

## 27. Marriage and Relationships

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<b>Resolutions</b>	27/1. The Conference receives the report.  27/2. The Conference resolves that the 1992 Statement on <i>A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage</i> shall no longer have the status of a Conference Statement.  27/3. The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to keep marriage and relationships on its agenda and to bring a Report to the 2025 Conference that enables the Conference to decide whether any further work is required.  27/4. NOT PUT

### Summary of content

<b>Subject and aims</b>	This report explores further work on marriage and relationships, and looks at the status of the 1992 Conference Statement on <i>A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage</i> .
<b>Main points</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction</li> <li>• The 1992 Statement</li> <li>• Further reflection on human relationships</li> <li>• The 1993 Resolutions</li> <li>• Living with contradictory convictions</li> </ul>
<b>Background documents</b>	Memorial M43, 2021 <i>Marriage and Relationships: Provisional Resolutions</i> , 2021 <i>God in Love Unites Us</i> , 2019 The 1993 Resolutions <i>A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage</i> , 1992

### 1. Introduction

1.1. The 2021 Conference acknowledged that the *God in Love Unites Us* report covers only some of the many issues about loving human relationships that have been discussed by the Conference over the years. Memorial M43 expressed concern that the important roles of families, social groups and communities, which form the overlapping contexts within which marriages will either succeed or suffer stress, were scarcely mentioned in the Report, despite the reference to relationships in its title. The Conference agreed that all loving relationships of two persons exist within a number of other relationships, some of which (the families, friendship networks and communities to which parties belong) predate the couple's relationship and others (for example, through the birth or adoption of children) follow from it. All of

these can be vehicles through which God's love is made known and the relationship of the couple is supported and it is important that they are topics of theological reflection.

- 1.2. The Conference therefore directed the Faith and Order Committee to review the matters raised in the memorial. Noting the considerable changes in society and in the Church over the last three decades, it also directed the Faith and Order Committee to review the 1992 statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*, and to bring to the 2022 Conference some initial reflection and any recommendations for further work.

## 2. The 1992 Statement

- 2.1. The Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* was adopted by the 1992 Conference as a Conference Statement. Conference Statements express the corporate theological understanding and wisdom of the British Methodist Church and are framed with a view to standing as such for some years. This means that the 1992 Statement continues to carry a significant level of authority.
- 2.2. Given the considerable changes in society and in the Church, the growth of understanding in various matters relating to human relationships and human sexuality, and the decisions that the Conference has made over the past thirty years, the Faith and Order Committee finds that the 1992 Statement no longer stands the test of time. The Statement makes assumptions and uses language that are inappropriate three decades later and which may cause pain and distress. Whilst there is still some helpful and important theological thinking within the Statement, it is no longer representative of how the Methodist Conference would articulate a theological understanding of human relationships. Those things that the Conference might still wish to affirm would need to be re-expressed in the light of the decisions and experiences of the Methodist people and developments in theological and contemporary thought.
- 2.3. The Faith and Order Committee therefore recommends that the 1992 Statement should no longer carry the authority of a Conference Statement but is viewed as part of the narrative of the development of the Methodist Church's theological thinking on marriage and human relationships. Under Standing Order 129(6) a Conference Statement shall cease to have that status if the Conference by a simple majority so resolves, and a Resolution is brought to this effect.

## 3. Further Reflection on Human Relationships

- 3.1. As the 1992 Statement is now of limited scope and the *God in Love Unites Us* report only addresses some aspects of human relationships, there is much further work that could be undertaken. This section outlines some of the potential areas for consideration.
  - a. **The Family**

Within Methodist thinking about human relationships it has long been acknowledged that 'family' can mean different things. For example, the 1992 Statement recognised three types of family: kinship-related family, the

household-family, and the 'family of faith'. Some further reflection on what makes a family would be timely, however; not least in the light of the decisions following the *Marriage and Relationships: Provisional Resolutions* report<sup>1</sup> and the many different types of family that exist within the Methodist Church today. Biblical reflection on the family might also be useful, given the wide variety of family structures and relationships found within biblical texts.

