



## Mission Resourcing

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### A Methodist Understanding of Marriage

Throughout the Methodist world marriage is seen to be the faithful, life-long union in body, mind and spirit between one man and one woman.

In most countries where Methodism is found such a traditional definition is also the only legal form of marriage in that country. However, there is a range of opinion on the matter and views are changing both within the Church and in wider society and it remains to be seen how widely these more recent views will be held in the future.

The following represents my personal understanding of the three main schools of thought to be found among Christians and in secular society.

#### **The traditional defence of heterosexual marriage**

This view is held by the vast, overwhelming majority of Christians in the world from the Catholic to the Orthodox to the Pentecostal wings of the Church and also reflects the opinion of other world faiths, such as Islam, most of Judaism and other faiths originating from the Indian subcontinent. The idea is based on the notion that God has created humanity and chosen to make us male and female so that we have to live together in love to survive as a race. It is believed that male and female are complementary to each other and that the full expression of humanity is only found by taking both the male and female together. It is more than just a statement of obvious physical facts when the Bible says that the two shall become one. With the combined gifts of their respective sexualities, male and female, both equally, but in their own distinctive ways, contribute to the conceiving and nurturing of children. Christians believe that such marriage should be based on the free self-giving of the two partners in love – in the manner that Christ gave himself freely in love for the Church, the Bride of Christ. Therefore Christians do not accept marriages that are arranged against the will of the parties concerned. Because there is no greater commitment than love, it is believed that marriage should reflect the total giving of self for a life-long union and because God is faithful, Christian marriage demands life-long faithfulness. Christians are among those who believe marriage should be between one man and one woman to reflect the existential equality of the sexes.

Catholic doctrine states that gay relationships are always “disordered”, meaning that they do not conform to God’s plan for creation in which male and female are designed for physical sexual union, whereas same sex partners are not so naturally designed. Marriage cannot be between members of the same sex because marriage in a country such as New Zealand is primarily an institution of the Christian faith – shared admittedly by other religions also such as Judaism from

whom the institution was passed to Christianity – and marriage must therefore conform to Christian tradition based on biblical and natural precepts.

Modern Western media often condemn those who speak out in favour of traditional marriage as “homophobic.” This term may be justifiably applied to those who persecute or otherwise abuse gay people, but when it is applied too indiscriminately it simply shuts down any possible dialogue between opposing points of view. This is particularly unfortunate when it happens in democratic countries.

### **The middle road**

The middle road is trodden by increasing numbers of Christians, particularly those living in secularised Western societies. These people value the tradition of hetero-sexual marriage and see marriage as a gift of God and the ultimate expression of human commitment. These people support marriage as much as the traditionalists. They differ, however, in their assessment of what it means to be gay. These middle of the road people contend that no one chooses their own sexuality; it is something with which we are born and which expresses itself from an early age of development, but most obviously post-puberty. Being gay, they contend, like being heterosexual, is just the way you are born. It is not the result of some moral choice, but an expression of the innate self, even if being gay only affects a minority of people, it is an outward expression of an inner reality. Other than being attracted physically to a member of the same sex, gay people have identical needs as heterosexual people for physical fulfilment, companionship and romantic commitment because the change of object of their attraction does not change the quality of love itself. Gay couples, at the end of the day, are just people falling in love – that most wonderful of human experiences. Therefore, it is in the name of love that middle of the road Christians may support gay marriage, or at least Civil Unions. Some Christians would support the right of gay couples to receive their full civil rights to be in a legally recognised partnership, but would resist the move to call such a relationship “marriage”. For these Christians, the term “marriage” is a word with too much specifically Christian heritage to be taken by secular authorities and applied to something other than it already means. They would support the use of the term “Civil Union” for such relationships. Other middle of the road Christians may go further and agree that the term “marriage” can evolve its meaning to cover gay relationships. Such Christians acknowledge traditional values and know that Christian Scripture and Tradition have resisted gay relationships most strongly, but they would contend that Christian understandings change over time and that to support gay marriage is to support the higher things to which we are called as Christians, which include graciousness, justice and above all, love.

### **Secular liberalism**

Most Western media are now dominated by a secular world view which makes the conversation between them and the traditionalists increasingly distant and mutually incomprehensible. For those raised in a modern, Western, liberal society almost all meaningful contact with the Bible as a living document of faith or a living faith tradition has been lost. Most of the values found in secular democracies have been bequeathed them through the Christian tradition, but this is less and less acknowledged and less and less relevant. For this group, it has been forgotten that marriage was transferred from the Church to the State in the years when Church and State were much more closely linked (whilst acknowledging that marriage existed before Christianity and was first handed by the State to the Church, before marriages outside of the Church became popular again in recent times). So for this group, marriage is clearly and obviously a matter for secular legislation to decide upon and Christians are just one interest group among many. In multicultural societies, it makes sense to have such matters in secular hands; to have one section of society now lay claim to such a central institution would be unthinkable. To hand back marriage to the Christians would be as

unthinkable as mandating that all butchers fulfil halal law. For secularists, the arguments do not involve religious notions, but are all about “human rights” and “social justice”. Religious viewpoints are largely irrelevant to them, but if faith groups make up a large voting constituency, special arrangements are usually made to allow religious groups to “opt out” of compliance. This is the current proposal in New Zealand that Christians would never be forced against their conscience to conduct gay marriages, but the suppression of Catholic adoption agencies in the UK suggests that these opt-outs are not necessarily guaranteed. As secularisation continues apace with each generation, it is believed that the blockage represented by religious conservatives simply needs to be carefully negotiated, but that they have no right to stand in the way of progressive social legislation. People have the right to associate with whom they wish and fall in love as they please and they should not be denied the same rights and privileges as other members of the community on the grounds of sexual orientation. To discriminate against the gay community is as unjust as to discriminate on grounds of colour. The growth of the middle of the road Christian view convinces the liberal secularists of the unassailability of their rational arguments and encourages them to believe that the liberal view will eventually come to be the most widely held view across all free societies.

Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard  
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### **The Inclusive Nature of the Methodist Church of New Zealand**

The policy and practice of the Methodist Church of New Zealand, Te Haahi Weteriana o Aotearoa, is to live with the plurality of view that is to be found among the global Christian community. It is acknowledged that good people and sound thinking can be found in more than one point of view. Our policy is therefore to welcome the presence and contribution of gay and lesbian people, including those living in stable same-sex relationships, in both lay and ordained capacities.

It is our intention that we should live together as a Christian community with respect and in harmony despite different convictions on the subject of sexual ethics. Those of both the traditional view and those of what is identified as the middle road view are equally welcome in the Methodist Church of New Zealand. No one is to vilify people of the opposing view, nor refuse to work with them. However, in the stationing of presbyters and deacons, no parish will receive a gay or lesbian presbyter unless they have identified that they are willing to do so on the appropriate stationing forms.

Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard  
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