



Pauline ecclesiology of the relationship of Christ and Christ's Body, the Church (Ephesians 5). St. Paul may not have been aware of homosexuality as a deep seated psycho-sexual orientation, and a strong social connection with paedophilia and temple prostitution may have a bearing on understanding the relevant texts (such as Romans 1).

Homosexuality is a good part of God's diverse creation - This framework upholds friendship and/or right relations as the paradigm for human relating and suggests that heterosexual marriage is not the exclusive pattern for human relationships. Some are disturbed by this though the intent is not to disregard the value of heterosexual marriage for the many who are able to make that decision. As outlined in the final report of the Uniting Church Assembly Task Group on Sexuality, the voluntary limits of solidarity, love, respect and mutual commitment are upheld for all.

Marriage and other faithful relationships

Following six years of work by the Assembly Task Group on Sexuality, the 1997 (Perth) Assembly resolved its support for marriage, with the following four structural components, comparable to the Declaration of Purpose in Uniting In Worship (UIW): one male and one female person; lifelong; mutually faithful; and possibility of having children.

Following a blessing ceremony for a same-sex couple at the Pitt Street Uniting Church in 1990, the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) ruled that clergy shall not perform ceremonies which "resemble" the marriage service. But this did not

prohibit pastoral services for people in a range of circumstances, including same-sex couples.

One option is to develop "A Pastoral Service of Commitment and Love", applicable to persons in different life circumstances, with some discretion for the clergy and congregation to adapt as required. In the Uniting Church there is nothing to prohibit clergy, elders and congregations from: welcoming; offering pastoral care; praying; pronouncing God's blessing; singing hymns; reading the Scriptures; listening to witnesses; confessing mutual sin; or sharing Holy Communion with lesbian and gay couples.

A downside of such a service is that lesbian and gay couples presenting and seeking a blessing ceremony might believe they are being treated as a second class couple. They would be partially correct in having that reaction. The Uniting Network NSW/ACT welcomes discussion on these and related issues.

The underlying challenge is to find appropriate ways for congregations to welcome and affirm, in the prayers and blessings of the Church, lesbian and gay couples.

Gay and Lesbian Couples: *prayers and blessings?*

"A place at the table..." Luke 13:29



Uniting Network NSW/ACT

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Introduction

The purpose of this brochure, number seven in the Uniting Network's Rainbow Series, is to encourage discussion of appropriate ways the Uniting Church may choose to recognise gay and lesbian couples. The Uniting Network strongly supports such recognition, but recognises that congregations and couples will decide on the best way to do that.

This brochure is a summary of a longer paper *Gay and Lesbian couples in the Uniting Church in Australia: prayers, blessings and recognition?*, a discussion paper prepared by Warren Talbot for the Worship Committee, Pitt Street Congregation, Uniting Church in Australia. Parts of this paper, and a broader discussion paper from Uniting Network Australia, can be read in *Uniting Network Review*, July 2009.

Changes in society

Society is moving at a rapid pace of change in regard to legislation for and the regulation of same-sex relationships. This does not require the Church to follow, but does call for discussion, classically posed by Richard Niebuhr as the relationship between Christ and culture. There are two distinct but related movements. A number of jurisdictions (Canada, Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, South Africa, and some States in the USA) have taken the most direct legislative route. They have decreed that marriage shall be the lifelong, faithful union of one person with another person.

A number of other countries and jurisdictions have, for varying reasons, followed a different path. The UK and New Zealand have enacted statutory provisions for civil unions, which provide

comparable rights and entitlements for same-sex couples with married couples.

There are relevant developments in Australia, although same-sex marriage or civil unions are not on the mainstream agenda. Following a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) report, in late 2008 the Australian Parliament amended nearly one hundred pieces of national legislation which discriminated against same-sex couples. This was an essential and valuable practical reform, and undoubtedly lays the ground for increased civil recognition of same-sex couples in the future.

Changes in the Reformed tradition concerning homosexuality

There are several trends in churches of the Reformed tradition.

Equality – seen clearly in the United Church of Christ USA and the United Church of Canada. Both have ordained openly lesbian and gay clergy, the former since 1972 and the latter since 1985. In both, qualified individuals may not be excluded solely on the grounds of sexual orientation or involvement in a same-sex relationship. Both denominations have authorised clergy to perform same-sex marriages, as these are legal in Canada and in a small number of USA states.

Diversity – the UCA is perhaps the best example of this national policy, where the congregation and the Presbytery) make decisions concerning membership and ordination in individual cases. There is no binding or guiding national doctrine.

Conditional – gay and lesbian people are welcome, as members and ordained persons, provided that they adhere to the standard of “celibacy in singleness and fidelity in (heterosexual) marriage”. This is the national policy of the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Methodist Church USA.

Moratorium – after an initial position of diversity, the United Reformed Church in the UK adopted a seven year moratorium on any decisions concerning ordination.

Separatism – the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) was established as a separate denomination in 1968 to respond to the needs of gay and lesbian people (and others) who believe they can no longer remain in their own denomination. Since inception MCCs have offered “Holy Unions” for same-sex couples.

Theological frameworks

Homosexuality is a sin - Advocates of this view use five or six scripture verses which appear to condemn all homosexual behaviour as the basis for their theological view. Many scriptural scholars have now questioned the meaning and interpretation of these texts. Many proponents of the “homosexuality is sin” view also tend to the opinion that individuals choose to engage in homosexual behaviour. If homosexuality is both chosen and a sin, then it would be inappropriate for the Church to pray for let alone bless such a relationship.

Homosexuality is second best in a broken world - This is a complex position, relying on an argument from the order of creation (Genesis 1-3), and a

