



# Sexuality



Developing  
**Good Conversation**  
on **Difficult Questions**



**Developing Good Conversation on Difficult Questions**  
A RESOURCE FOR THE METHODIST CHURCH IN IRELAND



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# Preface

In common with sister churches in Ireland and churches worldwide, the Methodist Church in Ireland is seeking to discern the will of God with regard to the complex issues of human sexuality. In 2014, a Working Party was established by the Faith and Order Committee to help the church in this process. Its Terms of Reference were agreed by Conference in 2015.

In keeping with these Terms of Reference, the Working Party presents this discussion paper to enable constructive conversation within the Connexion on these sensitive matters. Conference 2016 has directed that such conversations be held at both District and circuit level within the Connexion.

It is our prayer that all such conversations may involve sympathetic listening and considered response. The Working Party invites reports from the circuits and Districts in order to facilitate further reflection.



**Gillian Kingston**

*Chair of the Working Party on Human Sexuality*



# Introduction

*The Church of Christ in every age  
Beset by change but Spirit-led  
Must claim and test its heritage  
and keep on rising from the dead<sup>1</sup>*

Fred Pratt Green, © Stainer and Bell.  
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The purpose of this conversation document is to help the Methodist people in Ireland claim and test their heritage in a time of intense change and challenging questions. Human sexuality is a wonderful, complex, fascinating, dangerous and highly controversial area; we want to discuss it prayerfully, responsibly and with a listening spirit.

We begin by looking at human sexuality as a whole. Sexuality is something that affects us all, whatever our sexual orientation and whether or not we are involved in a sexual relationship. It is part of what it means to be human and so all of us are challenged to think responsibly about its place in our lives, in our relationships and in our communities. Although the changes in modern society have impacted the whole

range of sexuality, for many people it has been the changing perception of same-sex relationships that has been most perplexing. For that reason, we will need to give this area special – but not exclusive - attention. Already the Methodist Church has approved pastoral guidelines for the Church's relationship with those of homosexual orientation. Those guidelines, adopted in 2012, pledge the church to a continuing conversation and this document aims, among other things, to resource that conversation and search.

The Methodist Church in Ireland is not, of course, alone in this search for an appropriate response to questions about sexuality. Churches of many different traditions and in many countries have been involved in similar discussions over

<sup>1</sup> Hymns and Psalms 804; Singing the Faith 415

recent years. Some of their reports are very extensive and provide a helpful resource for smaller churches such as ourselves. As a result of these discussions, some churches (for example, The Church of Scotland, which is Presbyterian) have made quite radical changes to their inherited rules. Others (for example, The Presbyterian Church in Ireland) have re-affirmed their traditional teaching. And some (like The Methodist Church in Britain) have tried to combine traditional affirmations about sexuality with an openness to the contribution of gay and lesbian Christians to church life and leadership. Our Covenant partner, the Church of Ireland, is currently engaged in a similar process of discernment and our two churches have benefitted from sharing the journey.

**It is important that this discussion is seen primarily as a conversation within the body of Christ; those with whom we find ourselves in disagreement are our Christian neighbours.**

Because issues of sexuality, and especially issues related to same-sex relationships, can be so divisive, it is very easy for

conversation to become polarized and even confrontational.

It is important that this discussion is seen primarily as a conversation within

the body of Christ; those with whom we find ourselves in disagreement are our Christian neighbours. The aim of those who have prepared this document is to introduce the issues that need to be discussed, to suggest a constructive way for the conversation to develop and to point to resources that will help those who engage in it. Although the Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church in Ireland has taken the lead in this work, it has been initiated from within the church as a whole.

# Why this conversation?

So, why are we having **this** conversation at this point in the church's life? One answer is that the Methodist people are asking for it. This request comes from different perspectives. For some church members the church needs to give a lead in response to changes such as the same-sex marriage referendum in the ROI. On the other hand, a number of committed church members have asked how their participation in a same-sex relationship affects their inclusion in church life.

We are therefore responding to questions being asked in various areas of the church:



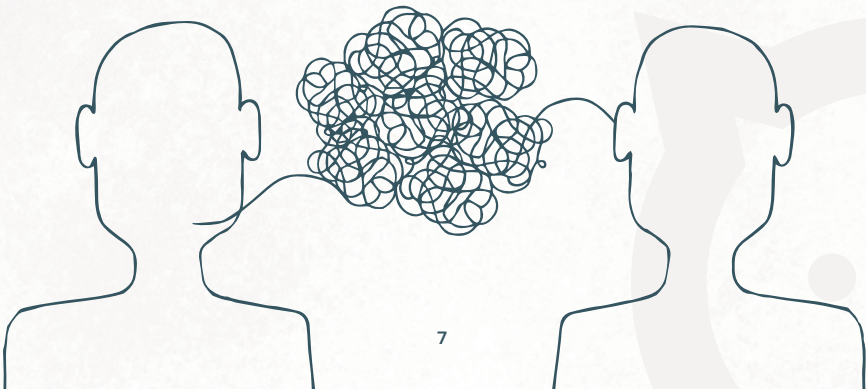
By local congregations and in particular by church members who identify as gay or lesbian, especially with regard to membership and leadership;



By others in congregations who want to know how to respond to the massive changes going on in society;



By IMYC, who are working out how to walk with young people and young adults as they wrestle with sexuality and wonder about their place in the church.



