



The Uniting Church

A Welcoming Church

The Uniting Church is a lively, creative and young Australian church, founded in 1977 from three existing churches: Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists. As people on a journey of faith we seek to understand and follow the Way of Jesus in all areas of life. With about 100,000 members across Australia the Uniting Church is known for its openness to change, participatory decision-making, equality and inclusion, commitment to social justice, human rights and ecological responsibility. Women and men participate in all areas of the church's life on an equal basis, as do Australia's First Peoples and people from many migrant-ethnic backgrounds and all walks of life.

You will find us in one of 2000 churches around Australia each Sunday: praying, singing, reading the Scriptures and sharing Communion. You will also find us in one of our 400 aged, childrens' and community service agencies, in cities and the outback. You will find us on Palm Sunday joining thousands of other Australians seeking to welcome refugees and asylum. Or seeking reconciliation with indigenous Australians. Or campaigning for real action on climate change. And...you will find some of us at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras and other LGBTIQ pride festivals around Australia. We are an Australian church for all Australians.

Following the Way of Jesus

Like everyone else, Christians form and change views over a period of time. We read and learn from the various Bible writers and what churches have said and done over 2,000 years. We are also influenced by the culture and society we live in. In the Uniting Church we also learn from the discoveries of modern science and medicine. For all decisions we talk and listen to members and try to reach consensus or agreement. Above all we seek to follow, or even risk living the Way of Jesus.

When we read the Bible we see in Jesus someone who expressed the love of God for all, especially people who have been rejected or marginalised. Jesus reminded his friends to love God and to love our neighbours. When Jesus was asked "Who is my neighbour?" he told the story of the Samaritan (Luke 10). Jesus himself was a Jew and the Jews and Samaritan were enemies. Jesus' story sees good Jewish people walk by while the hated Samaritan offers practical help to a person who had been robbed and left to die. Elsewhere Jesus even encouraged us to "love our enemies" (Matthew 5). How radical is that?

The Uniting Church learns about (homo) sexuality

LGBTIQ people have been a part of the Uniting Church since 1977, but as in the rest of society, individuals have often felt the need to remain quiet or in the 'closet'. Hiding your sexuality or gender identity or intersex status is not healthy for the individual or our society. As LGBTIQ people have become more open in society since the 1970's the same has happened in the Uniting Church. Until recently, it was very difficult for LGBTIQ members and Ministers to come out, and is still very difficult in many parts of the Uniting



Church. Attitudes of rejection and exclusion continue in some places.

In 1981, when a local church wanted an openly lesbian woman to become a Minister, the wider Uniting Church commenced a three year study on homosexuality and the church. The church's national body, called the 'Assembly', decided that people were not to be excluded because of their sexual orientation but the way in which sexuality was expressed was important – i.e. in ways which are loving and faithful and do not exploit or harm others. Some members of the church did not agree with that, and the Uniting Church spent a lot more time looking at sexuality in the 1990's. This time we didn't just focus on homosexuality as a 'problem' but looked at all of human sexuality as a good gift from God, and the range of human sexual experiences, such as when a marriage ends, and sexuality for young people and older people.

Why do some members of the Uniting Church not fully welcome and affirm LGBTIQ people? That's a difficult question to answer. Some of it has to do with social prejudice against gay, lesbian and bisexual people (called 'homophobia'). A lot of people still believe that the Bible-writers condemn homosexuality. The Uniting Church reports don't agree with that view, as it misinterprets what the Bible writers are saying. And the Bible writers did not know or understand homosexuality as a deep-seated sexual orientation, in the same way that heterosexuality is.

The overall message of the Bible, and especially Jesus, is that God loves, includes and welcomes all people. (There is another leaflet in this series on the Scriptures and LGBTIQ people.)

The status of LGBTIQ people in the Uniting Church

In 2018 the Uniting Church has moved a long way towards fully accepting and welcoming LGBTIQ people and our partners and families in the life of the church. We have always supported changes to the law to remove discrimination against LGBTIQ people in society. Uniting Church agencies such as Uniting NSW/ACT have led the way in Australia in making sure that services in aged care, children, youth and family, are aware of and welcoming of LGBTIQ people.

The current situation within the church is:

- All baptised persons (including LGBTIQ people) are welcomed as full members of the church and participate in the church's worship, witness and service.

- Decisions regarding leadership positions, whether in the local church, wider church bodies or the ordained ministry, are made on an individual basis respecting the gifts and graces of the individual and the understanding of ministry in the Basis of Union and other Uniting Church documents.
- Openly LGBTIQ people currently hold leadership positions in the Assembly, synods, presbyteries and local churches. A growing number of local churches have openly LGBTIQ Ministers, where they and their partners are welcome and affirmed.
- The guiding principle of the Assembly, since 1982, has been that sexual orientation is not a bar to ordained ministry but the way in which individuals express their sexuality may be taken into account. There are no categories or groups of people automatically excluded from ministry and leadership. (This doesn't mean that everyone is gifted to do everything.)
- Local Congregations are the heart of the Uniting Church and decisions about placing a suitable ordained minister in a local church continues to be made by the local congregation and the regional presbytery.
- As of July 2018 Uniting Church ordained ministers are now permitted to marry same sex couples. It is also noted that they have the freedom to refuse to marry same-sex couples.

Challenges for the Uniting Church

Change can be very slow, and there are at least three areas where the Uniting Church needs to continue to learn and change. Three challenges in mission and ministry are:

- Some of the changes mentioned above have only taken place in parts of capital cities. One aim of Open and Affirming Congregations is to encourage many other local churches to become aware and to openly support and welcome LGBTIQ people.



- We still don't understand very much about transgender and intersex people. There is a need for much more awareness and education.

The Uniting Church believes that we are a pilgrim people of God on the way. We have been slowly changing as we seek to follow the way of Jesus and to really welcome and love all of our neighbours – including our LGBTIQ neighbours.

Resources

For a short overview of the Uniting Church, key beliefs and activities, see Andrew Dutney, *Introducing the Uniting Church in Australia* (2008). Available from MediaCom.

The formal decisions of the Assembly and Assembly Standing Committee up until 2006 are found in *Sexuality and Leadership*.

https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/PDF/SexualityandLeadership_DocumentingtheHistory.pdf

The full report of the Assembly Sexuality Task Group is *Uniting Sexuality and Faith*.

https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/resources/Uniting_Sexuality_and_Faith_1997.pdf

A short history of LGBTIQ people and the Uniting Church is Warren Talbot, *LGBTIQ Pilgrims*.

www.unitingnetworkaustralia.org.au/resources



Photo: Member of Uniting Network join the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, for the first time, in 1988.

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