, houses ... Surely we can bless committed relationships of love.*
 - *You cannot ask for a blessing on an act that is not of God. The biblical stance is clearly opposed to homosexual relationships and so as well as blessings showing an element of acceptance and approval, the blessing itself cannot exist.*
 - *If (as Conference says) we can bless a same sex union in someone's kitchen, how can we be denied permission to bless it in a Church? What sort of theology says that something is good, holy and blessable outside Church but not in it? If the curtain of the temple was torn down, do we not believe that the whole world is equally holy? If we can bless a relationship in one place (as I believe is right) we should be able to bless it anywhere and everywhere.*
 - *I have been a Preacher for 20 yrs and a Methodist all my life. I find it offensive that God's*

44

This refers to the situation in England and Wales. In Scotland, there may be the option of a separate ceremony.

love is for all and if two people find love our good Lord would be celebrating this and I was deeply distressed that I had to have a blessing at my CP in a Golf Club . Yet people use our premises for marriage and blessings and yet as a Church member and a committed Christian this was not possible for me to have such in the church!

- *If I can't perform a civil partnership ceremony in church then I wouldn't want to be able to offer a blessing in church.*

167. The 2006 *Pilgrimage of Faith* Report offered some helpful theological reflections on blessing and prayer, and we would urge that more attention be given to what was said then. Having explored the issues, that working party concluded:

“There are no easy solutions for the complex situation in which the Church finds itself – at least, there are not if we are each to respect the Christian integrity of those who hold different convictions from ourselves. It will be healthy and honest for the Church frankly to acknowledge that there will be pressure on Christian consciences whatever stance the Church adopts. Many will be unhappy if any minister or lay person blesses a same-sex relationship; such action, especially if it is a minister’s, might suggest that he or she was acting in the name of the whole Methodist Church. Others will be unhappy if the Methodist Church prohibits the blessing of same-sex relationships. At what point does ‘pressure on Christian consciences’ become unacceptable or undesirable? This is not an easy question – but the whole Church must continue to be sensitive to it, each of us looking out especially for those whose viewpoint differs from our own.”

It went on to propose the resolution adopted by the Conference and quoted above⁴⁵.

168. The second aspect of our consideration was the evidence, from our own experience and from responses to the consultation, that the point at which the line was drawn in 2006 and the guidance in *CPD* which accompanied it does not reflect what has actually been happening in the intervening period. That is not, of course, a good reason in itself for change but it perhaps reflects the greater body of people who have now had a direct encounter with same sex couples in civil partnerships or more broadly living in committed loving relationships than was the case in earlier years, and this has led them to want to offer more positive affirmation and hospitality.

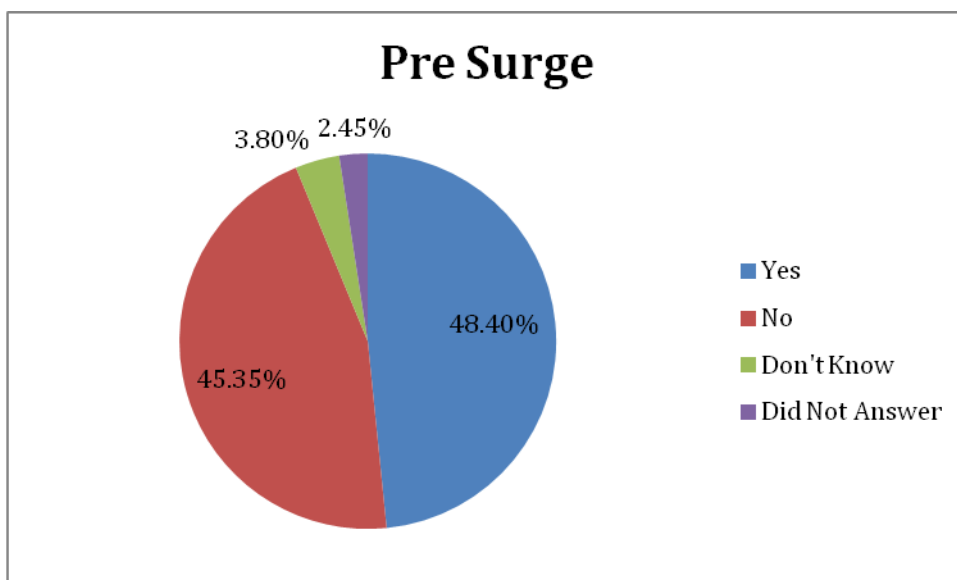
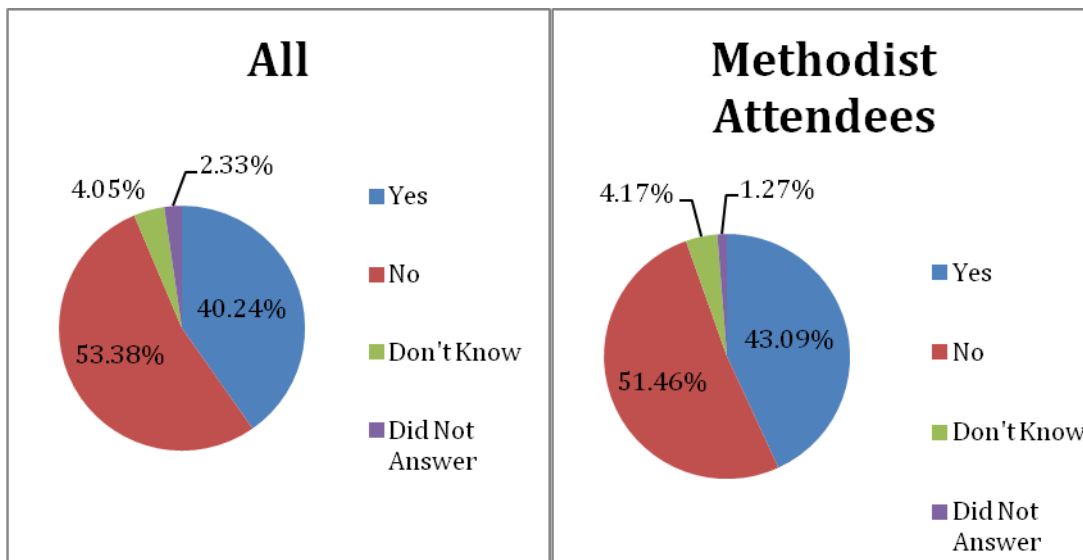
- *I had a civil partnership at a hotel venue where our minister gave prayers and a lay preacher conducted our blessing and a large number of the congregation attended. What was missing was being in the church where we regularly worship!*
- *At present Methodist congregations have to go to other churches' buildings to celebrate and bless civil partnerships of their members (as our church did). My daughter's civil partnership was blessed in a URC church, by our own Methodist minister, and more than 30 members of our church's congregation came to the service. If the congregation had had a choice, our family would have abided by whatever the church's decision was about whether to hold the service in our own church or not - but we would have liked to have the chance.*

