

One plus One:

thinking together about marriage

A discussion booklet produced by the human sexuality task group of the United Reformed Church for General Assembly 2014



**“For now I know in part,
then I shall understand fully,
even as I have been
fully understood.”**

1 Corinthians 13

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Introduction

What is marriage? A freely chosen, exclusive relationship; a life-long commitment; the cradle of family life; a contract framing rights and duties; a covenant sealing love and hope...? Or...? Definitions don't have to be exclusive, and definitions of marriage change across time and cultures.

It is one such change that has provoked this current discussion: same-sex couples can now marry. Churches and other faith groups may choose to participate in this, or not. The exceptions to this are the Church of England and the Church in Wales who are currently forbidden by law from participating. For those Churches which do decide to participate there are legal protections built into the legislation which state that no individual minister or local church can be prosecuted for declining to perform marriages of same-sex couples. Those denominations wishing to allow for participation would need the assent of their governing authority: in the case of the United Reformed Church that is deemed to be the General Assembly. If such permission were granted then there would still be legalities to be gone through locally as this would be a separate system, not an extension of existing practice: buildings would need to be registered and authorised persons appointed (England and Wales), celebrants identified and appointed (Scotland).

We work in an ecumenical environment and many of our local congregations are part of local ecumenical partnerships with shared ministry and buildings. The governing authorities of such partner churches would have to consent before any local church went ahead; this parallels the rules for registration for celebration of civil partnerships. The Church of England is currently in a two year consultation process on its Pilling Report; until that time is concluded and General Synod makes a decision their present disciplines obtain. The Methodist Church has a group reporting to Conference 2014 which, having undertaken considerable research and consultation,

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will enable Conference to decide whether or not they wish to embark on a process of revisiting their understanding of marriage in the light of the new legislation. If they do so decide, then a group would enable further work and consultation over an extended period with a view to decisions being taken at a later Conference.

The human sexuality task group is grateful to all those who have shared their thoughts with us. Inevitably marriage of same-sex couples is a divisive subject; it meets us on the “fault lines” of scripture and tradition. The task group itself encompasses the range of views described in the 2007 Commitment; what we have discovered, in common with all the groups who have worked on this subject down the years, is that we recognise Christ in one another; even when honest convictions do not change and agreement cannot be found we are able and willing to go on listening and sharing in mutual respect. We hope that this spirit will be present in the discussions at General Assembly and beyond.

The members of the task group have written the following papers which we hope will enliven your discussion. The first group of papers sets the scene, grounding us in the Commitment by which our Church seeks to live, valuing and respecting difference; moving on to reflect on the Bible, history and science. These papers are followed by a collection of more personal reflections. You will also find questions for discussion – although obviously you may have questions enough of your own!

There are no conclusions. The conclusions, should they emerge, belong to all of us as we pray, listen and reflect together.

The human sexuality task group, March 2014

The human sexuality task group members are: Jacob Addo, Karen Campbell, Elizabeth Caswell (convener), John Hardaker, Val Morrison, Alan Paterson (co-opted), Neil Riches and Justine Wyatt.

The Commitment

In The Commitment the 2007 General Assembly recognised the diversity of views that are around in church life. Broadly, it recognised three viewpoints within the church (paragraphs 7.2.1., 7.2.2. and 7.2.3):

- That it is a matter of biblical truth that sexuality can only be expressed between a man and a woman in marriage.
- That there are other far more pressing issues the church should concern itself with and this one has formed too much of a distraction.
- That it is a matter of biblical truth that God is gracious and welcoming regardless of sexuality, and calls some into same-sex relationships.

Perhaps most significantly, the General Assembly decided that in God's grace we are called to unity with one another, and to continue together in fellowship. The Assembly decided that these very deeply held convictions do not need to divide the Church and that we can continue to live together despite these tensions. However, we need to recognise how difficult it is to walk this path, and, since 2007, when the Commitment was agreed, there have been times when individuals have felt that some decisions made and implemented have taken insufficient notice of it.

In addressing the question of unity and diversity the 2007 report said the following:

“We need to keep a sense of proportion about this issue, which can never be as important as the gospel itself nor all those things in which we are firmly united. We must also consider the impression we make on the world around. We believe we have come to a point where we need to say to one another –

- this is who and where we are;
 - can we now recognise and face our differences?
 - and how might we live with that?”
-

Whilst those statements remain relevant we would do well to remember that they were made seven years ago and our context has changed during that time. Civil partnerships and marriages of same-sex couples are clearly new, but in the wider context increasing numbers of people are finding the confidence to “come out” and the world in general has become increasingly accepting of changed lifestyles, despite the reported hardening of lines in some (particularly) African countries. Much else has changed in the economic, political and social dimensions of our world, all of which impacts on our attitudes to our fellow human beings.

In 2007 the Assembly papers talked about some of our convictions and some of those remain current in 2014:

1. In order to maintain its *integrity*, the Church must look honestly at itself and face up to the extent of its internal diversity.
2. The Church’s life is built on our *relationships* in Christ and with one another. It is vital to meet one another within the life of fellowship and common discipleship. It is also vital to be committed to exploration and dialogue together. Bringing people of differing understandings together for discussion has more often than not proved to be fruitful. Engaging in the process is as important as its conclusions.



3. The *unity* of the Church is a gospel priority and a divine gift, to be responded to in human terms through the struggle of living together.

Acknowledging the depths of pain and tension which this subject has raised, the challenge remains, as stated in 2007:

“All of us read the same story in the Bible; we belong to the same heritage of faith. How is it then that some can come to mutually exclusive understandings of what is most honouring to God in relation to one key aspect of human living? We need to listen to one another to discover how that has happened and to understand the nature of that difference before deciding what to do or how to live with it. We may find more agreement than we had expected. We may find some of those differences are insoluble. We may find ways of living with that tension.”

