

Minister's Letter

Dear Friends.

The Conference in 2014 urged the Methodist people to engage with each other honestly, prayerfully and graciously in a process of deep reflection and discernment about matters relating to marriage and human relationships. The Conference in 2015 are asking the people called Methodists to consider through scriptural and theological reflection, whether or not there are reasons to revisit the Methodist Church's definition of marriage, and for Districts to provide feedback to the Marriage and Relationships Task Group on the range of reasons, and the missional and pastoral issues for revisiting or not revisiting the definition.

Last weekend I went on the training for the district facilitators of the conversations along with Mr Craig Price who is the other district facilitator. I went not quite knowing what to expect as I'd only had a week's notice that I was to be one of the facilitators. I needn't have worried the weekend was engaging, thought provoking and balanced. One of the things we discussed was how we always plan for a catastrophe. How we imagine in our minds that the person opposite us has an extremely different view from ours and that this in itself will cause the most appalling row and we will fall out and never speak to each other again; which is probably why we don't seem to talk about same sex marriage in church very much. One of the sessions was run by two Presbyters who had completely opposite views on the matter of same sex marriage, one of them was a conservative Christian and the other a progressive Christian; recipe for the aforementioned row you might think. But nothing could have been further from the truth. With great love, respect and joy they told their stories of their own journeys and how they had grown in their friendship with each other over the years. For me it was the greatest example of how we as followers of Jesus, the church, can live with contradictory convictions.

During the weekend we were also asked to consider what authority we give the bible in our faith journey. I don't know if any of you have read the report that came out in 1998 *A lamp to my feet and alight to my path?* Fascinating reading that came up with seven different ways the people called Methodist view the nature and authority of the bible. We also looked at the history of marriage within the life of the church. Did you know that the first marriage within the church was conducted in 1563 and that the Methodist church didn't conduct marriage ceremonies until 1835?

I am really looking forward to going around the district in the coming months and hearing how the people called Methodist view marriage and human relationships, listening to their stories and finding out why we think the way we do.

I must stress that this is not an exercise in changing people's minds but rather a way of seeing how we can continue to travel together as together we seek to do God's will. This will mean that we must continue to respect each other's opinion, that no-one is forced to do something that contradicts their conscience. The process, I hope, will mean

that we listen carefully to each other and act honestly and sincerely share with each other. Above all let's hope that we will demonstrate to the world that we are a family held together by the love of God.

Rev Jan