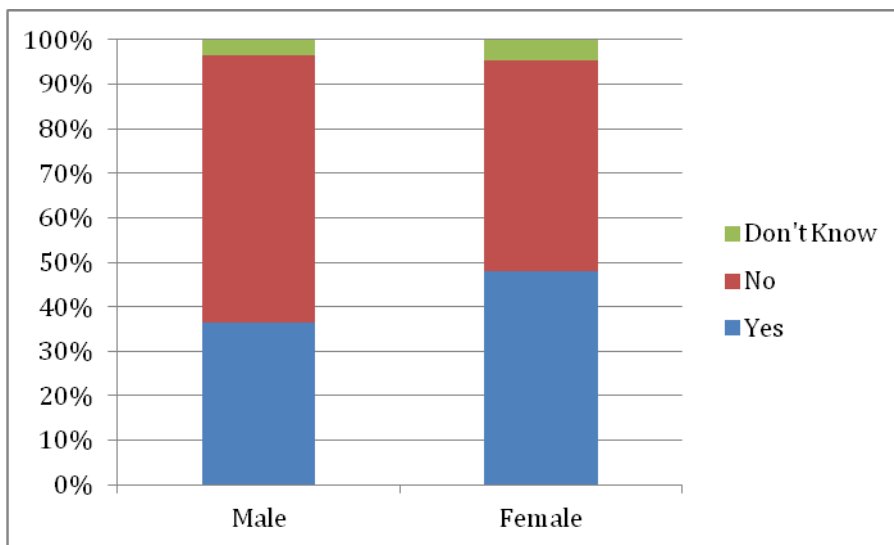
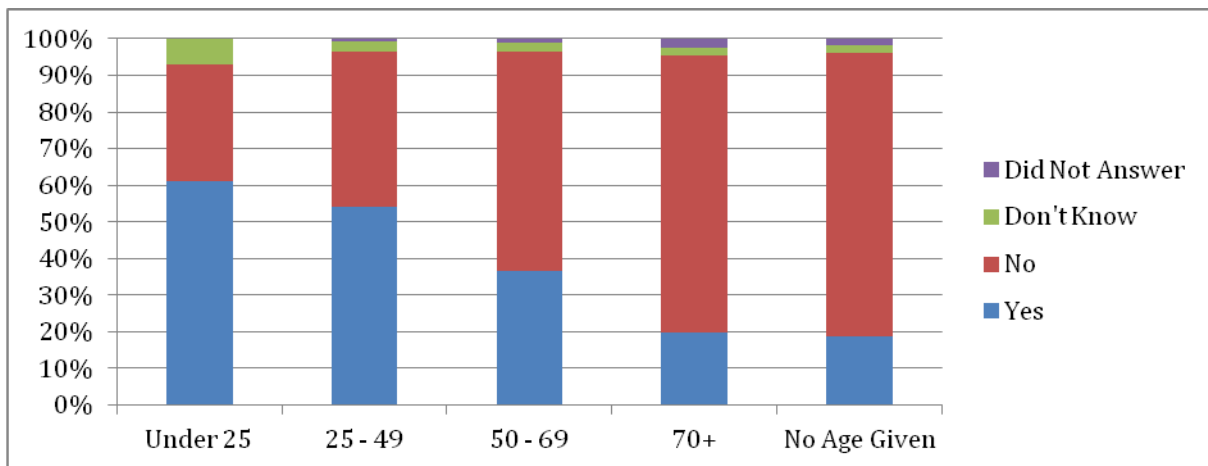
169. Thirdly, what became very evident in the online consultation and was reflected too in other conversations, is that, as we explained above, a significant number of people are opposed to a change in relation to our teaching on marriage not because they object to all same sex relationships as such, but because they feel that it is impossible or inappropriate to extend the traditional definition of marriage beyond the relationship of one man and one woman. They would, however, want to move further towards a greater recognition of same sex relationships