The notion of 'family' continues to be popular when speaking about the Church, but this raises questions about how those who have unhealthy and abusive experiences of family then perceive the Church. In this respect, insights could be gleaned from, and links made to, recent work on the theology of safeguarding and the Methodist Church's continuing conversations about domestic abuse.

The concept of 'family' is also employed in other areas of society (for example, within gang culture, some businesses, and in some social groups), and it can be used in ways that are both life-affirming and life-denying. Therefore, some further theological reflection on understandings of 'family' may also have something to say within contemporary culture.

b. **Singleness**

Pain and hurt have been expressed about the lack of reflection on singleness across the years. The tone and nature of the reflection on singleness in the 1992 Statement is particularly problematic. Deep-rooted and continuing assumptions that family life is the norm and that fulfilment is primarily found in partnership and/or in parenthood all merit further attention. Singleness may be by choice or circumstance, it may be a life-long experience or for periods of time, it may bring joy and fulfilment and it may bring unhappiness. These things can also be said of marriage, and of other patterns of relationship, but further and fuller theological reflection on singleness has been lacking within the Methodist Church's developing thinking on marriage and relationships.

c. **Marriage**

Although the *God in Love Unites Us* report offers rich reflection on marriage it did not seek to be definitive on all matters. There are various areas that could be further developed including reflection on divorce; linking understandings of marriage with work on domestic abuse; questions of consent within a marriage; giving attention to the question of 'why marry' (what does the church have to say about marriage to cohabiting couples, for example?); and exploring different biblical examples of marriage.

d. **Cohabitation**

The Faith and Order Committee indicated a willingness to undertake some further work on cohabitation and report to a future Conference. It suggested to the 2021 Conference that the direction of travel might be:

- "reflection on cohabitation in terms of a sexual relationship between two people;

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<sup>1</sup> *Marriage and Relationships: Provisional Resolutions*, 2021, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/21969/conf-2021-59-marriage-and-relationships-provisional-resolutions-updated.pdf>

- that the church comments on life-long committed sexual relationships between two people as something that develops and cohabitation is one stage of the journey;
- an affirmation of marriage as a key point, but recognition that this is not how many people's relationships develop, and cohabitation often precedes marriage;
- recognition that many of the virtues associated with marriage (faithfulness, self-sacrifice, mutual support and so on) are also present in a variety of other relationships so that these too can reflect something of the love for which God created us."<sup>2</sup>

As any further work on cohabitation interrelates with some of the other matters identified in this section the Faith and Order Committee suggests that the question of whether now is the time for this further work is reconsidered as part of the Conference's response to the whole of this report.

e. **Childlessness**

Childlessness may be chosen or unchosen. Within the Church assumptions are still made about family life and childlessness which can be painful and damaging. This was acknowledged in the 2008 report, *Created in God's Image*:

"The difficulties faced by couples as a result of infertility can be severe, however, and the Church needs to accept that it can (even if unintentionally) add to these difficulties with its stress on 'family' and through poorly thought out theology which all too often talks of children as 'gifts' without taking into account the nature of gift or the significance this might have for those who are denied such a 'gift'. For those trying to cope with infertility occasions such as Christmas and Mothering Sunday can become an experience of marginalisation and pain rather than inclusion and joy. For some couples the possibilities of adoption may be a means to fulfil this part of human life, but this is not an option for all. IVF can offer hope but, like many medical treatments, brings with it a number of significant moral and ethical questions. Others, through choice or necessity, embrace childlessness as their vocation and this needs to be recognised, supported and affirmed by the church."<sup>3</sup>

Since this was written, the Methodist Church has not offered much further reflection on questions around childlessness even though some of the assumptions that continue to shape conversations in this area cause considerable hurt and pain. These warrant further attention.

f. **Gender Identity**

The 2019 *God in Love Unites Us* report highlighted the range of identities to be found among human beings, especially with regard to gender and sexuality, but reflection within that report on gender matters was necessarily limited. The EDI Toolkit<sup>4</sup> offers resources to help reflection on understandings of gender and sexuality, and materials concerning the inclusion of transgender, intersex and other gender diverse people in church life. There is, however, scope for further theological work, as a deepening understanding of gender and sexuality enriches thinking about what it means to be human.

