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Dear Members and friends

God in Love unites us: The Report of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group 2019

Many of you will already be aware that the Methodist Church is in the process of reviewing our understanding of a wide range of human relationships, amongst which is the much-publicised work concerning the potential for same-sex marriages to be conducted in church.

The Circuit Leadership Team (CLT) are aware that across this Circuit there will be many different viewpoints on all aspects of this report. Our views, all sincerely held, stem from our position regarding the authority of the Bible; our experience of human relationships; the traditions of church and family and our reasoning. As we discuss and think through these (sometimes) contradictory convictions, we will need to bear in mind all these possible variations and the fact that for some people, this will be the first time that these matters may have formed part of their faith conversations. The CLT have therefore asked me to write to you all to set out the main themes of the report; the way in which we shall be considering the report across the Circuit and what the Connexional timetable and process of consultation will be.

1. The Main Themes

- a. Developing good relationships
Understanding the principles and qualities of every good relationship
- b. Cohabitation
Recognising the presence of God's love in differing patterns of relationship
- c. Divorce
Recognising the reality that not all marriages are life-long
- d. Resources to support the nurturing of good relationships & for when relationships end
Producing worship resources and guidance for use in a variety of circumstances
- e. A change in the Methodist understanding and definition of marriage
Widening the practice of marriage within the Methodist Church to include couples of the same sex

The whole report is available as a paper document from me or it can be seen on (and downloaded from) the Methodist Church website by using this link: <https://bit.ly/36oV92E>

2. The Process within this Circuit

Both individuals and church groups are encouraged to read the report and the relevant study guide in the spirit of learning together. This is not about convincing someone else that your viewpoint is the 'correct' one; it is about studying together and listening with open hearts and minds.

The Methodist Church has a set process for consulting church members when a proposal going through Conference may result in a change to our Standing Orders (these 'rules' govern the way our Church operates). Local churches and Circuits are asked to confer in the months leading up to the Spring District Synods in April/May. At the Synod a ballot vote will be taken regarding the provisional legislation. It is possible for any member to bring an amendment (duly endorsed by another member) to the resolutions being considered by the Synod. Our representatives to Synod will have a free vote; they are not delegates and will not be mandated to vote in a particular way. However, they are

encouraged to hear as many views as possible prior to the Synod to assist the Synod in its decision-making. The result of the ballot vote will be conveyed to the Conference Office prior to the gathering of Conference in June/July when a final vote will be taken (again with the possibility of amendments being brought).

In addition, the task group have offered three suggestions for how the Methodist people may wish to continue with this work:

- Be open and positive about sexuality and relationships. We hope to enable the Methodist Church to speak openly, positively, and joyfully as well as wisely about relationships and sexuality as one aspect of God's gracious goodness and of who God has made us to be.
- Value all relationships of grace. We invite the Methodist Church to value all committed faithful loving relationships that bear the marks that we can see in the love of Jesus, and are within the law of the land. We encourage the Church actively to offer greater dignity, inclusion and restoration in the community of God's new creation to those who cohabit, are single, or are developing relationships, irrespective of sexuality and gender.
- Widen and justify the understanding of marriage as being between two persons. We offer to the Methodist Church a theological reflection on marriage as a particular form of 'gospel' relationship between two persons and propose that we take steps to enable same-sex couples to get married in the Methodist Church. At the same time, we recognise that not everyone will agree with this and so we ask that the Church seek to protect the differing convictions of those who do not agree.

To encourage good conferring, the Circuit Leadership Team are arranging two afternoons for conversation and reflection. Anyone attached to a local church in the Circuit will be welcome. The dates are both Sunday afternoons, March 1st, 2020 at Andover (church to be decided) and March 8th, 2020 at Thatcham, commencing at 3:00 p.m. and finishing by 5:00 p.m. The afternoons will include video presentations on how the report came into being; from MET (Methodist Evangelicals Together, who hold a traditional view, including that marriage should only be between one man and one woman) and from Dignity and Worth (a group of Methodists committed to nurturing an inclusive church, including the provision for same-sex marriage in church). There will be no votes taken at these gatherings, nor at any Church Councils or General Church Meetings.

In the light of the vote to be taken at Conference 2020, in respect of the various resolutions set out in the full report, there may then be further consultation needed in the autumn of next year to decide how individual churches and ministers wish to respond.

We need to be aware that many people have an interest in how our church is dealing with this report and that this could be seen as being a really positive contribution to contemporary Christian debate. I commend the report and the study guide to you and hope to see you at one of the Circuit gatherings (or both, if you wish!). As part of our shared journey, I finish with this prayer that I would encourage you to use in the coming weeks and months...

Merciful God, help us to speak in love what is in our minds,
and to hear in love what is said by others;
to feel in love what is in our hearts,
and to sense in love what is in the hearts of others;
to confer in love to discern your truth,
and to be open in love to your guiding Spirit.
Through our disagreements guide us;
in our agreements direct us.
Together may we share the mind of Christ,
in whose name we pray.
Amen.

Peace,

Rachel