⁴⁵ At paragraph 26.

in their own right within the life of the Church. Obviously this is not a view shared by those whose stance is taken upon the wrongness of any such relationships.

170. This trend is reflected in the numbers of individual replies to Question 4 in the consultation. Whilst the balance amongst Methodist attendees was still negative the gap between the “yes” and “no” replies was narrower than for the other questions (and with rather more “Don’t know”s). It might be noted that until the beginning of the ‘surge’ there was actually a majority in favour of revisiting the prohibition. As previously there was an overall majority in favour amongst the younger age groups. Almost 50% of women also indicated that they were in favour (see pie charts and bar charts overleaf).





171. In the light, then, of all these considerations about the new legal situation in which we find ourselves as to marriage, and the views expressed to us about the context in which prayers and services are offered, we have decided to test the mind of the Conference by recommending that the following guidelines be adopted to supersede those which were put in place as enshrining the mind of the Church in 2006. The previous guidelines offered no advice to Local Churches or managing trustees and we have sought to address this fully. If accepted, these guidelines, set out below, would replace those in CPD Book VII Part 10⁴⁶ and, it is hoped, help individuals and local churches to respond to requests appropriately, including the possible use of their premises.

“The Methodist Church recognises that its members hold contradictory convictions regarding issues of human sexuality and the forms of relationship intended by God. The demands of the Gospel commit us to making pilgrimage together grounded in mutual respect and a spirit of understanding and love. In all this we continue to affirm our need of grace and our willingness to admit our limitations.

In providing guidelines the Conference acknowledges the help required by Local Churches and individual ministers and lay persons to respond well to enquiries and requests for prayers or services from same sex couples, including those whose relationship has been recognised in a civil ceremony. The pastoral

⁴⁶ Appendix 4 below.

conversation with the couple resulting from such an enquiry should be conducted in an atmosphere of welcome and with care and sensitivity. Any conversation about the current understanding of the Methodist Church with regard to marriage and relationships should be based on the previous decisions of the Conference in order that the pastoral response offered is consonant with these understandings. Knowledge is therefore presumed of the following Methodist Conference documents and decisions:

The relevant Standing Orders, principally SO 011A

The 1992 Conference Statement on A Christian Understanding of the Family, the Single Person and Marriage

The 1993 Conference Resolutions on Human Sexuality (CPD Book VII, part 11)

The Pilgrimage of Faith Reports 2005 and 2006

Christian Preparation for Marriage: Methodist Church Policy and Guidelines (CPD Book VII, Part 8)

Guidelines for Interfaith Marriages (CPD Book VII, Part 9)

These documents and decisions together govern the practice of the Methodist Church and no decision of local church bodies or officers, ministers or lay persons regarding relationships or sexuality should contravene them. It is the responsibility of each presbyter, in conjunction with the Church Council, to ensure that this discipline is upheld in the life of the Local Church in order to preserve and advance its mission and unity.

Whilst it is expected that any response be respectful and welcoming, no local church body, minister or lay person is required to act in any way contrary to the demands of conscience. The Conference trusts that at all times all those responsible will seek to act together with integrity and in good faith.

Given the sensitivities of these matters, these guidelines are offered in a spirit of support and mutual care. They are intended to reduce the possibility of hurt or distress that may be caused by rejection or misunderstanding, and to preserve the unity of the Local Church, in order that the Church may remain faithful to the Gospel mission to which it is called."

172. 2.) The second main issue in this section brings us finally to one of the most difficult and sensitive areas in our consideration.

