

“God in Love Unites Us”

Gerald Barton, Editor

As readers of In-touch will be aware, the Methodist Church is currently asking churches and circuits to discuss a major report on marriage and relationships, “God in Love Unites Us”. In our Circuit discussions have been arranged on:

Saturday 7th March at 10.00am -12 noon at Northolt

Monday 16th March at 7.45pm – 9.45pm Ealing Green Church

Wednesday 18th March at 7.45pm – 9.45 pm at Kingsdown

So, what’s this all about? In 2016, the Methodist Conference set up a Marriage and Relationships Task Group to revisit and consider the definition of marriage adopted by the Methodist Church. At the 2018 Conference the group was directed to produce a report on these matters including any recommendations to change Methodist Standing Orders should the group conclude that the current definition of marriage should be changed. “God in Love Unites Us” is the report produced by the group.

The report is wide-ranging, thorough and well written and is well worth reading in full, although it is quite long. Many readers will be aware that one of the issues that the group was asked to consider was the question of same-sex marriage – hence the question whether the definition of marriage should be changed. It should be added that the report does not just focus on that one issue, but also considers the wide variations in human relationships we find in our society today.

It goes without saying that the issue of same-sex marriage is controversial with many people having strong and often opposing views on the subject. The Conclusions section of the report opens with two quotes from John Wesley’s sermons –

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?”

“Be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion.”

In essence the Task Group acknowledges that views will differ on matters of relationships and sexuality. Indeed, the report does not produce a ‘one size fits all’ conclusion but seeks to find a way forward that embraces differing opinions and views. The authors ask us to consider their report and its conclusions in the spirit of these quotations from John Wesley. In so doing, we will all need to be prepared to listen to and respect the views of others who disagree with us and to exercise humility in how we hold and express our own.

Because of the breadth of issues covered by the report it is difficult to summarise in a short space. What I have tried to do instead is to give at least an appreciation of the breadth and depth of the report. To understand it fully, you need to read the report itself.

The report begins with God. As we are made in the image of God, to understand what it means to be human means understanding something of the nature of God. As Christians we believe that we can see and understand something of what God is like through the life and ministry of Jesus, the 'Word made flesh'.

We are made to relate to God. God reaches out to us in a relationship characterised as a 'covenant', not a contract because it is "an act of grace which calls for a responding commitment. Those who respond to the covenant choose to do so, but the initiative is God's". The response to God's covenant love is to love God and others as we love ourselves. Humans are social beings, made to relate to one another. We are also sexual beings made to relate sexually to each other. How we, as Christians approach and think about relationships should reflect the covenant love God shows us in Jesus.

One of the key themes running through the report that stands out to me is that of change – how thinking about marriage, about relationships and about gender and roles in society has changed over time.

Starting with marriage, going way back into the Old Testament, it is clear that polygamy was not unusual and there was provision for 'levirate' marriage when a man should marry his brother's widow in order to provide for her even though he was already married. By the time of Jesus, however it appears that monogamy had become the norm.

Similarly, the way we think about the purpose of marriage has changed. The Book of Common Prayer of 1662 gave the purpose of marriage as the procreation of children; a remedy for sin; and mutual comfort and help. The emphasis now, however is very much on "... life-long unity of heart, body and mind, comfort and companionship", but adding "..... so that children may be nurtured, family life strengthened and human society enriched" (Methodist Worship Book 1999). Procreation is no longer seen as a primary purpose of marriage. After all, many older couples beyond child-bearing years marry and it would be absurd to assert that their marriages are somehow lessened by the fact that they cannot have children. Similarly, "a remedy for sin" is no longer seen as a purpose of marriage as we now recognise that God made us to be sexual beings who relate to each other sexually.

Whilst the church, and indeed probably most people still sees marriage as a life-long union at least in principle, the possibility of that marriage bonds could be broken has long been recognised. Whereas the Catholic Church regarded marriage as a sacrament instituted by God which could not be broken, the Orthodox Church recognised that, albeit in rare circumstances it might be better for some marriages to be ended. After the Reformation, Protestant countries increasingly came to consider marriage a civil contract and the courts assumed the power to dissolve marriages. That said, it generally remained a matter of public policy that divorce should be severely restricted as it remained in the UK until the 1960's.

Churches, but not the Catholic Church do now recognise that marriages fail and that divorce and re-marriage is possible and legitimate. From the point of view of compassion, it seems harsh to deny the possibility of the happiness that making a new commitment in marriage can bring should a previous marriage have ended in divorce. One point the report raises is the need for the Church to do more to support people when their relationships end. In particular, the authors suggest developing liturgies to help people through relationship breakdown.

The report highlights the variety of forms of relationship now available to people. These range from informal co-habiting to civil partnerships to marriage. When same-sex marriage was legalised in the UK it was not long before some people starting demanding that civil partnerships be made available to opposite-sex couples as well. At this point you may wonder what, in fact is the difference between legal marriage and civil partnerships. In fact there is very little difference in law between the two. The principal difference is that adultery may not be cited as a reason for ending a civil partnership.

For people to be legally married in the UK they must make two statements, one affirming that they are legally able to marry (ie they are not already married to someone else) and then that they take the other person as their wife/husband. Christian thinking about marriage, as the authors point out goes much further than this seeing in marriage a reflection of God's covenant relationship with us. Indeed, the words of the marriage service and the vows that we make – "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health...." Reflect the fact that marriage from a Christian standpoint is much more than simply a legal contract.