# The Changing Social Context

As Christians we have the constant challenge of discerning how the Holy Spirit may be speaking to us through the changes in the world, and how that same Spirit is moving us to respond. Our discipleship is always contextual. The Church is called to be counter-cultural; it should be ready to challenge and resist those aspects of society (like racism, for example) that distort God's vision for justice and joy. At the same time, a church always exists within a culture and needs to see God at work within it. So, alongside such challenges as climate change, the refugee crisis and the search for peace, the profound changes in sexual attitudes and behaviour in western societies make it important that we look again at the purpose of human sexuality and at healthy ways of expressing it.





## Christianity and its Changing Understanding of Sexuality

It seems that both Jesus and St Paul led celibate lives – for them the demands of serving the Kingdom of God left no room for the responsibilities of marriage. Some of the other early Christian leaders were married, but Christians often developed a negative attitude to sexuality, seeing it as a distraction from devotion to God and at best a necessary means to produce children. Sexual desire and pleasure – even within marriage – were looked on with suspicion, while virginity and a life of sexual abstinence was seen as the better way. It took many centuries for this view to change. Despite their reputation for repression, Puritans (radical Protestants of the seventeenth century) saw sexual pleasure within marriage as a gift from God and not at all inferior to celibacy. They encouraged the idea that the sexual act should give pleasure to both partners and not just to the man.

So Christians are heirs to at least two different ways of thinking about sex.



One concentrates on the negative aspects of sexuality – its capacity for abuse, selfishness, deceit and destructiveness.



The other sees the positive side of sex as part of God's good intention for a flourishing human life, one in which love and companionship are developed within a committed sexual relationship.

## Changing Sexual Mores

Within Western societies sexual behaviour and sexual attitudes are varied – but a number of trends emerge. The following statistics were gathered according to the most recent UK National Survey of Sexual Attitude:



THE AVERAGE  
AGE FOR SOMEONE  
TO BECOME  
SEXUALLY ACTIVE  
HAS DECLINED  
TO 16



MOST COUPLES WILL  
LIVE TOGETHER BEFORE  
MARRYING, AND MANY  
WILL CHOOSE NOT TO  
GO THROUGH A FORMAL  
MARRIAGE CEREMONY



THERE HAS  
BEEN AN INCREASE  
IN THE AVERAGE  
NUMBER OF SEXUAL  
PARTNERS A PERSON  
HAS DURING  
THEIR LIFETIME



THE STATISTICS  
FOR MEN AND  
WOMEN HAVE  
BECOME MUCH  
MORE SIMILAR



ATTITUDES  
TOWARDS SAME-SEX  
RELATIONSHIPS HAVE  
BECOME STEADILY  
MORE POSITIVE



THE RESULTS  
SHOW A GREATER  
DISAPPROVAL OF  
UNFAITHFUL SEXUAL  
ACTIVITY.

## Recent Medical and Psychological Evidence

The term 'homosexual' was coined in the Nineteenth century when medicine tended to regard same-sex attraction as a disease. During the last fifty years medical and psychological bodies have moved away from this definition and have increasingly seen same-sex attraction as part of the normal range of human sexuality. There is evidence that such sexuality is not a matter of choice, nor is it completely explained by life experience. There does seem to be a strong biological and genetic element to it.

Contemporary psychology also points to the harmful effects of homophobia – harassment or discrimination against people because of their sexual orientation.



## Marriage

In spite of the many changes in behaviour and attitudes, most people do enter into marriage, or a relationship that looks very much like it. Christians have generally taught that a full sexual relationship belongs within marriage and that sex outside of marriage falls short of God's ideal pattern. While marriage is a social and legal institution, Christians also see it from a theological point of view. Marriage, according to the Church's traditional reading of Scripture, reflects God's creative intention for human community and mutual care. The self-giving which marriage calls us to is compared in the New Testament with the relationship between Christ and the Church. That traditional teaching is summed up in one of the prayers included in the Methodist Worship Book:

*From the beginning you made them man and woman  
For yourself and for each other,  
And you call us to reflect your faithfulness in lives of love and service.<sup>2</sup>*

A challenge for the churches is how their traditional theology of marriage engages with the changing social and legal status of marriage. In fact, the Christian understanding of marriage has always developed depending on the social context. There has been a number of models for marriage down the centuries and the most common modern western model – a contract based on mutual love and companionship – is quite recent. Methodism is pro-marriage, but there is little distinctive about the Methodist theology and

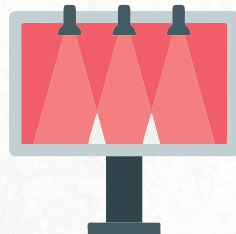
<sup>2</sup> Methodist Worship Book, p 380

practice of Marriage. By and large we have followed the same trends in social and theological thinking as our sister churches, especially those in the Protestant tradition, though Methodist churches have tended to be more lenient on the re-marriage of divorced persons. Successive editions of the Marriage service used in Methodist churches show that we have shared in the general move towards an emphasis on the love and companionship that binds a couple together rather than on marriage as the means for procreation. One – but only one – of the questions raised by recent changes in society is whether a Christian theology of marriage can or should embrace a relationship between two people of the same sex.