173. The other relevant *Pilgrimage of Faith* resolution adopted by the Conference in 2006 confirmed that there was no reason *per se* within our discipline to prevent anyone within the Church, ordained or lay, from entering into or remaining within a civil partnership⁴⁷. Should the same ruling then apply to entering into or remaining within a legally contracted same sex marriage?

174. There are some good arguments for saying that it should. The 2006 ruling focused upon the legal status, not any particular conduct which might or might not be involved. The same sex marriage legislation similarly is about creating a legal status, and there are close links with civil partnership. For many people, marriage was the status which they were seeking from the outset, but were precluded from entering; the effect of the legislation is that when couples convert their civil partnership to a marriage the marriage is to be treated as having existed from the date of the civil partnership. The means whereby civil partners can convert their relationship to one of marriage will not involve going through another ceremony⁴⁸. For those

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It went on to state: "However, the 1993 [Derby] Resolutions do still apply. Those Resolutions apply to every Methodist, whether married, in a civil partnership, or single."

⁴⁸ Paragraph 164 above.

people who have already entered into a same sex marriage abroad, their status until the new legislation came into effect was that of a civil partnership, but is now automatically converted into a marriage here. Unlike the situation for opposite sex couples, non-consummation is not in itself a ground upon which a same sex marriage can be annulled. It could be argued that in the new context in which we find ourselves the Church's longstanding view that there is no dichotomy between "religious" and "civil" marriage will need to be re-examined, as there is clearly a difference in understanding between the legal relationship of marriage as now recognised by the state and that expressed in the Church's teaching. But because civil same sex marriage is, in essence, a legal contract like civil partnership there is no reason why Methodists cannot enter into this legal relationship.

175. Those who oppose this would say the situation is different from that of civil partnership: there was nothing in our teaching which would have precluded people from entering that status. Marriage, on the other hand, is something upon which the Church's teaching is clear and it would be inappropriate to signify acceptance of something which would obviously be at odds with that teaching simply on the basis that the legal context has changed. This situation has presented itself even more starkly to the Church of England with the divergence between the general understanding and definition of marriage in England as enshrined in common law and statute and the doctrine of marriage held by the Church of England and reflected in canon law. The Bishops' conclusion as to the current situation is that (as described above⁴⁹) it would not be appropriate conduct for someone in holy orders to enter into a same sex marriage, given the need for clergy to model the Church's teaching in their lives, nor for anybody in such a marriage to be ordained to any of the three orders of ministry.
176. It has not usually been the practice within Methodist polity to draw a distinction between the conduct to be expected of lay and ordained members of the Church, and we would not wish to do so here.
177. Given these arguments, and recognising that the 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality would still apply to all relationships, the working party has concluded that the ruling regarding those entering civil partnerships, namely that there is no reason *per se* to prevent anyone within the Church, ordained or lay, from entering into or remaining within such a relationship, should also extend to those entering into legally contracted same sex marriages.
178. We offer our conclusion in this regard for the Conference to declare its mind, but even if the Conference feels unable to adopt it, we consider that it is right that clear guidance should be given as to the position of people who are already within a same sex marriage before these resolutions are dealt with by the Conference. We propose the adoption of a resolution similar in form to that adopted in 1993, to preclude retrospective disciplinary action. With regard to such marriages contracted in the future, the effect of not adopting the conclusion in paragraph 177 above is that any complaints made on the basis of such marriages would be dealt with under the existing procedures of the Church.
179. Finally, there are some instances in Standing Orders which refer to 'spouse' and similar wording in relation to eg ministers' terms of service. These need to be reviewed to determine how they are to be applied in this new situation. In some places, eg where they relate to pension scheme entitlement, then the effect of the relevant legislation is that they clearly apply to a person who is legally a spouse or civil partner. In others, further consideration needs to be given to this in the light of whatever decisions the Conference makes upon this report. We therefore recommend that this work be done in the ensuing connexional year by the group which we are proposing that the Conference should appoint.

⁴⁹ Paragraph 130 above.

180. The working party would wish to conclude by saying that our conversations have been conducted in an atmosphere of openness, trust and sensitivity to each other as we heard and expressed deeply held convictions. We pray that the same spirit will be at work as these issues are explored by the Conference. We have all agreed to bring to the Conference the resolutions which appear below.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

40/1. The Conference received the Report.

40/2. The Conference recognised with gratitude that, over the years since the debate on human sexuality in 1993, God's grace has been at work in the hearts and minds of the Methodist people to enable us to hold together in the bond of unity. It now urged the Methodist people, under the guidance of the Spirit, to engage with each other honestly, prayerfully and graciously in a process of deep reflection and discernment about the issues which this report raises.

40/3. The Conference adopted the recommendation contained in paragraph 148 and directed the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion committee, in consultation with the group appointed under resolution 40/4 below, to work, as a matter of priority, on the production and dissemination of clear guidance on what is, or is not, to be regarded as homophobia and, if thought appropriate, on a formal statement for the Conference to adopt on this matter.