It is our hope that these papers will assist in that exploration.

Questions for discussion

- Were you aware of the 2007 Commitment?
- Do you find your position represented in its contents?
- Do you feel able to make such a commitment?

NB: As you engage in the discussions at General Assembly try to keep the Commitment in mind – and ask yourself how it influences the way you speak and act.

The Bible

“The Word of God in the Old and New Testaments discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God’s people.”

(URC Basis of Union)

We need to bring to the responsible task of discernment:

- A humble spirit willing to hear and obey
- Due diligence as we study the scriptures in their breadth rather than lifting isolated texts out of their context
- An honest awareness of how our own attitudes have been shaped by history and personal experience.

In reading the Bible we are invited into an ongoing conversation; we have faith that as we join in, the Spirit will enable us to hear God’s living Word, Jesus Christ.

Marriage and relationships are the backdrop to the scriptural narrative, yet there is little overt teaching about marriage. Jesus takes the creation story as his summary of what marriage is: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24). Jesus goes on to say, “They are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together let no-one separate.” (Mark 10:8-9). Jesus’ teaching is in the context of a question about divorce; Jesus sets out God’s ideal intention for marriage to be a lifelong, exclusive union. He even says that re-marriage after divorce is adulterous.



The same incident in Matthew's gospel tells us of the disciples' horrified reaction: "Better not to marry!" Jesus replies that not everyone can accept that, but only those to whom it has been given (Matthew 19:9-12). It is clear from the continuing conversation that Jesus is commending celibacy, as St Paul does (1 Corinthians 7:7); yet both acknowledge that celibacy is a gift or calling for particular people, not a rule for all disciples.

Paul does give teaching for husbands and wives, and parents and children and indeed for slaves and masters (Ephesians 5:22-6:4). Remembering that the chapter and verse divisions are not original we would do well to start reading at 5:21: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." This applies to all; it is not simply the weak submitting to the strong. Within the household people fulfil different roles and are to do so lovingly and respectfully. This social interaction takes place, from our perspective, in the context of a wider truth: "All of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galations 3:27-28).

Jesus says nothing about same-sex relationships. Paul does write some devastating things about homo-erotic behaviour (Romans 1:18 -32; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10). These verses, together with Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13 are the main debating ground for those who seek to discover the meaning of scripture on this issue and hear God's living Word for today. Christians who believe that the practice of homosexuality is wrong do so on the basis of these texts. Christians who believe that loving and faithful same-sex relationships can be held within God's will, despite these texts, do so because they think that the kind of behaviour being condemned in these scriptures is quite different; what is being referred to in them is rape, prostitution, paedophilia and promiscuity. Such depraved behaviour should not be used as parallel with the loving and committed relationship which might lead to the marriage of a same-sex couple.

Setting the scene

To pursue this further please see two books which give detailed exegesis of all the relevant passages from both points of view, as well as looking at wider issues:

Reasoning Together: a conversation on Homosexuality, Ted Grimsrud and Mark Thiessen Nation

Straight and Narrow, Thomas E Schmidt

It is not only scriptures which directly refer to homosexuality which will affect our judgment on this matter. One passage which has been significant for some of the task group is Romans 14 and 15. These chapters are not directly about marriage or sexual ethics. They are about how we should behave in the Church when we encounter profound disagreements. Paul tells us to accept each other, even if we regard each other's behaviour as weak or wrong-headed. We are not to judge; we will, after all, each have to give an account of ourselves to God. We are each to act from our own conscientious beliefs, yet we are not to do things which may cause others to be distressed. We must act in love. Paul raises the possibility that what would be sinful for me, because I believe it to be wrong, might not be sinful for you, because you believe it to be right.

We are not to pass judgment on each other, he says. We are to accept one another as Christ accepted us. We are to ask God to give us a spirit of unity as we follow Jesus Christ. The history of the Church warns us that believers have not always found it easy to follow this advice, but we could always try!

Questions for discussion

- What has shaped your views about marriage? Has your thinking changed through time?
- Jesus was very clear on the subject of divorce and remarriage and yet it is common practice in today's Church. Why do you think this is?
- Where has your own study of scripture led you in the debate about same-sex relationships?



Marriage – an historical perspective

Through the ages, across cultures and societies, marriage is found; it is a virtually universal human phenomenon. It is pairing with a purpose: it provides a secure environment for the birth and upbringing of children, it gives clarity to norms of inheritance, and it defines a continuing family. It can be a couple's own choice or their families'. It can be accompanied by public ceremony and celebration, by state registration, by religious rites, or by nothing more than a decision to be together, leaving father and mother, cleaving to one another, one flesh.

Marriage has developed differently in different parts of the world, and it continues to change. It can be monogamous or polygamous, or rarely, polyandrous. It can be public or clandestine, permanent or dissoluble. It can be as cold as a contract or as sacred as a covenant. Those in power may seek to define and redefine it to suit their political or religious purposes.

Marriage – creator of family, channel of passion, building block of community. It can be hell on earth or bliss, or any stop in between, and despite vast cultural differences it remains one of the most obvious characteristics of human society.

The early Church continued initially with the practices of the prevailing culture with regard to marriage, drawn from the Jewish background of the earliest believers, but with the growing number of gentile believers this was soon overtaken by the practices of the Roman empire, some of which we still use today – floral bouquet, wedding cake – and some of which have gone in and out of fashion and back again – the white wedding dress for example. There is no known liturgy for marriage prior to the 4th century, and Christian marriage does not seem to have been regarded as essentially different

Setting the scene

from pagan marriage. However, with the collapse of the Roman empire and exposure to a wider pool of cultural influences, specifically Christian ideas became more prominent, the most significant being that marriage must be based on consent. The religious nature of marriage and its indissolubility were stressed.

