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# GOD IN LOVE UNITES US: Study Guide



A guide for study and prayerful discussion of  
The Report of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group 2019

# The Methodist Church

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# GOD IN LOVE UNITES US: Study Guide

**A guide for study and prayerful  
discussion of The Report of the Marriage  
and Relationships Task Group 2019**

To support your study and prayerful discussion of *God in love unites us*, this guide has:

- wide margins to allow you to add your own notes or reflections
- icons for easy referencing to:



view the scene-setting film featuring the Task Group speaking about the issues they covered in writing the report



consider individually, or to come together to discuss, the questions on each section of the report.

## FOREWORD

*God in love unites us* was presented to the Methodist Conference in July 2019. The Conference received the report and commended it to the Connexion for study and prayerful discussion. It did this recognising the significance not only of the resolutions that follow the report, some of which are provisional and will be voted on in District Synods, but also of the different areas which were explored by the Task Group that produced the report.

The title of the report has been carefully chosen. *God in love unites us* because we are all beings who are created to love in many and various ways. But *God in love unites us* in redemption because we abuse the gift of love and use it to our own selfish ends. And we pray that *God in love unites us* when, as so often, we find aspects of human love to be divisive and some of the issues that this report explores – divorce, cohabitation, and same-sex relationships – have been issues on which Christians have passionately disagreed.

This report was the product of lengthy discussions in the Task Group, which built on the work of other working parties before them. So thank you for engaging with the report and being part of the prayerful conversation that those groups have had and which the Conference

continued. It is a conversation to which many have brought their own sometimes painful experience of love, acceptance and rejection, of questioning, finding answers and changing minds, and of learning to live with, to learn from and to respect those who read the Bible and the world differently.

This study guide is designed to help with the study and prayerful discussion for which the Conference asked. The section summaries and questions below are designed to be read alongside the full report – both so that individuals and groups can engage with the report at a deep level and so that when Synods come to vote on the resolutions the Synod members can be informed by the fruits of these earlier conversations.

**“The Conference received the report and commended it to the Connexion for study and prayerful discussion”**

## INTRODUCTION

The introductory section of the report reminds the Conference that the 2016 Conference set up a Marriage and Relationships Task Group to revisit and consider the definition of marriage and to prepare a new Statement of the judgment of the Conference on marriage and relationships. The 2018 Conference directed that, instead of a statement, the Task Group should bring a report on these matters which could include any proposed changes to Standing Orders, were the definition of marriage to change.

### **This is what the Task Group has done in *God in love unites us.***

The report affirms (0.1) that God makes human beings to enjoy life in all its fullness and this means that we live in relationships with others. However, Christians have interpreted what that means in different ways, and the Methodist Church has been on a pilgrimage for many years. The current report and ancillary papers (available at [www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19](http://www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19)) are offered as part of that discernment.

The report then sets out why these questions matter (0.2), how the Task Group engaged with them (0.3) and what the content of the report is (0.4).

“God makes human beings to enjoy life in all its fullness”

### To consider

The report notes that Christians do not agree about these questions. Why do you think that is? In your experience, what other topics in Christian life provoke similar levels of debate?

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The Introduction describes the Task Group’s starting points and ways of working.

You might also watch the video in which the Task Group members describe their experience of working on the report.

How would you have approached the task?



# 1. GOD HAS MADE US TO BE IN RELATIONSHIPS AND TO BE SEXUAL

In this section, the report draws on common understandings of significant Bible verses and Christian theology to reflect on what it is to be human. It starts with the nature of God, in whose image we are made, and it considers what this teaches us about human relating. The section then reflects further on how God has created us to be social and sexual beings and considers developing understandings of the complexity and diversity of human sexuality.

The report reflects that, since as human beings we are made in the image of God (1.1), in order to understand what it means to be human, we therefore need to begin by understanding what God is like.

The report then discusses how we relate to God (1.2), how we relate to each other (1.3), and how we are made to relate as sexual beings (1.4).

The report explores the diversity of sexuality (1.5) as a core aspect of what it means to be a human created in love by God.

“God has created us to be social and sexual beings”



**To consider**

How do you define ‘sexuality’? Has this section of the report caused you to reconsider your views?

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Have you heard Christian teaching that has implied that sexual activity is fundamentally sinful? How did or do you respond to that?