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<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 3.4 of *The Response of the Faith and Order Committee to the God in Love Unites Us report*, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *Created in God's Image*, 2008, paragraph 43

<sup>4</sup> See the Methodist Church's website: [EDI toolkit modules \(methodist.org.uk\)](https://www.methodist.org.uk/edi-toolkit-modules)

Alongside the areas highlighted above there are other matters which have been raised within debates about marriage and relationships:

g. **Polygamy and polyamory**

Polygamy is practised within some cultures, and there are many examples of polygamy within the Bible. At present polygamy is not legally possible within the United Kingdom and it is a question that predominantly arises more in the context of relationships with world church partners. Polyamory places emphasis on deep, intimate relationships with more than one partner. Both of these patterns of relating, which potentially involve long-term committed sexual relationships with more than one partner at the same time, merit further theological attention.

h. **Healthy sexual expression**, including questions around, for example, masturbation and consent. Much of the writing and 'guidance' around healthy sexuality, particularly for young people, does not reflect the breadth of Christian theology and can sometimes be uncompromising and discouraging of exploratory conversation, particularly on matters that may be difficult for some people.

3.2. It is clear that there are a number of matters that could be explored further. The Faith and Order Committee has considered the different ways in which that could happen.

a. The Methodist Conference could direct work on a Conference Statement on Human Sexuality and Relationships. This is likely to require further work in the areas identified above. It would express the considered judgment of the Conference on human sexuality and relationships, require connexional consultation and ask the Conference to come to a common mind on its contents. It would offer the opportunity to offer something positive and helpful about a variety of human relationships and set out the framework within which contradictory convictions are held.

b. The Conference could direct that a report is brought to the Conference on one or more of the matters identified above, for example a report on singleness. Whilst such a report would not carry the authority of a Conference Statement it would nonetheless give expression to the Methodist Church's theological thinking on the relevant subject(s) for the Conference to discuss and affirm.

c. The Conference could direct that resources are developed, or a that a resource list is drawn up, to enable further conversation and reflection on one or more of the matters identified about. Enabling individual, small group and wider reflection would better enable different perspectives to be articulated and explored and give space for thinking to develop. It would not, however, enable collective understanding to be expressed, and some careful assessment about how and by whom the resources would be used would be important.

3.3. Were the Conference to decide that any of this further work should be undertaken then there would be a significant resource and cost implication, particularly if there were to be appropriate consultation. The Faith and Order Committee notes that the

Methodist Conference is already facing challenging questions about priorities and the use of resources, and (not least in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic) many Methodists feel exhausted and overwhelmed. It further notes that Methodists are continuing to work through the decisions of the 2021 Conference, including working out what it means to live with contradictory convictions both within the Methodist Church and with other Churches and Christian communities. It may be helpful for there to be a period during which this is given further time and attention before more work is undertaken on matters of human relationships and sexuality, especially those matters which, potentially, might also involve conflict and sometimes difficult conversations.

3.4. Therefore, alongside the questions about what work would be helpful for the Methodist people and what form that work should take, there are also questions about what the Methodist Church's priorities are at this time and whether now is the right time for any further work to begin. There are theological resources more widely available about many of the matters identified in this report, which prompts consideration of when it is important for the Methodist Church to undertake work if there is already material obtainable.

3.5. The Faith and Order Committee is therefore not bringing any resolutions for further work at this time on any of the matters described above. Instead it suggests that the Faith and Order Committee keep this topic on its agenda and brings a report to the 2025 Conference to enable the Conference to reconsider whether any further work should be undertaken at that point.

#### **4. The 1993 Resolutions**

4.1. The 1993 Resolutions have been an important part of the pilgrimage of faith, and have enabled Methodists to journey together whilst holding contradictory convictions. Nearly three decades have passed, however, since they were agreed and not only are they now in tension with the Conference's most recent decisions but the language and form of expression is now unhelpful and sometimes inappropriate. It is clear that, and especially since the decisions of the 2021 Conference, the pilgrimage of faith is now in a different stage.