For Celts and Anglo-Saxons the purpose of marriage was primarily the desire to forge contracts and alliances between families and tribes. Women were regarded as commodities in this process, and marriage as some form of conveyance or purchase. The idea of consent had an uphill struggle with such attitudes.

One of the key problems for both Church and state was that marriage was widely regarded as an essentially private matter, established by ritual. Between the 10th and 12th centuries there were strenuous efforts to move the marriage ceremony from the home to the Church.

In 1563 the Council of Trent set down the requirement for a priest and witnesses to be present, taught that marriage is a sacrament and reaffirmed its indissolubility. But the Reformation had brought a major shift in ideas. Both Luther and Calvin saw marriage as a natural condition, not a sacrament, and believed that the civil authorities should legislate appropriately for all subjects, whatever their religious allegiance. They also allowed for the possibility of divorce. In Scotland – from 1573 – divorce could be obtained on the grounds of adultery or desertion. But in England and Wales there was no new legislation, so, with the break from Rome, and therefore the possibility of papal dispensation, divorce became impossible. The only recourse was to seek a private act of parliament (which was very expensive) and the first of these was in 1551. For ordinary people, an unsatisfactory marriage could only be coped with by desertion and, as a result, bigamy was not uncommon. Largely for this reason, “informal” rather than “legal” marriage remained the norm for many folk. The rise of a middle class with notions of “respectability” led to a greater desire for legally recognised marriages, which also provided greater security. It was not until 1857 that it became legal in England for a man to divorce his wife on the ground of adultery, and equality of treatment for wives seeking divorce did not arrive until 1923 – until then



they had had to prove cruelty as well as adultery. The 1969 Divorce Reform Act, which came into effect in 1971, removed the concept of matrimonial offence.

The first civil legislation around marriage did not happen in England and Wales until 1753. It said that for marriage to be legal it must be solemnised by an Anglican clergyman in a parish church, the only exceptions being for Jews and Quakers. Other nonconformists were left with a difficult choice and they pressed for civil registration, which was eventually agreed with the Marriage Act of 1836. However marriages still could not take place in a nonconformist chapel without the presence of a registrar – the system of authorised persons was not introduced until 1898.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, a law had been passed in 1834 allowing ministers of churches other than the Church of Scotland and the Episcopal Church of Scotland also to celebrate marriages.

The most recent development in the practice of marriage has been the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. Similar legislation in Scotland received the royal assent in March 2014 though it is still awaiting the necessary regulations before it can come into force. The main impetus for this has been the concepts of equality and justice, coupled with the contemporary western view of marriage as a bond based on love for the purpose of mutual support and companionship. Once procreation ceases to be seen as the main purpose of marriage, denying its status and benefits to same-sex couples makes less sense.

There has been opposition to this new practice from most mainstream faith groups, although a few – including Quakers, Unitarians and Reform Jews – have expressed their approval. The opposition stems from traditional interpretation of the scriptures and the accepted definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Same-sex weddings took place in the latter part of the Roman era, but were outlawed in 342 CE. There is some evidence that, between the 5th and the 14th centuries, the Church in the West conducted blessings of same-sex unions – but these are believed to have been of a spiritual rather than a sexual nature.

Setting the scene

The late 1960s saw the beginnings of a revolution in what was regarded as acceptable/normal sexual behaviour. The contraceptive pill, the legalisation of abortion under certain conditions, “no fault” divorce, and the legalisation of homosexual acts between consenting adults, have given rise to greater freedom. The gap between traditional religious teaching and everyday behaviour has widened. The majority of couples now live together before getting married and many children are conceived outside marriage. Nevertheless, marriage remains the eventual choice of the majority of couples. Greater longevity, sometimes unrealistic expectations and economic pressures put individual marriages under strain but as an institution, ever changing yet recognisably the same, marriage continues as the major building block of family and community life.

For more detailed reading see:

A History of Marriage, Elizabeth Abbott

As man and woman made, edited by Susan Durber

Questions for discussion

- Explore how changing social trends have affected your own family’s life.
- What tensions do you encounter between traditional Christian teaching and popular culture?



Gender, sexuality and marriage of same-sex couples

Christian doctrine identifies two distinct yet complementary genders, male and female. The union of these two in holy matrimony constitutes the basis of a traditional Christian marriage.

A clear understanding of gender, sex and sexuality is therefore important when discussing this very complex and important subject – which fundamentally changes the definition of marriage.

Sex and gender

Sex¹ and gender² are often used interchangeably in the vernacular. However, in a biological and technically scientific sense, these words are not synonymous. The word “gender” is often used to define identity and social role. It is not uncommon to hear references to gender by professionals from various disciplines and government agencies. The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 was implemented on the basis of what we generally refer to as gender.

Initially, all human foetuses³ are primed to have a female sex, in that the default pathway for development is toward female features. During the eighth week of gestation, foetuses with a Y-Chromosome⁴ and appropriate cell receptors⁵ undergo testicular⁶ development. This process converts the inherently female foetus into a male one. There are other identified gene⁷ products that influence this developmental process, and recognised inherited conditions that can affect the normal development process.

Setting the scene

A person's "sex" is defined by the gonads⁸ or potential gonads, which are determined by the chromosomes they inherit from their parents. A person's sex is generally assigned at birth by external genital appearance due to the common assumption that this represents the genetic or chromosomal status. When an "intersex"⁹ condition is noticed in a newborn, further tests are needed to determine the genetic or chromosomal sex of the baby. One's sex is often assigned by health professionals with parental consent with the view of simplifying social interactions and rearing.

A person's sex is a primary state of inherited parameters. A person's gender is a conclusion reached in a broad sense when individual gender identity and gender role are expressed. Conceptually, most medical professionals consider sex as biologically determined while gender is socially determined.

