



Uniting Network Australia

welcoming and celebrating lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) people in the life of the Uniting Church in Australia

EQUAL MARRIAGE IN THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

A Response to the Assembly Discussion Paper on Marriage from Uniting Network Australia

10 October 2014

Uniting Network Australia is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Assembly Doctrine Working Group Marriage Discussion Paper (DP). This is a crucial conversation for the Church in the context of rapidly changing understandings of marriage in church and society, including the passage of same gender marriage legislation in sixteen countries and in more than half of the states in the USA. We are also challenged to respond to the decisions of a number of our partner churches to approve the liturgical celebration of same gender marriages.

Beyond the issue of same gender marriage, which is the primary focus of our response, we believe the Church must address the experience of young people who are sexually active outside of marriage, and respond to the new patterns of long-term de facto relationships and of serial monogamy in western societies.

We recognise that the DP is intended to foster conversation across a church that holds different conceptions of marriage and sexuality and bible and theology. However, as a church called to reconciliation, we must give special attention to the voices of those couples and families who are currently excluded from marriage and from the legal protections that such recognition entails.

We offer four observations and four recommendations that have been informed by detailed textual, theological and ethical studies provided to the Doctrine Working Group by Dr Bill Loader, Rev Dr Paul Tonson, and Rev Dr Margaret Mayman all of whom identify significant problems in the Discussion Paper.

Four Summary Observations

1. The use of the existing marriage service is problematic.

We are not convinced that the starting point of a commentary on the marriage service liturgy is a helpful one. All theological reflection has a “point of view” and the choice of the marriage service fails to take into account the viewpoint of a vast body of research on the evolution of sex, gender, marriage and families. An incarnational understanding of the Gospel and of the life of the Church would have begun preferably with the lived experience of people in same gender relationships who seek to marry, and of ministers who recognise their pastoral concerns and wish to be able to officiate at such marriages, as encouraged by the Basis of Union:

When the Uniting Church engages in theological reflection we are called to be a church that

“...enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God's ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith... [sharpening] its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought... (The) Uniting Church also stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help it to understand its own nature and mission.” (Basis of Union, paragraph 11).

We believe that a discussion paper based on the consultation report “Views of Marriage in the UCA” (compiled by Rev Dr Robert Bos) would have provided a more useful starting point. The Uniting Church has moved on from the challenging conversation of the mid-1990s and, it seems, from the understanding of marriage that forms the basis of the 2005 Marriage Service. It hurts and angers us to find that the Marriage Service framework has functioned to silence the already excluded voices of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex members of the Uniting Church, their families and faith communities.

2. The theological framework of the DP is inadequate

Many of the Uniting Network members are entirely unconvinced that the theological framework of creation, fall and redemption is a helpful lens for this conversation. It is a highly problematic and inadequate approach to human sexual diversity to regard homosexuality as a result of either creation or the „fall“.

We note that the conclusion reached in the Bos report contradicts the claims of the Discussion Paper that the Marriage Service is a reliable indicator of the Church’s shared theology of marriage.

“Clearly, there is no agreed theology of marriage in the Uniting Church. The responses to the consultation process reported a wide range of views. At the same time, many demonstrated openness to change and reviewing their position.” (Robert Bos, Views of Marriage in the UCA, p. 24)

The Network hopes that in time the Church will affirm that the mystery of intimacy, both of body and spirit, is as real for same gender relationships as for heterosexual marriage, that both may fully participate (as *koinonia*) in the divine life, and that both may express the nature and mystery of the self-giving love of Christ for the church.

On this basis, if the Church is unwilling to consider a reworking of the Marriage Service at this time, the Uniting Network believes that the existing liturgy needs little adaptation for use in the case of same gender marriage.

3. The interpretation of Scriptural texts in the DP is not sufficiently critical

The limits of using the Marriage Service are also obvious in the DP in the way biblical interpretation has been limited to uncritical consideration of Genesis 1 and Ephesians 5. We appreciate that the Doctrine Working Group did not resurrect the usual condemnatory proof texts found elsewhere in scripture. However, Genesis 1 is an etiological myth that enables a powerful apprehension of God as creator and just as we do not take literally the account of creation in six days, neither are we required to take literally the account of sex and gender in Genesis.

The claims of Ephesians 5 about the connection between male and female and Christ and the Church are bound up in a passage that is inherently patriarchal and which justifies inequality between women and men. However, regarding Ephesians more positively, it is our firm belief that references to „the mystery of male-female union“ and to the metaphor of „Christ and the church“ (paragraph 13 and the subsequent panel: Scriptural Language) do not distinguish in any way the nature of same gender and opposite gender covenanted relationships.

4. Changing the definition of marriage is appropriate

The account of the changing understanding of marriage (following para 15) is among the most helpful aspects of the paper. However, the conclusion in the Same-gender marriage? panel that “(it) is clear that same-gender marriage is not simply about making marriage more inclusive, but about altering the definition of marriage” begs the question. For church and society have always been free to change the definition, eg in rejecting the view that marriage is a contract between two men: a man and his wife’s father.

Four Recommendations

1. Freedom to perform same gender marriages

We value the stance of the Discussion Paper, which is noted in the first paragraph, reinforced in the Same-gender relationships? panel, and presented throughout in the „conversation“ between the plain text and the inserted colour panels, namely that „within the context of shared convictions about marriage“, disagreement exists among (faithful) Christians.

For this reason, the Uniting Network recommends that in the event of legislative approval, the Church offer freedom to each minister to perform marriages without regard to sex, sexual orientation or gender identity of the two partners according to their own conscience and the acquiescence of any congregation involved.

We agree with the view “that same gender partnership should be recognised and blessed by the church in order to bring such partnerships into the same orbit of discipline and public accountability as relationships of marriage and celibacy.”

2. Support for civil legislation for same gender marriage

We ask that the Uniting Church publicly declare support for the passage of legislation that will enable all Australian citizens to be treated equally in the matter of civil marriage regardless of sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, and make a clear public statement that the UCA believes that the proposed legislation does not undermine the rights of faith communities to make their own determinations about same gender marriage.

3. Further reflection must be based on lived experience

We believe that the Discussion Paper’s analysis of the Marriage Service highlights the need for new creative theologising about marriage and sexual relationships that is not based in the first chapters of Genesis. In seeking the reign of God, Jesus critically engaged with the religious and political institutions of his day. So we recommend that the Church continue to engage in a broad conversation about sexual ethics which addresses the lived realities of members of our church and wider society including a renewed engagement with Uniting Faith and Sexuality.

4. A pastoral Inclusive approach is needed

The pastoral response to divorce by the Uniting Church and other mainstream Protestant churches set a welcome precedent for this present challenge. A reconciling and pastoral approach is what is called for now, for both the Church’s care of its own members and its witness to the world around it. From the viewpoint of pastoral care, the reference that “a person’s fallen sexual orientation can be healed or transformed” should have no place in the DP. It represents a totally discredited approach We ask that any further work in this matter undertaken by the Church should include LGBTIQ persons, including if possible people who seek to marry or who have already been married in other jurisdictions.