It is worth noting that over the last century one of the most profound changes in society – affecting its attitude towards sex and marriage – has been the growing conviction that women have just as many rights as men and should never be the victims of the abuse of power of any kind. Churches have not always rushed to adopt gender equality, but gradually it has developed – perhaps an instance of how the Holy Spirit has spoken to us through changes in society.

## The Sexualisation of Western culture

Of course, the changes in contemporary culture are not all positive, and Christians are called to discern and denounce those developments that demean their fellow-human beings. For that reason we need to be aware of the shadow-side of human sexuality.



Culture is transmitted through language, material objects, ritual, institutions, and art from one generation to the next.<sup>3</sup> We should ask, ‘what culture are we transmitting to the next generation?’ Our culture is being increasingly sexualised. This is illustrated by the growth in sexual images used to sell products such as jeans, beauty products, cars - even cat food! On any given day we are bombarded by sexual images. Sexual behaviour is being modelled by music videos, reality TV shows and movies, normalising promiscuity and a certain body image to be aspired to.

Recent surveys show how this is shaping young people’s view of themselves and of what sex and relationships are about. Girl Guiding, in a recent UK survey, found that the majority of girls aged 11 to 21 see a link between stereotyped and sexist representations in the media and unfair treatment of women in society. 81 per cent of girls aged 11 to 21 say they have experienced or seen some form of everyday sexism.

<sup>3</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/culture>

Girl Guiding, UK Survey Findings



THREE IN FIVE GIRLS HEARD JOKES OR REMARKS THAT BELITTLED OR DEGRADED GIRLS AND WOMEN FIRST HAND AND HALF HEARD THE SAME IN A FILM OR ON TV (53%)



TWO IN FIVE HAVE READ SOMETHING IN THE MEDIA THAT TRIVIALISED VIOLENCE OR ABUSE TOWARDS WOMEN <sup>4</sup>



ONE IMPACT OF THIS IS THAT 3 OUT OF 4 GIRLS REPORT LOW SELF-ESTEEM.

Statistics around pornography in both the North and South of Ireland, influenced by accessibility to the internet, are shockingly high. In the recent 'Irish Times' survey 83% of respondents had viewed pornography, including 99% of men aged 17-34.



83% OF RESPONDENTS HAD VIEWED PORNOGRAPHY

In a survey carried out by the charity 'Love for Life' in schools in Northern Ireland, 72% of 15 year olds have accessed porn online, with 30% of males daily and a further 26% weekly. [Love for Life Data, 2015]. Porn is changing how people view relationships. Research has found that 'Since porn often portrays women as nothing more than sex objects that need to be dominated, it's not surprising that porn users often start seeing real women that way as well.'<sup>5</sup>



99% OF MEN AGED 17-34 HAD VIEWED PORNOGRAPHY



72% OF 15 YEAR OLDS HAVE ACCESSED PORN ONLINE

Sexting is another aspect of the same problem and 20 % of 15 year olds in northern Irish schools have used their phone to send or receive an indecent image. [Love for Life Data, 2015]. Add to this domestic violence, rape, human trafficking, abuse and prostitution and the picture is bleak indeed. The culture which is shaping our young people requires response and action by the church. It is vital that we begin to take seriously the impact this is having on the behaviours and well-being of human beings created by God for relationship, love, and life in all its fullness.



<sup>4</sup> <http://new.girlguiding.org.uk/latest-updates/making-a-difference/girls-attitudes-survey-2015/sexism-andrepresentation>

<sup>5</sup> <http://fightthenewdrug.org/porn-kills-love/>

# Developments in Language and Understanding

## SEX

**'Sex'** usually refers to our biological state. For the vast majority of people (though there are exceptions), their bodies are either male or female and they have male or female chromosomes, sexual organs and hormones.

## GENDER

**'Gender'** refers to someone's identity as a man or a woman (though some people prefer to identify themselves in other ways). Gender owes something to our biological sex, but it also reflects those roles that are constructed through our cultural identity. Ideals of femininity and masculinity, dress codes for men and women, the association of certain jobs in the work place, the church and the home with men or women: these are all social rather than biological. We may take them for granted and think of them as 'natural', but in fact they are different from culture to culture. Within the lifetime of many of us, the gender roles for men and women in Western society have seen profound change.

As we engage in our conversation, it will be useful to keep in mind the way in which language has developed in recent thinking as it has been informed by biology, psychology and sociology.