4.2. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the role of the 1993 Resolutions and their place in the history of the British Methodist Church, they no longer encapsulate the concerns, dynamics and parameters of the pilgrimage as it continues. Some of the principles endure, but the 1993 Resolutions are no longer the best form for expressing them. The Faith and Order Committee therefore recommends that they are no longer printed annually in CPD. This does not affect their status within the development of the Methodist Church's thinking about marriage and relationships, but acknowledges that guidance in this area now needs to take account of subsequent decisions. A Resolution is brought to this effect.

#### **5. Living with contradictory convictions**

5.1. The decisions of the 2021 Conference emphasised that in matters of human sexuality (as in many other areas) the Methodist people are committed to living together with contradictory convictions. The 2006 Faith and Order report part B, *Living with Contradictory Convictions in the Church*, and its associated study guide,

offer some reflection and guidance in this area, and much has been learned during conversations about the *God in Love Unites Us* Report.

- 5.2. There is an opportunity to reflect on the wisdom gained during these conversations as the Methodist people continue to learn together what it means to be a people who live with contradictory convictions. This approach to living in community could be a gift which the Methodist Church might offer as many different kinds of communities today are wrestling with how people live with difference.
- 5.3. In many areas, not just on matters of human relationships and sexuality, Methodists have different understandings about the Bible. The 1998 report, *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path* outlined seven different models of biblical authority found within the British Methodist Church, but some further reflection on how Methodists engage in theological conversation and decision-making when they have different approaches to how the Bible is interpreted would be timely. Local Churches, Circuits and Districts are encouraged to consider this, and not least on how it shapes and impacts on conferring.
- 5.4. After the decisions of the 2021 Conference some Local Churches are wrestling with the question of how to work with other Churches and Christian communities who hold contradictory convictions on questions of human sexuality (for example, those with whom they share their building). This is also a question for the British Methodist Church as a whole in its relationships with ecumenical partners. More broadly, in the global context, the British Methodist Church is challenged to reflect on how it continues to have conversations with other churches on these matters with humility and sensitivity whilst expressing its own position with integrity.

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

- 27/1. The Conference received the Report.**
- 27/2. The Conference resolved that the 1992 Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage* shall no longer have the status of a Conference Statement.**
- 27/3. The Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to keep marriage and relationships on its agenda and to bring a Report to the 2025 Conference that enables the Conference to decide whether any further work is required.**
- 27/4. NOT PUT**

### **The Conference adopted Notice of Motion 2022/102: Marriage and Relationships Report:**

The Conference noted the continuing significant work the Faith and Order Committee carry out throughout the year on behalf of the Methodist Connexion.

The Marriage and Relationships Report (p 333-342, Agenda Vol. 2), highlights some of the further themes of human relationships that did not form a substantive part of the Marriage and Relationships Report: *God in Love Unites Us* (2019). These include the family, singleness, childlessness, gender identity, polygamy and polyamory and healthy sexual expression. The report notes that these matters could be explored

further by the Faith and Order Committee. In Resolution 27/3 the Conference is asked to direct the Faith and Order Committee to keep marriage and relationships on its agenda and bring a report to the Conference of 2025 regarding any further work required.

Throughout the debates on the proposals of the God in Love Unites Us Report, there were moving speeches on the floor of Conference, calling for more reflective work on singleness. The last substantive theological reflection on singleness is contained within the 1992 Conference Statement on *A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage*. A statement which the Conference of 2022 is asked to remove from its current status as a Conference Statement (Resolution 27/2). This work is now thirty years old, unhelpful in its assumptions, and inadequate for the task.

There is much still to do in welcoming, affirming, and celebrating the presence and contribution of single people in the churches life together. A further delay of the possibility of work on singleness until 2025, may contribute to further marginalisation of those who are single, divorced, separated or widowed.

The Conference therefore directed the Faith and Order Committee to bring a report on singleness to the Conference of 2024.