## 2. GOD GUIDES US IN ALL OUR RELATING

In part 2, the report addresses the question of what makes for good relating, and for good sexual relating in particular. The report seeks to discern the purposes of good relationships, and their qualities. It explores what patterns of behaviour and practices enable these good relationships to flourish. Then it considers contemporary patterns and practices of relationships in the light of these reflections. Finally, in all of this, it offers reflections on biblical passages and previous Methodist teaching.

This section of the report acknowledges the purposes of good relating (2.1), offering the reminder that God has made everything, loves everything that is made and invites human beings to accept that love and return it. This gives us our core purpose as human beings, which we work out in worshipping and serving God in a variety of ways. The report then goes on to discuss the qualities of good relating (2.2), offering the thought that all significant relationships should be built on self-giving love, commitment, fidelity, loyalty, honesty, mutual respect, equality and the desire for the flourishing of the people involved. It proposes principles of good relating (2.2.5) for the Conference to affirm.

The report then sets out (2.3) the patterns and practices of good relating and how these support the purposes and qualities of good relating.

The report then offers additional reflections (2.4) on good sexual relating, drawing on some insights from Scripture and some contemporary theological developments. It explores key concepts such as chastity and fidelity as things that are positive rather than negative, and for everyone rather than just a few. Following this, it explores the change in attitudes towards contemporary sexual relating (2.5), cohabitation (2.6), civil partnerships (2.7), LGBTQI+ relating (2.8) and moving towards marriage (2.9).

**“The report explores key concepts such as chastity and fidelity”**

### **To consider**

The report states that the key to good relating is self-giving rather than self-seeking, but that this has often been misunderstood in the Christian tradition. Can you think of instances where the emphasis on self-sacrifice in relationships has been unhelpful?

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What do you understand the key concepts of chastity and fidelity to mean? Do they have particular meanings in sexual relationships?



### **3. GOD'S GUIDANCE FOR MARRIAGE: DEVELOPING OUR VISION**

This third section of the report notes the distinctive character of the commitment that constitutes marriage as the Methodist Church understands it. It considers how the important concepts of covenant and grace have particular application to it. This section highlights the potentially enriching character of marriage relationships, while recognising that the lived reality may sometimes differ from the vision which God offers to us. The report tracks the changes in the Methodist Church's teaching on marriage towards it being more about companionship between equal partners, with less emphasis upon the creation of children. Reflections are offered upon a theology of marriage based upon our reading of the Bible, Methodist theology, and people's lived experiences.

The report starts by exploring the developing theology of marriage (3.1). It then goes on to look at divine grace and human frailty (3.2), marriage as a social and legal institution (3.3), and resources that could be offered to support marriage (3.4).

“Divine grace and  
human frailty”



**To consider**

How do you understand Genesis 2:22-24?

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Why do you think that the Methodist Church’s stated understanding of marriage has changed over the last two centuries?

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What could a liturgical act to mark the end of a marriage do (and for whom)?

## 4. WIDENING THE PRACTICE OF MARRIAGE

In the fourth section, the report looks at how the State has developed marriage-like relationships with the creation of civil partnerships and widened the definition of marriage itself to include same-sex couples. Alongside this, the report considers whether the developing Methodist theology of marriage and relationships mean that the Methodist Church can now widen its own practice of marriage. The conclusions of this section reflect upon previous arguments for not widening the celebration of marriage to include same-sex couples. It considers previous approaches to Scripture and emerging interpretations.

The report looks at (4.1) the question posed by the Marriage (Same Sex Couples Act) 2013, and (4.2) who can register a civil partnership or be married in law. It further looks at who may register a civil partnership, or be married under the discipline of the Methodist Church (4.3).

“It considers previous approaches to Scripture and emerging interpretations”



### To consider

Are there particular Bible passages that have shaped your thinking about same-sex relationships? Which are they?

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The report writers propose that “in awe and humility” the Church takes steps which they believe to be “scriptural and faithful”. How do you respond when you read that? On what is your response based?