## SEXUALITY

**'Sexuality'** tends to be used in two ways. First, it refers to our sexual orientation – which may mean we are attracted to members of our own sex, or the opposite sex, or both. How far our sexual orientation is determined by our 'nature' and how far it develops through our 'nurture' is very difficult to determine; it is probably a combination of both. But 'sexuality' also refers to an aspect of our whole life. As sexual beings, our personhood and our interaction with others expresses our sexuality even if we are not engaged in an active sexual relationship.

## SEXUALITY ACTIVITY

**'Sexual activity'** can also be difficult to define. 'Sexual intercourse' is generally taken to mean genital, penetrating sexual acts. But, of course, there are many other forms of sexual activity, including kissing and touching in different ways.

# The Pastoral Context

In our conversations about sexual issues it is important to remember that they affect real people, and at the deepest human level.

The Working Group on Human Sexuality invited groups and individuals who wished to share opinions and experiences to meet with a small panel of group members. We want to thank those who took time and trouble to meet us and who shared some of their deepest convictions and most painful experiences. Some wanted to express their views on the way the Methodist Church should develop its teaching, while others wanted to share something of their personal journey and experience. This listening process highlighted the church's pastoral responsibility – especially in relation to same - sex relationships and practice. In fact, this issue was almost the only thing people wanted to speak about.

The listening exercise also highlighted the diversity of views within Methodism. For some, any

questioning of traditional teaching on same-sex relationships would be both hurtful and wrong, a failure to give proper moral leadership at a time of crisis. Others wanted to tell stories of their, or their children's, experience of exclusion. For them, the silence of the church on issues concerning human sexuality has led to pain and hurt, misunderstanding and alienation for individuals and families. The 2012 guidelines do not seem to have been a reality for such people.<sup>6</sup>

We realise that the Methodist Church in Ireland, in common with every other Christian Church, has members who are of homosexual orientation (whether lesbian, gay, or bisexual). Many have never heard any reference to sexuality from their pulpit or, if they have, it has been negative. As a consequence, some feel confused and hide their true feelings because they fear being marginalised and excluded from the Church. The guidelines set out our pastoral responsibility to value each person as God does.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Those who struggle with issues of sexuality are no different from those who struggle with other difficulties. All deserve our attention, care and Christian love. This is vital because some families believe they have not received this care.'

## The Mission Context



There is a mission imperative to engage with the issues of sexuality. This is partly because the churches are perceived to have disengaged from the positive issues of human sexuality and focused on the negative aspects of sexual behaviour. Such negativity has impacted on people's view of the Church and - therefore - their view of God. Some believe that people have stopped listening to the Church because of this and therefore they are not hearing the radical nature of the Good News of human flourishing that we have to share. Others see their commitment to mission pointing to the need for the Church to reaffirm its traditional teaching on sex and marriage.

**We believe that God has made us as people who are called to relate to each other as body, mind and spirit.**

## Sexuality and Human Flourishing

**“THE GLORY OF GOD IS HUMAN BEINGS MADE FULLY ALIVE.”**

This famous saying is from the second-century Christian writer St Irenaeus. Though it was not framed with sexuality in mind, it does point to a positive view of human sexuality. This is at odds with the rather negative impression that we often find in the Christian tradition. From that negative point of view, human sexuality and sexual acts have been seen as expressions of our fallen, sinful nature. Sexual activity is then – at best – viewed as a method of making babies and keeping the human race going. The desire and pleasure that often goes with our sexual lives is seen as an embarrassing sign of our imperfection.

Instead of this negative view we believe that God has made us as people who are called to relate to each other as body, mind and spirit. Our sexuality is part of that call to relationship. While it is often abused and degraded, our sexual nature is as open to God's perfecting grace as any other aspect of our being. In other words, we are created for life in community and God wants that life to flourish in every aspect. Of course, that does not mean

that we are only fully human if we are in an active sexual relationship or if we have

children, but it does see God at work in our sexual and family relationships.



# How do we converse?

How, then, do we have such Connexion-wide conversations? What are some of the resources and ways to converse on matters where there is much debate or conflict?

The listening process so far has highlighted that within the Methodist Church in Ireland there are a variety of diverse and strongly-held views on issues of Human sexuality. The fact that most, if not all, of those who spoke to us came to talk about issues surrounding same – sex attraction and relationships, highlights that this is the presenting area for conversation at the moment.

While we recognise that for many people this is important for the church to discuss and grapple with, we want to encourage the conversation to happen in the context of the whole scope of human sexuality.

Rev. Brian Anderson (The President of the Methodist Church 2015/2016) in his address at Conference encouraged us to ‘talk with a soft difference.’

The tone of the conversation around the Connexion is vital! We may be discussing things that we consider ‘issues’ but for each area of conversation there are real lives of individuals and families, so let us examine our hearts and motivations and be willing to listen to those who think differently than us and speak ‘with a soft difference.’