There are instances when a discrepancy exists between sex and gender and that may pose problems for both the individual and society. Sexual development and gender development are not interchangeable and should be viewed as separate developmental processes. Physiologic sexual development progresses through distinct stages from early childhood, puberty, adolescence and adulthood. Gender related behaviours during this developmental process are very variable and often influenced by socio-cultural values. The sexual identity or sexual orientation that emerges beyond childhood is a separate entity from gender identity. Aspects of physical sexual growth and eventual sexual orientation, although closely related to gender, cannot necessarily be used to draw conclusions about an individual's gender definitions.

Transgender individuals

Transgender is a state in which one's gender identity does not match one's assigned sex. It does not imply any form of sexual orientation. The affected individuals often were assigned a sex at birth based on their genitalia but feel that this is a false or incomplete description of them.



Advances in medical and surgical interventions have allowed individuals to have sex reassignment therapy. These gender reassigned individuals present a new dilemma to conventional Christians who may well have a problem with gender reassigned individuals in marriages of same-sex couples.

The debate regarding marriage of same-sex couples and gender issues is complex and needs to be approached with a good understanding of the issues raised regarding sex and gender.

Addressing some key questions

1. Are some people born homosexual?

There is no proven biological or genetic link between sexual orientation and genetic sex. Identical twin studies are considered the gold standard in looking at genetics and behaviour. Several large twin studies have been carried out looking at sexual orientation and genetics. The concordance rates between identical twins would be expected to be 100% if sexual orientation were determined solely by genes. The largest twin studies carried out reported a concordance rate of 6.7% for men and 5.3% for women¹⁰.

2. Is sexual orientation a “fixed” phenomenon?

Individual gender identity and gender role is a complex process that involves physiological development as well as social expectations and learned behaviours. Physiological sexual development and sexual orientation is a dynamic process and some individuals can undergo various changes in sexual orientation at different stages of their physiological development.

This is further complicated by the fact that individual sexual self-identification, sexual attractions and sexual behaviour are not always consistent or concordant.

3. Is homosexuality a mental health problem?

Homosexuality is considered normal human behaviour in most countries of the world. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental health disorders and declared that homosexual behaviour is healthy and normal. However, there are several countries which still legislate against homosexual acts and consider homosexual behaviour a mental health problem.

Endnotes

1. Sex: Comes from the Latin word *sexus*, is defined by the gonads, or potential gonads.
2. Gender: Comes from the Latin word *genus*, meaning kind or race. It is defined by one's own identification as male, female, or intersex; gender may also be based on legal status, social interactions, public persona, personal experiences, and psychological setting.
3. Foetus: A developing mammal or other viviparous vertebrate after the embryonic stage and before birth.
4. Chromosome: Is an organized structure of DNA, protein, and RNA found in cells.
5. Cell receptors: A receptor is a molecule usually found on the surface of a cell that receives specific molecules which then triggers a chain of responses within the cell.
6. Testicle: Male gonad in animals.
7. Gene: molecular unit of heredity of a living organism.
8. Gonads: Is the organ that makes gametes. The gonads in males are the testes, and the gonads in females are the ovaries.
9. Intersex: In humans and other animals, is a variation in sex characteristics including chromosomes, gonads, and/or genitals that do not allow an individual to be distinctly identified as male or female.
10. 'Opposite-Sex Twins and Adolescent Same-Sex Attraction', Peter S Bearman and Hannah Bruckner, *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 107, No. 5, (March 2002), pp1179-1205.

NB: [The online version of this paper has links to much of the background information and research mentioned herein.](#)



Part two – Personal reflections

Finding what matters most

I joined this group with some trepidation, and with the fear that we would simply repeat ourselves. Most of us are tired of “the issue of homosexuality”, and have realised that the arguments were getting us nowhere.

- My hope was that we would create an atmosphere in which Christians – who have often been bitterly divided over issues of sexuality – could engage in real dialogue and not simply repeat past arguments. It has been a real privilege to be a part of this group, and it has felt like an important journey for us to have shared throughout the last year or so.
- I believe there is a definite shift in the debate, both from within bodies such as the Evangelical Alliance on the one hand, and with the emergence of studies such as Queer Theology on the other. Queer Theology draws on scripture and tradition as places of encounter with God, and represents a return to seeking a more faithful interpretation of scripture within a living, dynamic tradition.
- Like many others, I have come to believe that there has been too much reflecting on human experience and not enough on the nature of God, and that we need a different and more theological approach to sexuality. Gay and lesbian theology, and its opponents, have both far too easily brought in modern notions of sexual identity, and have cut themselves off from a

tradition that is much more fluid and diverse, in that it teaches that in the end, gender and sexual identities have no ultimate significance. All love has its origins and fulfilment in God, and our relationships are the real but imperfect anticipation of union with God. Heaven is the fulfilment of human desire, and this cannot be narrowed down to heterosexual love. We need to recover that vision, which historically has been fundamental to us.

- Gay and lesbian identity are not **the** truth of who we are and to see this as the essence of who we are is a denial of full personhood. It is by baptism that we enter the church, not by biology, and this involves a change of identity, a setting aside of other identifies in favour of identity as members of the Body of Christ. Heterosexuality/homosexuality/male/femaleness is not of absolute importance and is not determinative in God's eyes; in fact, we are required not to belong to the categories we thought we belonged to. For example, in Ephesians 5 men are called to be part of a female body (the Church) and women are called to be part of a male persona, by representing Christ to the world.
- I do not think that marriage of same-sex couples is an oxymoron because gender is not of ultimate concern and human desire has its end beyond human relationships, in God. However, the continuing idealisation of marriage and family life means that single people are often still marginalised, and to me, marriage of same-sex couples seems to have a lot to do with the marketing of "coupledom". Baptism is about discontinuity more than continuity and about participating in the new life of the Kingdom, not about assimilation into the mainstream culture.
- We have been in danger of creating groups within the church, almost completely unable to talk to each other, but it feels to me as if we are now being taken to a different place where we can begin to see things from a different angle. God is always enlarging our vision, and is always surprising us!