40/4. a) The Conference adopted the recommendation contained in paragraph 157 and appointed a task group on marriage and relationships to be responsible for the implementation of the work. It recognised the significance and therefore the need for adequate resourcing and support of this work.

b) The Conference directed that the tasks which the group shall work to implement shall be as follows:

(i) to seek to engage the Church more widely in exploring the two major themes of

- i. living with contradictory convictions, and**
- ii. the nature of the authority of the Bible**

by drawing upon the existing material produced connexionally and identifying other ways of resourcing and encouraging these conversations throughout the Church;

(ii) within that context, to encourage and facilitate across the Connexion the process of reflection and discernment referred to in Resolution 40/2;

(iii) to explore in depth the implications arising from the divergence between the Methodist Church's teaching on marriage and the legal definition and concept of marriage now applying in England, Wales and Scotland. These explorations should include

- i. the missional challenges involved**
- ii. the tradition and experience of the Christian Church in living in contexts where its values, teaching and practice as to marriage have not been shared with those of the surrounding society**
- iii. the considerations for and against the continued involvement of the Methodist Church in the solemnization of (opposite sex) marriages;**

(iv) to find ways to encourage Local Churches (and if thought necessary, equipping them with pastoral and teaching resources) to welcome same sex couples and their families and to enable their participation in the life and worship of the Church;

(v) drawing as appropriate upon the theological material already produced by the Faith and Order Committee and in collaboration with that committee, to develop resources to help people to explore the teaching and practice of the Church in relation to cohabitation;

(vi) to look at the range of other issues raised by paragraphs 92 to 101, to investigate what material is already available or could, within the financial and personnel resources available, be produced in order to encourage wider discussions about marriage and other relationships;

(vii) to work with the EDI committee on the task directed by Resolution 40/3 above;

(viii) to consider further the implications of the same sex marriage legislation for shared buildings not held on Methodist trusts and for those working in wider ecumenical contexts, and report to the Conference of 2015 on any action recommended to be taken;

(ix) to carry out the work recommended to be done in paragraph 179 and report to the Conference of 2015 about any Standing Order amendments required;

(x) in the light of its explorations and experience of working on all these issues, to bring a general report to the Conference of 2016 on the key issues and proposals for any further work to be done, and including recommendations upon:

- i. whether the 1992 Conference Statement *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* should be updated**
- ii. whether to revisit the question of embarking upon a process of revising the Methodist Church's definition of marriage.**

c) The group's task shall be primarily to oversee and coordinate the work listed in b) above, and it is anticipated that it will identify sub-groups or individuals to undertake particular tasks.

d) The group shall work wherever possible collaboratively with the relevant members of the Connexional Team, and in consultation with the relevant connexional committees, in particular the Faith and Order Committee.

e) It shall also seek to work as far as possible with ecumenical partners who are engaged in similar explorations at this time.

f) It shall report regularly to the Methodist Council upon how its programme of work is being implemented, seeking the advice of the Council as to priorities where necessary.

g) The group shall consist of the following persons:

The Revd Ruth M Gee (Chair), the Revd Samuel E McBratney, the Revd D Paul C Smith, Mrs Louise C Wilkins, the Revd Angela J Long, Mr Eric Watchman, the Revd Olufemi R W Cole-Njie.

40/5. a) The Conference adopted the recommendation in paragraph 171 above and replaced the Guidance appearing in Book VII, Part 10 of *Constitutional Practice and Discipline* by the Guidelines set out in that paragraph.

b) The Conference directed that its decision on part a) of this Resolution shall constitute its reply to Memorial M29 (2012).

40/6. The Conference resolved that, whilst recognising that the 1993 Resolutions on Human Sexuality would still apply to all relationships, the ruling regarding those entering civil partnerships, namely that there is no reason *per se* to prevent anyone within the Church, ordained or lay, from entering into or remaining within such a relationship, should also extend to those entering into legally contracted same sex marriages.

Appendix 1 Membership of the working party

The Revd Ruth Gee is the Ex-President of the Conference. She has a comprehensive overview of the life of the Connexion today and experience of it in many contexts. She is a member of the Faith & Order Committee with an interest and expertise in theological ethics.

The Revd Olufemi Cole-Njie is superintendent minister of the Forest circuit. She represents the concerns of racial justice on the Methodist Council and is a member of the Equality Diversity and Inclusion resource group. She is a former member of the Methodist Women in Britain Forum.

The Revd Angela Long is a presbyter in the Durham and Deerness Valley Circuit, and Synod Secretary of the Darlington District. She has experience of ministry in smaller, quite traditional village chapels, while belonging to a generation for which the culture of marriage, relationships and sexuality has changed rapidly.

The Revd Samuel McBratney is Global Christianity Programme Director at the Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, and responsible for the MA programme. Interested in Conflict and Reconciliation studies, a former Director of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, he served on the working party producing the report on Marriage and Civil Partnerships before the Conference and thus provides continuity in the new working party.