We would ask that these things be kept in mind as we converse:

This is not a debate but a dialogue. Here are some suggested differences between the two from *The Magic of Dialogue* by Daniel Yankelovich:

## Debate

- ✗ Assuming that there is a right answer and you have it
- ✗ Combative: participants attempt to prove the other side wrong
- ✗ About winning
- ✗ Listening to find flaws and make counter arguments
- ✗ Defending assumptions as truth
- ✗ Critiquing the other side’s position
- ✗ Defending one’s own views against those of others
- ✗ Searching for flaws and weaknesses in other position
- ✗ Seeking a conclusion or vote that ratifies your position

## Dialogue

- ✓ Assuming that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can craft a solution
- ✓ Collaborative: participants work together toward common understanding
- ✓ About exploring common good
- ✓ Listening to understand, find meaning and agreement
- ✓ I reveal my assumptions for re-evaluation.
- ✓ Re-examining all positions
- ✓ Admitting that others’ thinking can improve one’s own
- ✓ Searching for strengths and value in other’s positions
- ✓ Discovering new options, not seeking closure



The New Testament frequently uses the phrase 'one another'. This gives us a helpful framework to dialogue well. We are encouraged to love one another, to be at peace with one another, to put others before ourselves, not judge others, to be patient with one another and bear with one another in love.

So our **tone** and **posture** in this conversation is key and as you will see each point is intrinsically connected to the others:

### RESPECT

We must respect each other's viewpoint and suspend judgement.

### LISTENING

Listening to the Holy Spirit and each other.

### HONESTY

Honesty is vital if we are fully to engage with the issues. This will only happen when people feel safe to contribute their opinions in a non-judgemental environment. Alongside this is the importance of acknowledging that culture, personal experience and brokenness have influenced and shaped our own opinions.

### INFORMED

Our conversation will need to be informed in the following ways

- ✓ Biblically/  
Theologically
- ✓ Historically
- ✓ Psychologically
- ✓ Sociologically

Our aim is that the resources provided will give some background reading/exploring to allow people to be informed as they converse.

**Learning:** We must come to these conversations with an intention to learn, acknowledging there is always more to learn. We may reach a place of agreement, we may not, but the hope would be that we would at least have more understanding of those we differ with after the conversation.

**Intergenerational:** This is not just a conversation for the 'grown-ups' in our churches. The conversation will be richer if we do it together across the generations. It is vital that we listen to the opinions of the younger generation. This will require a posture of humility and an understanding of the power dynamics that exist with role and age.

Our hope would be that all of the above will create a 'safe place' where people will feel free to speak openly, this requires a level of confidentiality and an ability to suspend judgement not only during the conversation, but beyond the conversation.

## How do we deal with Scripture?

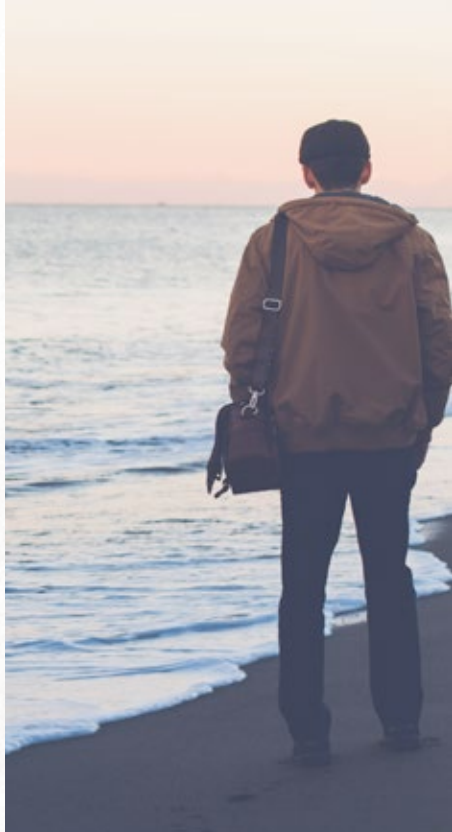
Many Christians will point to a number of passages in the Bible that they believe give a clear injunction against same-sex activity. Others will draw different conclusions from their reading. So one of the key questions in our conversations about sexuality will be 'how do we interpret Scripture?'

Interpretation is an inescapable part of reading Scripture. Sometimes – and on a whole variety of topics - we say 'the Bible teaches'. But it might be more accurate to say 'the Church teaches on the basis of its interpretation of the Bible'. We believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the authors of the biblical books, and that the same Spirit inspires those who read those books in new situations. Methodists would tend to say that they interpret the Bible through attention to the Christian Tradition, to the wisdom of human reason and to lived experience.

How, then, does the Church interpret Scripture in its teaching on sexuality? It is true that for most of Christian history the churches have taught that human sexuality finds its fulfilment and purpose only within the faithful commitment of marriage, and that a marriage is necessarily between a man and a woman. It is also true that churches have seen sexual acts – including same-sex practices - outside of marriage as symptoms of a disordered human life and as contrary to the will of God.