Human sexuality and the Lordship of Christ

The aim of this paper is to attempt to focus on the Lordship of Christ and what this means for his disciples as we explore the matter of marriage of same-sex couples within the United Reformed Church. Many of our local congregation are joint URC/Methodist and most would have shared in a covenant service. The opening line from the Methodist Covenant makes a bold statement about the nature of our Christian discipleship: “I am no longer my own but yours.”

Such a starting point in the covenant promise flows from our Christian understanding of dying and rising with Christ. A central pillar of our baptismal theology is that we are brought from death to life in Christ (Romans 6:4): we identify with Christ buried and raised to new life. Our resurrection life is a gift of grace, not something we can earn or generate from our best intentions or actions. Our life without Christ is without hope – lost and separated from God. All humanity is dead in trespasses and sins, and in need of regeneration and a new birth. Baptism’s powerful symbolism captures this transition, and through the sacrament we believe God begins a process (in infant baptism) or confirms a process that may have taken years (believer’s baptism). Both expressions of the sacrament carry this same sense, as expressed in the *URC Service Book* (1989): “In baptism we are buried with Christ and are raised with him to a new life”.

We are a new creation, the old has gone the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). The new life we live is not our own, it is Christ in us. This has far reaching consequences for the way we live our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. Our moral and ethical choices are no more our own than any other aspect of life: all belongs to Christ. Being under the lordship of Christ requires that we surrender to his headship and seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance as a first principle.

When we apply this to the United Reformed Church's dialogue on human sexuality and marriage of same-sex couples, both sides of the discussion must start from the same point as disciples of Jesus Christ who have died with him – symbolised by our baptism – and are raised to a new life in the Spirit. This must make our personal starting positions secondary as we unite in our desire to be faithful to Jesus, the only head of the Church. Too often this does not seem to have been the case – open hostility has coloured this debate. The Commitment has been a great help, and we dare to hope that all parties in this ongoing process have learnt from past mistakes.

When we do begin from a place of submission to the lordship of Christ we must all surrender our own positions and look to Jesus who is the only head of the Church. Such a starting point will have different consequences for all sides of this debate.

It shifts the focus away from what we may “feel” on the matter. Arguments which flow from our human experience or are based upon our subjective sense of “right and wrong” have to be given a subsidiary position. We have to accept this is very challenging for those who experience this as a live issue every day of their lives; it is not an even playing field. However our call to die and rise with Christ is not an opt-out from the trials and injustice of the human struggle. Nor can we sit comfortably in old conformities unmoved by the fresh revelation the Holy Spirit will bring from God's Word. The lordship of Christ compels us to hold all things lightly apart from our connection to him and through him his Body.

Such a perspective does not allow us to hold on doggedly to scriptural interpretations without allowing the Holy Spirit to move us forward in our understanding of truth. Our affiliation is first to Christ; biblical exegesis is subject to his lordship.

The winning of the argument is not what we are about. Together we aim to submit to Jesus, and, as sisters and brothers, listen to the Holy Spirit's lead. Perhaps what we need most is not better dissection of



the issues and biblical texts but an attitude that surrenders all to Jesus. Our deeply held positions matter because we matter – but they must be released to the Lord of the Church who has bought us with a price.

Question for discussion

- In what ways does reflection on baptism help in our thinking about human sexuality?

Religion – authority, power and diversity

Brian is the priest for one of the biggest parishes in the Diocese of Motherwell. We worked together over a number of years. “Sometimes I just have to say to people,” he told me, “this is who we are – this is what we teach – it’s not a democracy. You are a member of an authoritarian church and the church is not going to change its nature or teaching just because you’d like it to.”

Christine is world-renowned in the genre of Gaelic song and she comes from Carloway on the west coast of the Isle of Lewis. We’ve talked a couple of times. When she moved to Glasgow as a young woman she teamed up with another young woman and they shared a flat. It was a week or two later that she discovered her flatmate was a Roman Catholic – and what astonished Christine was that they could be friends – this girl showed no signs either of horns or cloven hoofs! When Christine next went home to Carloway she challenged her mother about her upbringing, asking: “Mum, do you really believe all Catholics will burn in hell?” Christine regretted asking, she said: “My mum couldn’t handle it; she was a decent soul in a small township and a member of a very authoritarian church. When I challenged her on her church’s teaching (and authority) she just crumpled.”

Many years ago I was a guest at the Church of Scotland General Assembly. One evening the Assembly met as a court; I watched as a person pleaded their case for re-entry to the ministry which they’d left after a sexual indiscretion which took place when they were ill and vulnerable. The detail of the case was none of my business, but what horrified me was that this person had to plead their case before more than 600 commissioners and guests. It seemed an exercise in raw power. I trust some things may have changed since, but it’s hard to be reconciled to any court-like action by a church, where the legislature and the judiciary appear to be the same institution.



I once attended a trio of consultations in Serbia, Greece and Transylvania with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, I learned that the Reformed Church of Hungary and other ethnic Hungarian Reformed churches which are no longer in Hungary, rarely use the cross as a Christian symbol. It was explained to me thus: “During the counter-Reformation, captured Reformed prisoners were made to kiss the cross. Thereafter their throats were cut, but they were deemed to have died as Catholics and the state could then justify claiming their families for Catholicism.”

I vaguely recall church history lectures from the 1960s – how, across swathes of Europe post-Reformation Catholics burned Protestants, Protestants burned Catholics and everybody burned Anabaptists. In Scottish history there was a period in the 1680’s named “the killing times” which followed internecine conflicts that were about power in the church. Attempts to impose uniformity, conformity and consistency in church practice and teaching appear regularly to have led away from Kingdom values and veered towards death, persecution, subjugation and humiliation in the church. The examples abound.

