



## **“God In Love Unites Us”**

### **Summary of feedback submitted from individuals and local church, Circuit and District conversations**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

During the autumn of 2019 and the early part of 2020, numerous conversations regarding the “God In Love Unites Us” report took place in local churches and Circuits across the District. In addition, one of the three originally planned District-led conversations took place, the others unfortunately being cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Feedback from those conversations was invited and this paper seeks to summarise the views expressed by those who chose to respond to that invitation.

#### **THE CONTENT AND NATURE OF THE REPORT**

Many people expressed gratitude for the fact that the church is focussing on these matters, but some felt that the report was coming far too late. The length and complexity of the report was a concern for some whilst others appreciated the wide-ranging approach and presentation. Some commented that the report showed care and compassion and was respectful of the wide range of views currently represented within the church with good supporting information from the history of the church and from scripture. Others felt that the outcome was a foregone conclusion and that the report had been written to support that conclusion with insufficient consideration being given to scripture.

The emphasis on an overall theme of love and unity was welcomed by many whereas some found it hard to understand how it might be possible to live alongside each other and retain unity with our differing convictions on these matters. Some found it valuable to have the opportunity to explore how their long held views might be reconciled with their current life experience whilst others did not feel that the church should be engaging in the conversation at all. There was acknowledgement of the way in which the church’s views on such matters as slavery, divorce and the role of women in the church had changed over the years but it was also apparent how many people had not been aware of the changes that have already taken place within the life of the church on the matters contained within this report.

#### **THE USE OF SCRIPTURE**

Some who responded felt that the report did not take the authority of scripture seriously and focused too much on liberal interpretations whilst others found the application of reason and experience to biblical passages to be helpful. There was concern amongst some that scripture was being disregarded or even manipulated and that the Methodist Church was straying from its Wesleyan roots in scriptural holiness whereas others appreciated the recognition that traditional interpretations of scripture may sometimes lack context or nuance.

There were a significant number of responses from people who felt betrayed and let down by the church because of what they perceive to be a move away from viewing scripture as the supreme authority in these matters, whereas others were delighted to see that there is recognition of the fact that many have a changing and developing sense of what the Spirit is saying through scripture.

#### MARRIAGE AND CO-HABITATION

Many respondents expressed concern at the movement away from their biblical understanding of marriage as being between one man and one woman, whilst others were pleased to see a recognition of the fact that the nature of family relationships reflected within scripture changed over time and that those changes are still taking place. Some reflected that some of the family relationships described within scripture would not be considered acceptable by the church of today.

Many were supportive of equal rights for all couples and therefore of the opportunity for same-sex marriage but did not wish to see this happen in church. Some were content to welcome and embrace same-sex couples within the life of the church but were not willing to move on their traditional views of marriage. Others were disappointed that the report did not reflect the fact that some with same-sex attraction choose to live chaste, single lives.

Many were saddened that it had taken the church so long to make these recommendations regarding same-sex marriage and expressed deep concern for those who have felt rejected and abandoned by the church and often left the church as a result. There was a recognition in some feedback of the tension between the traditional view of marriage and the over-arching biblical themes of love, inclusivity and all being made in the image of God.

Not many people referred specifically to cohabitation in their responses but those who did wanted to see more biblical support for this practice and were concerned about the lack of differentiation made between long-term committed relationships and short term relationships.

#### SEXUALITY

Many people were clear that their understanding of scripture determined that a sexual relationship between two people of the same sex is sinful and that the church should not condone such actions. There were a range of views expressed about how the church should behave towards couples in same-sex relationships.

It was clear from the range of responses that there is varied understanding about homosexuality, sexual identity and gender and whilst many respondents were supportive of the church moving towards a less discriminatory attitude towards same-sex couples who wish to be married in church, there were also many respondents who were deeply uncomfortable with this proposal.

Some commented on the fact that our understanding of gender, sexual attraction and what it means to be made in the image of God is still developing and several shared how their own attitudes and understanding of scripture had changed as a result of family members or friends being in same-sex relationships.

#### CHURCH AND CULTURE

Many people expressed concern that the church seemed to following the world rather than the word i.e. the Bible and that instead the church should be offering a counter-cultural voice into

society. Others were relieved that at last the church is taking notice of and seeking to be aligned with changes in marriage legislation and indeed the stance of other Christian denominations on these matters.

Some expressed a wish that marriage should be a purely civil matter, thereby enabling the church to support all loving and faithful relationships without the burden of needing to decide who may be married in church.

#### LIVING WITH CONTRADICTIONARY CONVICTIONS

Some indicated that the conversations they had attended had been helpful, respectful and instructive and had been greatly encouraged by the tolerance and understanding demonstrated within the group of which they were part. However, there were others who found the discussions more difficult and even stressful and one respondent who described the conversations as having opened huge rifts between the people present. The manner in which the conversations had been led seems to have made a difference to the environment within which they were held.

Several respondents indicated that it should be possible for us to live respectfully together despite our differing views on these matters, whereas many others stated that they could not understand how it will be possible to live alongside each other when their convictions about traditional/biblical views are so strongly held and at odds with the perceived direction of travel of the church.

Quite a number of respondents indicated that they had not experienced contradictory convictions within the conversations of which they were a part. It is not clear whether that is actually the situation or whether it was because not everyone felt able to share their views. Many people felt that although the opportunity to discuss these matters had been welcome, it had only served to polarise opinions rather than improve understanding of contradictory views.

A number of respondents indicated that if these resolutions are ultimately supported by the Conference then they will leave the church. Several responses expressed concern about the potential loss of members that the church will experience whatever decision is taken and the number of people who may experience hurt as a result of these decisions. A couple of responses expressed concern about how these decisions would impact upon LEP congregations.

#### CONSULTATION PROCESS

Many of those who responded were pleased to have had opportunity to be involved in these conversations but there was disappointment expressed that the final decisions on these resolutions would only be taken by Synod members and then Conference members, all of whom are able to vote according to their own conscience and discernment rather than according to local decisions. Some indicated that being part of local conversations had enabled them to grow in their understanding of the differing views held by others within their own church family.

There was concern expressed by some that there was insufficient awareness amongst the general membership of the church of changes in the stance of the Methodist Church on these matters during the last 20 years. Some respondents also expressed fear that all the conversations held locally would not impact upon what they perceive to be a foregone conclusion in favour of same-sex marriages being conducted in the Methodist Church.