In the contemporary Christian debate, some Christians (including many within Irish Methodism) argue strongly that the traditional Christian biblical interpretation and teaching on sexuality needs to be maintained because anything else would be contrary to the plain meaning of the Old and New Testament texts. Others (again, including many within the MCI) would argue with equal conviction that the Church should look again at its reading of scripture and be prepared to change its teaching on the basis of fresh interpretation and a different context.

The American Methodist scholar, Richard Hays, has given a helpful guide to the interpretation of Scripture in Christian ethics<sup>7</sup>. He suggests that when we turn to the Bible for moral guidance, we are likely to treat it in one of four different ways:



### RULES

We may look to the Bible for commandments and rules to give us explicit moral guidance. They are certainly present, but most of the Bible doesn't read like a moral textbook. When it comes to sexuality, some of the commandments (for example, 'You shall not commit adultery') are more obviously relevant than others (for example, the instruction in Leviticus that a couple shouldn't have sexual intercourse if the woman is menstruating).



### PRINCIPLES

These are not so specific as rules; they give us guidance that need to be applied in particular circumstances. 'Love your neighbour as yourself' might be one such principle. 'Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit' another. We then need to think carefully about how these biblical principles affect our sexual behaviour.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Continuum/T&T Clark, London, 1996



## STORIES AND MODELS

Much of the Bible is in the form of story. Sometimes this is the story of the nation, or the person of Jesus, or the Church. Sometimes – as in the teaching of Jesus – it is a parable that uses story to help us with fresh insights. Of course, there are widely different stories, even in the area of sexual relationships, and we need to discern how to read them. We will also find descriptions of examples and patterns of behaviour. We might want to note, for example, the way that Old Testament prophecy so often draws a parallel between faithfulness in the sexual relationship of marriage and faithfulness to the covenant with God. Even with this familiar model, we need to be careful not to see it as justifying any violence against women.



## WORLD-VIEWS AND PATTERNS

For Christians, the Bible is always more than a collection of poems, stories and instructions; it gives us the ‘big picture’ of the God who has created us and saves through Jesus Christ. The way we understand that biblical big picture – for example, the emphasis we give to the goodness of creation or to human sin – will affect our understanding of sexuality. Methodists may want to see words such as ‘grace’, ‘transformation’ and ‘mission’ as providing key perspectives on their interpretation of Scripture.

There are many aspects to biblical interpretation, and different ways of viewing the authority of Scripture. Most scholars and teachers would remind us of the importance of reading scriptural passages in their historical context and taking careful note of what words and stories mean in their original setting. Other voices urge us to use our imaginations in our spiritual engagement with the Bible, allowing the Holy Spirit to make connections between the text and our journey of faith. And there is also the insight from liberation theology that communities of ordinary people are called to interpret scripture for their situation.

In summary, as we read the Bible, whether it is for guidance on sexuality, or for any other purpose, we need to:

- ✓ Remember that it is the community of faith, and not just individuals, who read, listen and interpret.
- ✓ Pay attention to the context. That means looking at how a text fits into its surroundings. It also means listening to commentators: words and stories may have meant something different 2 or 3 thousand years ago.
- ✓ Pay attention to the tension between the big picture that the Bible paints and the different voices that emerge in Scripture.
- ✓ Listen to the different interpretations of texts – even if we find it difficult to believe that we can be wrong!

## Questions for Conversation

When we have listened, discussed, interpreted and considered we still face the challenge: what do we do now? In offering this discussion document we do not want to determine the outcome of the Church's conversation, but we do think that we should ask ourselves these key questions:



What can the church do to become a community that helps people express their sexuality in healthy and fruitful ways?



How welcome can we be to those who do not conform to the traditional norms?



What might the Holy Spirit be saying to us through the many changes in society's attitudes to sexuality?



How can we disagree with each other without becoming divided from each other?



How can we listen to and interpret Scripture as we wrestle with difficult moral and social questions?

# Resources

to help think through issues  
of Christianity and Sexuality

People seem to like to write and talk about sex! So there are countless books, pamphlets, blogs, videos and websites that deal with aspects of sexuality in relation to Christianity. Some are intended for young people, some for a general readership and some for an academic audience. Some are from official church sources, and these usually try to be balanced and fair. Others represent a particular point of view. Some, it has to be said, are unhelpful and even unchristian in the way they deal with other people and other points of view.



 [irishmethodist.org/WPHS](http://irishmethodist.org/WPHS)

A short list of selected resources is included below, but a much more comprehensive list of helpful material in print and other media is accessible on the working party's page on the Methodist Church in Ireland website ([www.irishmethodist.org/WPHS](http://www.irishmethodist.org/WPHS)). Many of the resources listed are available on the internet.

On the same page you will also find suggestions on how to structure a conversation in your church or circuit, together with questions that you might want to consider. You will also find some specific resources for young people and youth groups.

The most important recent statement by the Methodist Church in Ireland is 'Pastoral Responses regarding those of Homosexual Orientation' (adopted by the Methodist Conference of 2011). This is included as Appendix 2 in this booklet.