The world is not short of authoritarian churches who will tell people what to believe and require their obedience, but in my book that is an easy if infelicitous system. It doesn’t help people work out their relationship with God. It takes away theology as the people’s tool. It seems the antithesis of what formed the URC. A Church that values its heritage from Churches of Christ, Presbyterianism and assorted Congregationalisms, in whose past Arminianism and Calvinism have been accommodated, is a shining beacon to the rest of Christendom for the celebration of diversity. For me, embracing diversity is not some fuzzy, soft, fudged compromise, but a working through of the Churches’ calling to operate powerlessly, without coercion or sanction, assisting church people to respond to the experience of God in their lives and then through their living to demonstrate God’s love for the world.

When there is diversity and people are not ranked shoulder-to-shoulder it creates spaces. I believe these are the spaces in which we can rock the boat, shake the foundations, give elbow-room to the

Lord of the Dance who still dances on, and ensure the wind of the Spirit is not draft-proofed out of the institution. Dare I say it – I am not convinced that St Paul was entirely consistent in everything he wrote in his letters, nor do I think the recorded accounts of the gospels are unambiguously consistent, but what a treasury we have inherited from the diversity!

Discuss!



What is marriage?

I sometimes find myself pondering the question: “What is marriage?” Or, perhaps more precisely, the question I ponder is whether: “marriage” is in the relationship, or whether it is in the ceremony/legal contract?

At a meeting of the human sexuality task group in 2013, the question was raised as to whether a couple who have been living and loving together for decades can be regarded as married. At least one member of the task group felt the answer was “yes”. At least one other said “no” – because this would be devaluing the state of marriage.

I wonder... if two people presented themselves as a couple with no explanation about their background, would we even question whether they were married, or simply accept them as they are?

If the couple are committed to each other, love each other, care for each other, respect and nurture each other, (why) do we need to ask further questions or make further demands of their relationship? Why should the Church – or Christians – be concerned whether a couple have entered into a legal contract, which in itself has nothing to do with faith? Are we suggesting that God cannot accept or recognise the relationship unless and until a couple have gone through a man-made legal ceremony?

Traditional Christian teaching says that if a couple are co-habiting without “getting married”, they are “living in sin”. I have two strands of thought on this. Firstly, I would understand the word “sin” as referring to evil or wrong-doing. But where is the evil, or who is being wronged, when a couple live and love faithfully together? Is the wrong-doing in God’s eyes or in our own? The question is particularly pertinent when we consider the diversity in historical and a cultural understanding of what constitutes “getting married” –

which can range from a legal contract to a lavish public celebration, to a simple declaration of intent.

Secondly, I believe the term “living in sin” is the language of faith, and only really has meaning in a spiritual context. So, the question becomes: “How can a legal document address or alter a couple’s spiritual state?” Logic would suggest that, if there is some further requirement of the relationship – and I don’t want us to ignore the “if” – surely this should be from a spiritual perspective. The emphasis should be on some way of deliberately acknowledging the relationship before God, or inviting God’s presence into the union – perhaps through a Christian act of blessing. Yet this does not seem to be the case. The question: “Are you married?” is rarely followed by: “Where or how did the marriage take place?” There is no request to know whether God featured in the promises exchanged. Put bluntly: “If you’ve got the certificate, you’re ok. If you haven’t, you’re not!”

Now I am going to risk really setting the cat amongst the pigeons... Could it be possible that we inadvertently raise marriage to the status of a false god? How often do we celebrate the longevity of a legal marriage rather than the quality of the relationship? I wonder how many Christian couples stay together living unhappy and even virtually separate lives because they believe it’s “the Christian thing to do”. And how do we reconcile the situation wherein a Christian couple who co-habit in a life-long relationship are regarded as living in sin, whilst another couple who choose to exchange vows without any reference to God are accepted as being married? While I’m sure that many Christians would assure me that it is taking their vows before God which seals the commitment of marriage, this is not generally understood as an explicit requirement.

In answer to the question: “what is marriage?” I believe absolutely it is the relationship between two people which is important – the intentions of the respective partners. To love, honour, care, respect and cherish must surely come about through the commitment of the couple rather than through a legal document. Similarly, I believe their “rightness” with God comes about through their relationship with God and their relationship with each other.



I don't know how or whether my reflections are of any use in the current debates about marriage – I was simply struck by the seeming nonsense of looking to a civil contract to address a spiritual situation. Perhaps my thoughts highlight the need to clarify what is meant when we refer to “marriage” or “Christian marriage”. And perhaps they lend weight to the argument for all “marriages” – in the legal sense – to take place in non-religious premises, with faith-based blessings (subsequently) being sought by those for whom this is meaningful.

Questions for discussion

- “We put too much emphasis on ‘legal marriage’, when it is the intent of the partners which is more important.” How do you respond?
- Is there any difference between “marriage” and “Christian marriage”?
- If a Christian couple are living happily together in a long-term committed relationship, are they any *less married* than a Christian couple who are unhappily married and living virtually separate lives?

Marriage without Church

What if the United Reformed Church adopted the French model of marriage being a civil matter which the state had sole ownership of? What if the local church was left simply to bless (or not, as the case may be) marriage as the state defined it?

The issues of human sexuality with which the United Reformed Church has wrestled over the past two decades have been painful and disruptive to our mission. The unity of the URC has been threatened – and many have been wounded, discouraged and exhausted by this long running dialogue. Yet we seem no closer to finding the mind of Christ or being able to offer a reconciled position which enables us to hold our differences in a creative tension. These forces still threaten to tear the Body of Christ and undermine the credibility of our witness to a culture already suspicious of our motives and turned off by our petty squabbles and tribalism.

Does conceding this aspect of our local church life enable our witness to blossom and allow us to live in greater unity? Is it possible that there are a number of gains made by adopting this approach which are worthy of consideration?