## 5. NEXT STEPS FOR THE METHODIST CHURCH

In this penultimate section of the report, it moves to consider what our developing theology of relationships and marriage will mean for the Methodist Church in practice and how we hold together, as a Christ-centred community of equal persons who have differing convictions on these matters. In essence, it offers changes to the Standing Order on marriage and suggests a more developed description of our understanding of marriage to be included in the Guidance section of *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church (CPD)*. It also proposes that resources be developed to support marriage and other significant relationships.

This section of the report starts by discussing the guidance in *CPD* on the understanding of marriage (5.1), and following that offers the amended Standing Order concerning marriage (5.2). The report acknowledges the respect for differing convictions (5.3) that has already been affirmed through provision made in the Standing Orders for differing views.

“How we hold together, as a  
Christ-centred community of  
equal persons”



### To consider

The report suggests how the Church can balance the principle of connexionalism and the safeguarding of conscience. Are there times when one of these must be set aside for the other?

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How might Church Councils (managing trustees) confer to make the decisions that the report proposes they be asked to make?

## CONCLUSIONS

The report concludes with an invitation for the Methodist people to continue to explore these issues, giving consideration to the three key themes which run through the report, namely:

- Be open and positive about sexuality and relationships.
- Value all relationships of grace.
- Widen and justify the understanding of marriage as being between two persons.

The report's final thought is to ask us to remember, in the words of the hymn, we are:

***“Summoned by the God who made us  
rich in our diversity,  
gathered in the name of Jesus,  
richer still in unity.”***

“Rich in our diversity ...  
richer still in unity”



### **To consider**

Does anything in this report ‘strike at the root of Christianity’ in your view?

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How do you think we can live together with those who think differently about the key themes in this report?

## AFTERWORD

### **So, what happens now?**

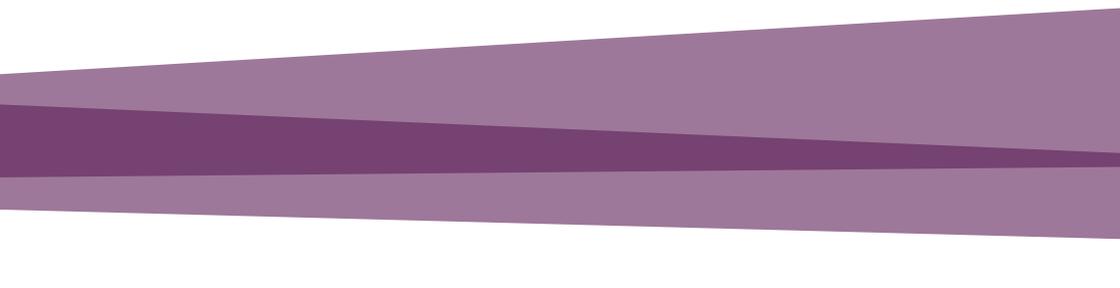
There is no expectation that individuals or groups who have studied the report will formally ‘feed back’ their thoughts but that the conversations which have been generated will inform those who gather at the Synods in the spring of 2020. Synod Secretaries will have been sent guidance on the votes that need to be taken and reported to the Conference Office. A small group appointed by the 2019 Conference will then review the votes and comments from the Synods and submit a report and resolutions to the 2020 Conference.

So, please pray for:

- those who will meet, debate and vote in Synods
- the members of the Conference as they make the final decision
- all who will be affected by the outcome: those who rejoice and those who are saddened by the Conference’s actions
- those who will minister to all affected by the outcome
- the unity of Christ’s Church.

## A prayer

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.**





If you ordered the film of the Marriage and Relationships Task Group on a USB, then you could put it in an envelope and attach it here for safe keeping.

The USB contains a film of the members of the **Methodist Church's Marriage and Relationships Task Group** reflecting on the process of working together on the report *God in love unites us* to give context for study and prayerful discussion.

To download or stream the film, go to **[www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19](http://www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19)**

For published editions of:

- the full report *God in love unites us* (MAR01-CT-19)
- its accompanying Study Guide (MAR02-CT-19)
- the USB with film of the Task Group (MAR03-CT-19)

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download this guide in printer-friendly black  
and white in the following versions:

- English, with a supporting video
- English large-print version
- Welsh
- Welsh large-print version

Also available online are additional resources  
to support individual prayerful reflection, group  
conversations, and the leading of worship  
around those topics covered in the report.

**[www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19](http://www.methodist.org.uk/MandR19)**