

Pastoral Letter – East Anglia District

Chair of the District - Revd. Julian M. Pursehouse

July 2021

Dear Friends,

On Wednesday 30th June the Methodist Conference convened to listen to God and to seek to discern what God was saying to us about marriage and human relationships. When we gathered, both physically and remotely online, we were acting as the Body of Christ seeking to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit through careful and prayerful conferring. This was a costly, vulnerable, prayerful, and honest debate in which representatives were able to articulate their deeply held convictions.

We have discovered that as Methodists we do understand marriage differently among ourselves, and that through the rich resources of God's grace we can live together with that difference. Those differing perspectives mean that some understand marriage as between any two people, while others as only between a man and a woman.

The Methodist Church has given permission, in principle, for churches to register to perform same sex marriages, and for ministers, or other authorised persons, to preside at such celebrations. However, no minister or Church will be required to do so if that is not in accordance with their understanding or conscience. As a Church, we have stated our openness to same sex marriage, but we have also affirmed that not all of us hold the same mind on this. This news will be cause of celebration for some but for others will cause significant pain and bewilderment; but in all of this, as John Wesley asked of us, let us therefore love alike, though we cannot think alike.

The Conference report, **God in Love Unites Us**, invites us to live as the Body of Christ, bound together in God's love and the unity of the Spirit whilst holding contradictory convictions. It is the admission that on many matters we may not reach a common mind but that through our rootedness in Christ there is a deeper unity that holds us together as one body. We hold together in the unity of Christ and seek to become ever more attentive to the calling of God upon us – we do so with appropriate humility recognising that our understanding of all things is partial and limited until at last we come face to face with God. The apostle Paul writes in his Epistle to the Corinthians that it is as though we see *'in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.'* (1 Cor. 13:12)

Let us commit ourselves to the path that lies ahead – and let us pray for healing where there has been hurt, for unity where there has been division, and for wisdom where difficult decisions lie ahead.

With deep peace and blessing, Julian