- If we abandon the rite of marriage we are spared having to redefine what marriage means. The traditional Christian view of marriage being between one man and one woman is overridden by the new legislation. Whilst some welcome this as an overdue rebalance of a long standing injustice, prejudicial against same-sex couples, others see it as a fundamental attack on biblical truth and long established Christian tradition. If we are no longer conducting the rite of marriage this is one battle we do not need to fight.



- Current protocols, as expressed in the 2007 Commitment, give local churches freedom to conduct blessing services for civil partnerships but do not compel any local church or minister to do so against their convictions. This could simply be extended to the blessing of civil marriage. This may look like sleight of hand, but such an approach does not require us to divide our churches in a legal sense between those which have opted in or out of the legal framework needed to register marriages of same-sex couples.
- The threat of legal action, which given the track record of this ongoing struggle seems a very high probability, would be removed. As none of our churches would be conducting weddings of any sort we could not be the target of any legal challenge over a refusal to conduct a marriage of a same-sex couple.
- Even if this was a temporary arrangement it may give us the time we need to hear more clearly the voice of the Holy Spirit as we continue together to discern the mind of Christ in this very important area of human life.

Some may feel that this is an extreme response to our current dilemma but it seems appropriate to explore every option and possibility when conviction runs so deep and the unity and witness of the Church is under threat.

“They wouldn’t get that from a registrar”

I make a plea to those who lean towards adopting the continental system for marriage. In 40 years in pastoral ministry I have always found it fitting that the state has rubber-stamped the marriages I have solemnised. It always seemed right that, for a religious wedding, the Church played the primary role and the state stamped it as “being ok”. I would be deeply disappointed if this was to be reversed and the Church simply added a religious frill to a state event. Since no-one seems to have a problem with the system of the church presiding at opposite-sex marriages with the state registering them, it seems a bit like cutting off our noses to spite our faces to contemplate walking away from marriages of same-sex couples just because we have no unanimity about presiding at marriages of same-sex couples. Marriage preparation and planning weddings have been one of the most fulfilling parts of my pastoral ministry. When I undertake to preside at a wedding I feel we (the couple and I together) are opening up a relationship of trust – and that there are both pastoral and mission elements in what we do.

When the head of the family law division of the Scottish government met with the Synod of Scotland’s church and society committee, he asked us the questions he was asking all the denominations to ascertain our attitudes. One was: “Have you ever refused, or would you ever refuse, to preside at a marriage of an opposite-sex couple?” We replied that, whilst in theory it was possible; in practice it had never been necessary for any of the clergy present. Then one minister said that occasionally after one or two sessions he had known a couple get back to him and say: “We don’t feel we should go ahead at this stage.” He explained that, in such situations, over and above the faith content which comes out in looking at the wording of the service, he usually counselled something like: “Getting married is not



an end in itself, but a beginning, so you might find it helpful to see the ceremony as rather like the laying of the foundation stone, upon which you'll continue to build your marriage for the rest of your lives. I suggest that you spend at least as much time sharing your hopes, dreams and expectations for this marriage as you spend time planning your wedding day."

"They wouldn't get that from a registrar," said the head of the family law division.

Questions for discussion

- What are your views on the possibility of ceasing to conduct any marriages in church?
- What would be lost and what would be gained?

On the one hand...

What follows is an imaginary conversation between Emma and her grandfather. Both attend the same church. Emma is getting ready for her wedding to Chris, which will take place in church – although Chris is a non-believer – at the same time as her grandparents are preparing to celebrate their diamond wedding anniversary ...

Emma: I can't believe that you and grandma have been married for nearly sixty years.

Granddad: I sometimes struggle with that myself! When we got married, though, we knew that it was for life. The promises we made said so, we asked for God's blessing – and though we have had some difficult times, we have stuck together.

Emma: Chris and I will make those promises as well. We will mean them, of course, but we can't see into the future. Some people may get married now knowing that divorce is a possibility at some point... but that is not what we think. Not now, anyway.

Granddad: I think I've said to you before that I still struggle with the whole idea of easy divorce, though I know that it happens a lot. You shouldn't set out to fail. All this talk of prenuptial agreements – what a load of nonsense!

Emma: Our church has married people who have been divorced for quite a long time, though, hasn't it granddad?

Granddad: Yes... but to be quite honest, I'm not sure when that started – or even why. It simply happened. I can't recall a full discussion in church meeting. I think we were told something like, "It's down to the minister's discretion",



whatever that means! Hmm ...the Church always seems to be playing “catch-up” with society, and I’m not sure that’s a good thing.

Emma: Jesus says that divorce is OK if there has been adultery, doesn’t he?

Granddad: Hang on a minute! I’m not sure it’s as straightforward as that! If I remember rightly, he says one thing in one place and one thing in another. I’m pretty sure that Jesus was concerned to speak up for stable, committed relationships – for marriage, if you like – because plenty of people in his time treated it very lightly indeed. Some things don’t change.

Emma: I remember getting quite cross in youth fellowship when we had a discussion about what Paul seems to say about marriage: don’t marry non-believers; only marry if you have to – whatever that means; the woman should know her place; God watches over the whole thing like a great “eye in the sky”. I may have got some of that wrong. Goodness, though, if the minister had talked to Chris and me about this in our marriage classes, he’d have run a mile!

Granddad: I know that society is very different now to when Grandma and I got married, but a part of me still thinks that some things and some teaching is forever. All this “being together” before marriage – like a kind of “test-run” – I still don’t like that, even though I keep quiet about it. No offence...

Emma: None taken. You’d be amazed by how many Christians do have sex before marriage now, though – and children certainly aren’t the be-all-and-end-all of marriage today. Chris and I would like to have children – and we believe that marriage provides a stable place for this – but children don’t feature in the plans of some of our friends at all.