The Revd D Paul C Smith is a supernumerary minister in the Tavistock Circuit and former Chair of Methodist Evangelicals Together. He is a former member of the working party on the *Pilgrimage of Faith* and the working party producing the report on Marriage and Civil Partnerships before the Conference and thus provides continuity in the new working party.

Mr Eric Watchman is a Local Preacher, a member of his district Vision and Strategy Team and the district Representative on the Methodist Council. He also serves on the Methodist Heritage Committee and has a particular interest in the support of ministers through the work of the Candidates Selection Committee 2003-2011 and being a lay contributor to ministerial development review.

Mrs Louise Wilkins is a member at Windsor Methodist Church and is the Conference Officer for Legal and Constitutional Practice.

Mrs Susan R Howdle (Chair) is a former Vice-President (1993) and local preacher in the Leeds (North-East) Circuit, who has chaired or served on many connexional bodies. Her professional life was as a university law teacher, as a judicial chair of tribunals, and as a member appointed by the Lord Chancellor to the Council on Tribunals.

Dr Jocelyn M Bryan is Director of Postgraduate Studies and a tutor at Wesley Study Centre. She teaches Pastoral and Practical Theology, Human Sexuality, Gender and Christian Ministry and Psychology and Christian Ministry. Jocelyn is a member of the Faith and Order Committee and a Methodist local preacher. She served on an earlier working party of the Conference dealing with issues related to human sexuality.

Mr Gerry Davis is the Synod Secretary for the London District and a member of the Methodist Council. He is currently Chair of Governors for a large London Further Education college. He was Deputy Director of Education in a London borough and after retiring worked for The Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust as General Manager. Gerry currently worships in the Wembley Circuit where he was a Circuit Steward.

The Revd Samuel E McBratney is Global Christianity Programme Director at the Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, and responsible for the MA programme. In addition to teaching Global Mission and Contextual Theologies, his main area of interest is in Conflict and Reconciliation Studies. He is a former Director of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement and a member of the Corrymeela Community.

The Revd Dr Stephen E Mosedale is Area Leader/Superintendent of Milton Keynes United Area, and a member of the Faith & Order Committee. He convened the group that prepared the Methodist Church's response in 2012 to the government consultation on same sex marriage.

The Revd Colin A Smith is Superintendent of the Barnet and Queensbury Circuit. Trained as a barrister, he is a member of the Law and Polity Committee.

The Revd D Paul C Smith is a supernumerary minister in the Tavistock Circuit, former Chair of Methodist Evangelicals Together, and former member of the working party on the *Pilgrimage of Faith*.

Mrs Louise C Wilkins is a member at Windsor Methodist Church and is the Conference Officer for Legal and Constitutional Practice. From February 2014 she was on maternity leave but participated by correspondence.

Rachel Lampard who is the Team Leader of the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) served the working party as an advisor.

Appendix 2 Methodist documents considered by the working party

A. Marriage

1. *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*, 1992. (Conference Agenda pp. 332-346) [This was a foundational document upon which much subsequent work was based, and was adopted as an official Conference Statement. Part C is specifically on marriage.]
2. *Christian Preparation for Marriage*, 1998. (Conference Agenda pp. 12-39) [The context of this report was partly the need to deal with the Church's policy about marriages involving divorced persons but it had a wider scope and built upon the 1992 report. It included a draft Policy and Guidelines, which (with minimal changes arising from the recent adoption of 'presbyteral' terminology) is now found in CPD Book VII C, part 8. The form in which SO 011A was adopted is set out in the body of the current report.]
3. *Methodist Worship Book*, 1999, pp. 367-398. Services of marriage and the blessing of a marriage.
4. *Methodist Service Book*, 1975, The Marriage Service pp. E1-E25.
5. *Guidelines for Inter-Faith Marriages*, 2000. CPD Book VIIC, part 9. [This is the form, with minimal changes as above, in which these guidelines were adopted in 2000 - Conference Agenda pp. 168-170]
6. *Marriage in the Methodist Church*, 2002. (Conference Agenda pp. 379-395) [This was the follow-up, as directed, to the 1998 report.]
7. *Domestic Abuse* – extract from the report of the working party to the Conference of 2005. (Conference Agenda pp. 426-7.) [These pages contain a theological reflection about marriage, in the context of a larger section on theology. The Conference resolution encouraged Methodists to make prayerful and considered study of the theology section of this report and its relation to their daily lives.]
8. Response from the Methodist Church in Britain to the consultation on "Equal Civil Marriage", June 2012. [Note: subsequently, the Revd Gareth Powell gave evidence (alongside a representative from the URC) to the Bill Committee. This can be read at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmpublic/marriage/130214/am/130214s01.htm>]

B. Civil Partnerships

Note: the main points about the Methodist position are contained in the Pilgrimage of Faith report of 2006, listed under D below. That includes the Guidance currently included in CPD Book VII, Part 10 on Responding to Requests for Prayers or Services of Blessing for Same-sex Couples.

