

# Paper N

Human Sexuality Task Group





# Paper N

## Human Sexuality Task Group

### Basic Information

<b>Contact name and email address</b>	Elizabeth Caswell ecaswell@btinternet.com
<b>Action required</b>	Resolution
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>Mission Council affirms the work of its Human Sexuality Task Group and encourages it to follow the direction of travel set out in Paper N.</b>
<b>Alternative options to consider, if any</b>	

### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	Description of work thus far and direction of travel for the future
<b>Main points</b>	
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	General Assembly Commitment 2007
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Law & Polity Advisory Group

### Summary of Impact

<b>Financial</b>	
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	

# Human Sexuality Task Group

## Remit

1. To promote awareness of the General Assembly Commitment of 2007 and to continue dialogue around the issues it raises.
2. In the area of human sexuality, to aid the United Reformed Church to respond to changes in the law proposed by Her Majesty's Government (e.g. proposals relating to same-sex marriage).
3. To advise on the complexities resulting from the present stance of the United Reformed Church.

## Membership

Jacob Addo, Karen Campbell, Elizabeth Caswell (Convenor), John Hardaker, Val Morrison, Neil Riches and Justine Wyatt.

## Meetings

The Group has met four times, in January, residentially in April, July and September.

## What we have done so far

We have spent time, as any new group or committee will do, in getting to know each other; we believe that we have achieved a level of trust which enables us to speak openly about sensitive matters despite the wide divergence of views in the group.

The Government had announced its intention to bring forward a same-sex marriage Bill for England and Wales before we had first met, and similar legislation was already proposed in Scotland. We therefore agreed that same-sex marriage had to occupy the major part of our time for the foreseeable future. The Law and Polity Advisory Group has taken the lead in understanding the legislation and in representing a United Reformed Church perspective to relevant committees at Westminster; Augur Pearce, LPAG Secretary, has attended our Group twice and briefed us fully between meetings. The Synod of Scotland, led by its Church and Society Committee, has responded to consultations concerning the Scottish legislation and has furnished our group with copies of this; in turn their Secretary, Alan Patterson, receives all our Task Group papers and may attend the Group when he thinks this is advisable. We regret that we failed to establish this link more quickly.

Group members have prepared and discussed papers on the quest for theological consistency in understanding different aspects of human sexuality, on how we understand and use the Bible, on a biblical understanding of marriage, on situation ethics, on a scientific view of sex and gender and on gay, lesbian and 'queer' theologies of relationships including marriage. We have also collated the views of churches and faith groups which have expressed support for same-sex marriage.

We had planned to consult Synods about the level of registration of local churches since General Assembly 2012 for Civil Partnerships. Anecdotal information is that only eight churches have done so thus far; but it was agreed that this should form part of the Annual Returns, together with information about the number of marriages conducted.

Through Reform and the URC web-site we have invited comments about same-sex marriage and how the United Reformed Church should respond. The number of responses has been small. Most recently we have been focused on concerns about how robust the legal protection for ministers and local churches who decline to conduct same-sex marriages will prove to be. At the time of writing this is ongoing work and we are indebted to Augur Pearce for his time and advice and to the GEAR Reference Group for sharing with us their work on this.

## The direction of travel

We are not yet in a position to draft any possible resolutions for General Assembly 2014 but we are only too aware that the March Mission Council will need to see and approve such resolutions. What we can share is our direction of travel.

1. The Task Group is unanimous in its desire to uphold the 2007 Commitment. Differences of view across the church are profound on this subject, as of course on many others. This is largely, although not exclusively, because of the different ways we understand and handle scripture. The Commitment gives a way to recognise these differences whilst acknowledging something greater which binds us together.
2. The Group will wish to enable Assembly to have a discussion about same-sex marriage and our Church's response which reflects all relevant points of view and enables the kind of 'hearing' of others which lies at the heart of our Commitment to live with difference.
3. It is possible that we will propose that the Church follows the same route that it did with Civil Partnerships. This would leave us with no single denominational view but give freedom to ministers and churches to follow their consciences. However we are concerned that the Westminster Act does not offer real parity with opposite-sex marriage. We are grateful to the Revd Dick Wolff for alerting us to the lack of inclusion of unfaithfulness/adultery as unreasonable behaviour and therefore, as with opposite-sex marriage, a ground for divorce. This is a major inconsistency. Lady Elizabeth Butler-Schloss proposed an amendment to deal with this in the House of Lords' debate but it was defeated. As this legislation stands same-sex marriages are exempt from the expectation of sexual faithfulness; this is a major re-definition of marriage.
4. The understanding that there is proper legal protection for ministers and churches not participating in the solemnising of same-sex marriages will have to be demonstrable; there is ongoing work on this, as indicated above, at the time of writing.
5. We will wish to honour the large number of local churches who are in Local Ecumenical Partnerships or who host churches/faith groups of other traditions and for whom decisions will be more complex. We are attempting to assess the impact on our ecumenical partners of Assembly's 2012 decision regarding Civil Partnerships and of any potential decision on same-sex marriage. Nevertheless we should not be distracted from our own conscientious search as a Church for the will of God for us.

We would value the opinion of Mission Council about the route we are taking and therefore ask you to discuss this Resolution.

## Resolution

**Mission Council affirms the work of its Human Sexuality Task Group and encourages it to follow the direction of travel set out in Paper N.**