Granddad: I know. Even the wording of church weddings seems to have changed recently. At one time, bringing up children was way up there, at the top of the service; sometimes it isn't mentioned at all now. I can't really remember when all that changed, either. Perhaps I am getting too old to speak out on things in the Church.

Emma: Don't be daft! The example set by people like you and Grandma to Chris and me is still very important.

Granddad: Thank you. I do worry, however, that so much seems to have changed in my lifetime, even within church... and I sometimes find this puzzling and disturbing. I don't know *why* it has all happened; I certainly can't remember talking about it very much in the past. It's not like today at all: after a lifetime of not talking about sex in church meetings, now we seem to do nothing else. I know that it is important, but there are lots of other important things too...

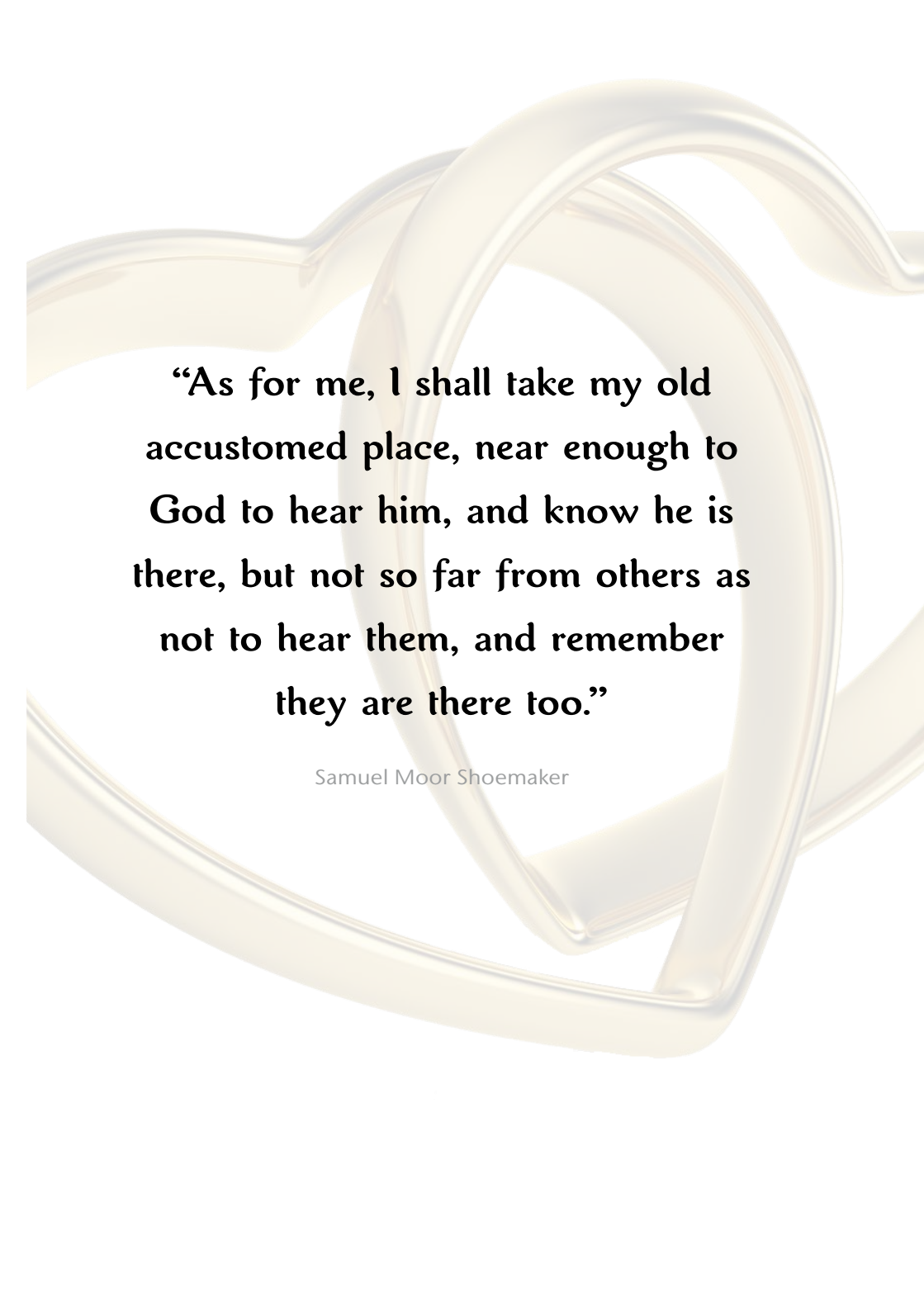
Emma: A part of it probably depends on who you are. I was disappointed that the church meeting decided that we wouldn't offer a service of blessing to same-sex couples, though that seemed to have as much to do with money as principle. Honestly! Now all this talk of marriage of same-sex couples seems to have come round very quickly indeed.

Granddad: I know, I know. My view is that you can't decide about this until you understand properly what marriage is – and although people might say: "Of course we know what marriage is", I think there have been so many changes in my lifetime that this is not an easy question to answer...



Questions for discussion

- What points in this conversation resonate most clearly with you?
- Are there any times when you would like to step into the conversation, either to say: “Yes, hear, hear...”, or to say: “No, you’ve got that wrong!”
- In respect of marriage, do you think that it is fair to say that Christians have effectively spent the last sixty years playing “catch-up” with the rest of society?
- Was the minister right to side-step Paul’s teaching in preparing Emma and Chris for marriage? Explain your answer!
- Do you agree with granddad that the most important issue facing Christians at the moment is the recovery of a clear, Christian understanding of marriage?



**“As for me, I shall take my old
accustomed place, near enough to
God to hear him, and know he is
there, but not so far from others as
not to hear them, and remember
they are there too.”**

Samuel Moor Shoemaker