## Selected Resources

### RESOURCES FROM OTHER CHURCHES

#### Church of Ireland

*Human Sexuality in the Context of Christian Belief: A Guide to the Conversation*, The General Synod of the Church of Ireland, 2016.

 <https://goo.gl/HLkYlh>

Available as a printed book. An executive summary and study guide have also been produced.


#### Methodist Church in Britain

This is the page that deals with issues of human sexuality on the Methodist Church in Britain website.

 <https://goo.gl/6y4O19>


#### Church of England

A recent Church of England report. It includes references to many other resources and also has major essays from different perspectives on same-sex relationships.

 <https://goo.gl/W6Bue7>

#### Church of Scotland

A major report of same-sex relationships from the Church of Scotland.

 <https://goo.gl/Fz6ZVv>

## BOOKS ON SEXUALITY AND CHRISTIANITY

Cornwall, S. (2013). *Theology and Sexuality*. London, SCM.

This is a helpful book looking at a whole range of issues relating Christianity and sexuality.

Farley, M. A. (2006).

*Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*. London, Continuum.

Margaret Farley writes as a Catholic laywoman and academic. She argues for a new way of framing our Christian sexual ethics.

Grant, J. (2015). *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age*. Grand Rapids, Brazos.

An Anglican evangelical makes an argument for affirming traditional sexual ethics within the context of contemporary culture.

Hill, W. (2015). *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian*. Grand Rapids, Baker.

A college professor and gay Christian writes about love and celibate friendship.

Vines, M. (2014). *God and the Gay Christian*. New York, Convergent.

An accessible book that makes an evangelical case for affirming same-sex relationships



# Appendix 1

## WORKING PARTY ON HUMAN SEXUALITY

### Establishment and Terms of Reference

The Working Party was established by the Faith & Order Committee on October, 2014. The Terms of Reference are as follows:

- i. To undertake a fundamental review of Christian teaching on human sexuality and practice and on that basis to formulate the standards required for membership of the MCI, and for holding any office of leadership in the MCI and to outline the disciplines required in regard to sexual behaviour by any member or office holder in good standing in the Church.
- ii. In undertaking the review set out above, to examine afresh how Holy Scripture may be faithfully interpreted in the MCI in respect of issues concerning human sexuality and, in particular, homosexuality and in the light of the major Biblical and theological themes respecting Creation and New Creation.
- iii. To bring forward an Interim Discussion Paper to the Faith & Order Committee in 2015 with a view to possible decisions by the Committee as to whether (a) such a Discussion Paper might fruitfully be brought to Conference with a recommendation for discussion by, and responses from, the whole Connexion and (b) and, subsequently, whether such Connexional reflections and considered responses might inform a draft Conference Statement on Human Sexuality and Christian Faith and Practice, which may be brought to Conference in 2017 or subsequently.
- iv. To have particular regard to the deliberations in other Christian Churches on matters concerning Human Sexuality including members Churches in the World Methodist Council; in particular, to seek to liaise closely with the Select Committee on Human Sexuality in the Context of Christian Belief established by the General Synod of the Church of Ireland in 2014 with a view to sharing in the task of discernment underway in both Churches.

### Membership of Working Party



- 1 Ms Gillian Kingston, *Chair of Working Party on Human Sexuality*
- 1 Ms Gemma Barclay
- 1 Revd Dr Richard Clutterbuck
- 1 Ms Gillian Gilmore
- 1 Ms Heidi Good
- 1 Dr Katie Heffelfinger
- 1 Revd Fiona McCrea
- 1 Dr Fergus O'Ferrall, *Lay Leader; Appointee to Church of Ireland Select Committee on Human Sexuality in the Context of Christian Belief*
- 1 The Very Revd John Mann, *Dean of Belfast; Nominee from Church of Ireland Select Committee on Human Sexuality in the Context of Christian Belief*
- 1 Revd David Turtle *Convenor, Faith & Order Committee*

## Processes proposed by Working Party in fulfilling the Terms of Reference

### 1. Introduction

At the first meeting on 5 November, 2014, the Working Party reviewed the extensive Terms of Reference given to it by the Faith & Order Committee. It was noted that there is:

- a short term task of preparing a Discussion Paper during 2015
- a medium term task of drafting an interim Statement/ Report on Human Sexuality and Christian Faith
- a long-term task of preparing a Conference Statement on Human Sexuality and Christian Faith following discussion by, and responses from the whole Connexion.sk of discernment underway in both Churches.

### 2. Approach proposed

The Working Party sees its role as an advisory and facilitative one for the Connexion. There is a need for space within the Church for grace-filled, humble, inclusive conferring together on all issues which arise in regard to human sexuality. The Working Party is agreed that:

- It is imperative to facilitate a process of listening for understanding – as opposed to ‘listening’ while formulating a ‘knock down’ reply formed by pre-judgement. We must listen to what the Holy Spirit may be saying about human flourishing in radically changed contexts.
- We need to examine afresh how Holy Scripture may be interpreted in respect of all the issues concerning human sexuality so that we reflect together on the Christian sexual ethics which the Church should teach and apply in its discipline.