9. Response from the Methodist Church in Britain to government consultation on Civil Partnerships on Religious Premises: Methodist Council, October 2011. (MC 1188)

C. Cohabitation

10. a. Report from 3Generate to the Conference of 2013 (Conference Agenda pp. 51-52, paras. 19, 20, 26, 27)
b. Resolutions 4/4 and 4/5 (Conference Agenda 2013 p. 54)
c. Notice of Motion 205 (Daily Record 2013 5/24/2)

D. Human Sexuality

11. 1993 Resolutions

Note: this list then moves to the 2005 report, not because what went before is no longer relevant, but because the most significant elements are all encompassed in that report.

12. Report of the working party on the *Pilgrimage of Faith*, 2005. (Conference Agenda pp. 236-254) [NB See the 2006 report below for the form in which the 2005 resolutions were eventually adopted.]
13. Report of the working party on the *Pilgrimage of Faith*, 2006. (Conference Agenda pp. 302-316)
14. Report of the Faith and Order Committee, 2006, Section B. *Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church* (Conference Agenda pp. 237-250) [A study guide was produced by the committee in 2007, *Understanding and Using ... – to be found on the Methodist website.*]
15. Report to the Methodist Council of the working party set up by the 2006 Conference on whether to review the 1993 Resolutions, October 2007. (MC 0783)
16. Report of the Methodist Council to the Conference on the 1993 Resolutions, 2008. (Conference Agenda pp. 550-555)
17. Notices of Motion also adopted in 2008 in relation to that report:
 - a. Notice of Motion 107 (Daily Record 2008 5/14/2)
 - b. Notice of Motion 109 (Daily Record 2008 5/14/3)

Appendix 3 The 1993 resolutions

- 1 The Conference, affirming the joy of human sexuality as God's gift and the place of every human being within the grace of God, recognises the responsibility that flows from this for us all. It therefore welcomes the serious, prayerful and sometimes costly consideration given to this issue by the Methodist Church.
- 2 All practices of sexuality which are promiscuous, exploitative or demeaning in any way are unacceptable forms of behaviour and contradict God's purpose for us all.
- 3 A person shall not be debarred from the church on the grounds of sexual orientation in itself.
- 4 The Conference reaffirms the traditional teaching of the Church on human sexuality; namely chastity for all outside marriage and fidelity within it. The Conference directs that this affirmation is made clear to all candidates for ministry, office and membership, and having established this, affirms that the existing procedures of our Church are adequate to deal with all such cases.
- 5 The Conference resolves that its decisions in this debate shall not be used to form the basis of a disciplinary charge against any person in relation to conduct alleged to have taken place before such decisions were made.
- 6 The Conference recognises, affirms and celebrates the participation and ministry of lesbians and gay men in the Church. The Conference calls on the Methodist people to begin a pilgrimage of faith to combat repression and discrimination, to work for justice and human rights and to give dignity and worth to people whatever their sexuality.

Appendix 4 Responding to Requests for Prayers or Services of Blessing for Same-sex Couples (CPD Book VII, Part 10)

The Methodist Church is committed to a spirit of mutual respect and understanding between those holding different perspectives on human relationships and sexuality. The resolutions of the 1993 Conference set out the Church's understandings concerning human sexuality and these are part of our discipline.

If a request is received to conduct prayers for a same-sex couple the person approached should respond sensitively, pastorally and with due regard to established good practice. Good pastoral practice means welcoming each couple and treating them with respect. Within these principles, no minister or layperson is required to act in any way contrary to her or his own conscience. The Conference trusts and respects the integrity of those responsible for responding to couples requesting prayers or a 'service of blessing', particularly when offering informal, spontaneous prayer in response to a pastoral need. However, nothing should be said or done which misrepresents the Church's beliefs or discipline, and for this reason Methodist premises may not be used for the blessing of same-sex relationships.

If there is any doubt over how to respond, the Superintendent and possibly also the Chair of District should be consulted.

Appendix 5 The questions asked in the consultation

1. **What are the implications for the Methodist Church of the legalisation of same sex marriage?** In our initial soundings, the following issues have emerged for us as major implications of the legislation. You can find out more about these implications by reading the supplementary paper [see **Appendix 6** below]. If you are leading a group this also provides some helpful questions to aid discussion.
 - **Understandings of marriage** – do we have a clear and shared understanding of marriage?
 - **Living with different views** – what does it mean to be part of a Church where people have very different views?
 - **Relevance to contemporary culture and society in Britain** – what should be the balance between communicating through our culture and being called to be "counter-cultural"?
 - **The Church's mission in the modern world** – what would be the impact of any decision for perceptions of the Church and its mission?
 - **Connexionalism** – what would it mean if local churches end up with very different practices?
 - **Conscience** – what are the personal implications for some people when their conscience is at odds with their Church?
 - **Ecumenical and world church relationships** – what would the impact of any decision be on our national and global partners?