The report recognises, however that many couples choose not to marry but to co-habit. Indeed, around half of babies in the UK are now born 'out of wedlock'. Thankfully, the stigmatisation of children as not being 'legitimate' when born to couples who are not married (or in a civil partnership) is now a thing of the past and, as the authors note is "no longer acceptable in our Church, if it ever were"

There are many reasons for this trend towards cohabitation. Some people regard the idea of marriage as out-dated and overly patriarchal. For others there may be purely practical considerations such as the need for two incomes if a home is to be secured or the sheer cost and expense of weddings, receptions and honeymoons. While many such relationships may be loose and apt to fracture, many are stable and long-lasting and, in terms of the quality of the relationship between the parties involved pretty much indistinguishable from marriage. That, of course reflects the level of commitment and the attitudes of the people involved.

The authors suggest that the Methodist Church should consider ways in which it can encourage good relating and deepening commitment in all forms of couple and marriage relationships. Arguably, it is more important to encourage people in this way than to stress the outward formal structure of their relationships.

The authors note that the way people think about sex, gender and sexuality has changed and developed quite rapidly in recent years and has become increasingly

complex. 'Sex' is assigned to us at birth depending on our biological characteristics, gender refers to how we express ourselves in terms of 'masculinity' or 'femininity' while 'sexuality' refers to our sexual feelings, orientation and activity. To help the readers follow the discussion the authors include a glossary of terms. If nothing else this goes to illustrate the diversity in the ways people are thinking about themselves and how they want other people to see them.

The authors do not discuss why there is this diversity of feeling but do note that the term 'intersex' in particular refers to people whose biological characteristics do not clearly fit what we normally consider to be 'male' and 'female'. Indeed, a small percentage of people are born with characteristics that include both male and female attributes. Similarly some people are born with chromosomes that differ from the normal XX for female and XY for male, eg XXY or XXX. Whilst there does not seem to be a gene that explains homosexual orientation, there is evidence that it is connected to certain aspects of how genes are expressed and the interaction of the developing foetus with hormones in the uterine environment. Suffice to say, there is good evidence to indicate that sexual orientation is determined at birth.

Throughout the report the authors draw on insights from Scripture and it is important to keep this in mind when thinking about the report. Numerous Bible passages and verses are quoted in support of the various arguments and themes being discussed. This is particularly so in the section that discusses whether the Methodist Church should widen its definition of marriage to include same-sex marriage. Underlying this section is the question of how Scripture should be interpreted. The authors note that in a report to the 1998 Conference seven different attitudes to Biblical authority were identified (although the report does not say what they were). Conference did not at the time, nor subsequently adopt any of those ways of interpreting Scripture as being superior to others, nor did it reject any. That said, the authors have taken note of the fact that scholarly debate is moving away from arguments about the precise meaning and implication of terms or particular texts, to judgements about their importance within the context of the whole range of voices that make up the Bible.

It is also worth remembering that various passages in the Bible have been given greater or lesser weight at different times. For example, some passages were once used to lend support to the practice of slavery. These passages are now viewed differently and would not be used nor interpreted in that way. Indeed, doing so would be seen as contradicting the overall thrust of God's love for all human beings.

The authors move towards their conclusions against the backdrop of a God whose compassionate love extends to, and welcomes all. In that light the authors consider that the 'companionship' model of marriage that the Methodist Church has developed over the years applies, theologically and practically just as well to same-sex marriages as to mixed-sex marriages. As the authors note, "The purposes, qualities and practices of marriage relationships that we have identified in this report as enabling those relationships to flourish can be applied to same-sex committed loving relationships as well as to mixed-sex relationships". The authors

therefore conclude that there is a strong case for the Methodist Church to extend its definition of marriage to include same-sex relationships, noting that “ if marriage is what the Methodist Church says it is, and is as wonderful as it says it is, this Church cannot remain true to the God of justice and love by continuing to deny it to those same-sex couples who desire it so deeply”.

As I commented at the start of this article, the authors of the report recognise that many will come, with equal integrity and faithfulness to different conclusions, that the Church should not redefine marriage to include same-sex relationships. They further recognise that those different conclusions should also be respected and honoured summarising Paul in Romans 14 “when Christians hold opposing convictions on the same issues, all are equally accountable to God, each must act according to their own conscience and none must behave in a way which damages or even destroys the faith of another”. Going on, they state, “The summary in Romans 14:13 of Paul’s advice on how to live with contradictory convictions amongst the members of the body of Christ still stands: Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of one another”.

In framing their recommendations, the authors note that if Conference agrees that the definition of marriage should be broadened to include same-sex relationships, similar provisions can be made as already exist for ministers who as a matter of conscience feel they cannot officiate at marriages where one or both of the couple are divorced. In those cases, the minister is not obliged to conduct the wedding but is obliged to point the couple to a minister who will. In the same way, a minister who, in all conscience feels unable to conduct a same-sex marriage would not be obliged to conduct the wedding but would be obliged to point the couple to a minister who will.

This leaves the question of the use of Methodist churches for the solemnization of same-sex marriages. The authors note that Local Churches already have a choice as to whether or not they should register for the solemnization of mixed-sex marriages. They recommend that Local Churches should be given the choice as to whether they should also register for the solemnization of same-sex marriages. However, in parallel with their recommendations for ministers, those Local Churches deciding not to register for the solemnization of same-sex marriages should be obliged to point same-sex couples to a church that is registered should they be approached.

I hope I have succeeded in giving you a ‘flavour’ of the report which I can only recommend that you read in full if you can. This is clearly a subject on which many of us will differ and therefore needs to be considered prayerfully and with respect for the views of others. The authors have sought to find an approach that will permit those differing views to be encompassed within one united body. In conclusion, let us recall the words of John Wesley quoted at the start of this article, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?”