The processes of listening, reflection and study are at this stage more important than the enunciation of a premature prescriptive Statement- the effect of which would be to close off the necessary learning and to exclude many voices from the Church.

### 3. Processes proposed

*(i) Study:* There now exists a substantial number of Statements and reflections from

various Christian Churches and a range of scholarly works which require to be studied in relation to human sexuality, Biblical interpretation and Christian sexual ethics. This work has been commenced by the Working Party and will take considerable time.

*(ii) Listening and learning:* The Working Party is considering how it may hear all and any voices or views within the Connexion on all of the issues concerning human sexuality. It is envisaged that this process will take much time and considerable resources to facilitate conferring at District and circuit levels. All need to know that they are being heard, that their views matter and that they are entitled to listen and learn through the processes as well. Consideration might be given as to how a conversation might be facilitated during Conference. Arrangements to communicate with the Connexion through the Methodist Newsletter and by other means in early 2015 are being considered.

*(iii) Covenant with Church of Ireland:* The Working Party has had the benefit of hearing of the work of the Church of Ireland Select Committee on Human Sexuality from Dean John Mann, Chair of the Select Committee, who represents the Church of Ireland on the Working Party. It is clear the Guide to the Debate which is being developed by the Church of Ireland Select Committee for later in 2015 will be a valuable resource for our work. Dr. Fergus O’Ferrall, Lay Leader, represents the Methodist Church in Ireland on the Select Committee.

The reciprocal arrangement will facilitate valuable two-way exchange of thought and experience.

### 4. Timescale

In the light of the above and of the time required to produce a comprehensive Discussion Paper the Working Party will aim to have an initial paper drafted by Autumn 2015 in preparation for Conference 2016. Thereafter the work of drafting a Conference Statement on Human Sexuality and Christian Belief and Practice would commence. This would be expected to take a significant length of time.

## Council on Social Responsibility: Pastoral Responses regarding those of Homosexual Orientation (adopted by the Methodist Conference of 2011)

The rule of faith of the Methodist Church in Ireland is the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments. Based on this understanding Methodists are inclusive Christians. We therefore believe that God loves everyone and Jesus died for all. We teach that people are made in the image of God but our lives have been tainted by sin; that sin has spoiled God's original intention for us and that sin affects every aspect of our lives, including our sexuality. However, we also emphasise that God's grace is available to all and from the moment people respond to Jesus in faith, the Holy Spirit begins the process of sanctification, i.e. enables us to grow in grace.

All pastoral care is based on this premise. Those who struggle with issues of sexuality are no different from those who struggle with other difficulties. All deserve our attention, care and Christian love. This is vital because some families believe they have not received this care. The Methodist Church in Ireland in common with every other Christian Church has members who are of homosexual orientation (whether lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender). Many never have heard any reference to sexuality from their pulpit, or if they have, it has often been negative. As a consequence, some feel confused and hide their true feelings because they fear being marginalised and excluded from the Church family.

The Committee/Council if of a mind that homosexual orientation is not, in and of itself, a sin, however the Committee/Council is unable to come to an agreed mind on the question of homosexual lifestyle. In common with many churches we find ourselves divided into two main streams of Biblical interpretation in relation to the latter issue.

It is therefore important that we respect the integrity of those whose interpretation of scripture is different from our own and continue to work together in Christian love.

We pledge ourselves to search the Scriptures continually under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In order to provide pastoral care to

those who feel isolated and on the margins because of their sexuality, Conference recommends the following:-

1. The Methodist Church strongly condemns all forms of homophobia both within the church and the wider community. Recognising the subtle forms in which homophobia is expressed; it urges all our members to carefully examine our thoughts, words and actions before God so that we may not be guilty of any form of homophobia, either consciously or unconsciously.
2. We acknowledge that in the past, we have sometimes condemned and hurt those who are of homosexual orientation.
3. We acknowledge that we, often unconsciously, have reacted differently toward heterosexual and homosexual people.
4. All individuals, irrespective of orientation, should be encouraged to make responsible decisions regarding relationships and sexual practice.
5. We urge all in leadership to show compassion in our discussion, statements, preaching and teaching about people irrespective of their sexuality.
6. We encourage the careful use of language on this issue.
7. For various reasons and at various times in their lives, people may struggle with their sexual identity and with its rightful expression. We underline the need to listen more and say less, so those who experience such struggles know they are valued as persons.
8. We urge the rejection of none on the grounds of their sexual orientation.
9. We emphasise that sexual orientation is not a barrier to anyone becoming a member of the church.
10. We invite every Church Council and Circuit Executive to discuss how they can ensure that all know they are welcome to share in worship.
11. We affirm our belief that the Communion Table is the Lord's and all who seek to be His disciples are welcome.
12. We do all that we can to encourage people to remember that every person matters to God and reaffirm our belief in the gospel of grace, forgiveness, healing and power available to all.



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