Are there other implications you think we should take into account? (Please circle to indicate)

Yes

No

Don't know If so, what are they?

2. The Methodist Church's position on marriage is this: "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." In the light of changes in British society do you think the Methodist Conference should be asked to look again at this position?

Yes No Don't know Why?

3. Even if a local church council wishes to register their building for same sex marriages, the legislation means that the Methodist Conference would first have to decide to "opt in" before this is possible. Do you think the Conference should be asked to consider opting in?

Yes No Don't know

4. Currently civil partnerships may not be blessed on Methodist premises, although ministers are invited to respond pastorally to any requests for prayers or services of blessing. The working party has been asked to consider a request to the Conference from the Birmingham Synod asking for the prohibition on such ceremonies on Methodist premises to be reviewed.

Do you think the prohibition on services of blessing for civil partnerships should be revisited?

Yes No Don't know Why?

5. Are there other issues regarding marriage and relationships in the 21st century which you believe the Methodist Church should give attention to? If so please tell us what they are:

Appendix 6 Supplementary paper for the consultation

The working group on same sex marriage and civil partnerships has been asked by the Methodist Conference to look at the implications of the changes in legislation and society for the Methodist Church. It has recently launched a consultation, asking Methodists for their views on a range of issues. The group wanted to ensure that it was asking the right questions about the changes in the law, so took initial soundings with a number of groups before launching the consultation process. In talking with a wide variety of Methodists, the following issues have emerged as the major implications identified so far. These are listed under Question 1 of the consultation. This paper explains these issues in slightly more detail, and, if you are leading a group looking at the questionnaire, it also provides some helpful questions to aid discussion.

Understandings of marriage

There is a question about whether the recent change in the law means that the State now has a new definition of marriage. Until now, Methodists have not distinguished between civil and religious marriage in the UK and accepted the relationships of those married by registrars. In making a response to the consultation, it might be useful to think about your own definition and understanding of marriage. Does the recent change mean that Methodists now need to look at their own various statements about marriage as well as local practice? Is it important for the Methodist Church to have a shared understanding of marriage among its members and/or with the State?

Living with different views

Methodists disagree about a range of issues. Some of these matters seem relatively unimportant whilst others are held to be essential or critical to faith. In all our discussions, we acknowledge that

we are a diverse church with people from many different backgrounds – eg cultural, ethnic, social or theological. But we continue to ask questions about how we should be together. What does it mean to be part of Church where people have such very different views? How important is it for us to agree on the question of marriage?

Relevance to contemporary culture and society in Britain

In the area of relationships and sexuality, British society has undergone major changes in the last 20 years. The law regarding same sex marriage is only the latest in a line of changes and raises question about whether Methodism is now ‘out of kilter’ with wider society. If so, we need to take account of the implications of such a situation. How important is it that the Church is accessible and speaks in terms contemporary culture can understand? In the area of relationships, to what extent is the Church called to be “counter-cultural”?

The Church’s mission in the modern world

The question of relevance is related to our understandings of mission. As we think about what we need to say, we must also be aware of how we will be heard. What will the impact of any decision be for perceptions of the Church and the effectiveness of its mission? In a changed situation with regard to the law, what should the Methodist Church be saying and how do you think it will be heard?

Connexionalism

Methodism often refers to itself as a “broad Church” and our initial conversations revealed a desire to hold onto some sense of breadth in our Connexion. It was recognised that different perspectives often exist in the same congregations and Circuits. Connexionalism is also often used with reference to stationing, where attitudes to same-sex marriage might become another criterion for the Stationing Committee to consider in appointing presbyters or deacons. What does it mean to be a Connexional Church and what will it mean if local churches or ministers end up with very different practices?

Conscience

In our discussions, it was felt to be important that people should not be forced to do things against their conscience. But it was also felt important that people should not be prevented from doing things that conscience demanded. Conscience can raise strong emotions and dealing with these can feel difficult. Is it possible to honour the consciences of individuals and groups, even when they are at odds with the majority?

Ecumenical and World Church relationships

None of the decisions we make are made in isolation. Methodism prides itself on close relationships with ecumenical and World Church partners and what we decide will have an impact on others. This is particularly true where we share buildings and ministry in LEPs. Some British Churches are actively discussing their response to the change in the law whilst others, such as the Church of England, are currently excluded from making a decision. In the World Methodist family, there is a variety of opinion and practice, and partner churches face a wide range of local legislation from outright ban of homosexuality to legalised same-sex marriage. In your response to the consultation, you might want to consider the impact of any decision on our ecumenical and World Church partners.