



## Proposals from Members

### 25 Inclusive Changes to Definition of Marriage

That the Assembly resolve:

- (a) To affirm that ordained Ministers and those authorised by the Uniting Church to act as marriage celebrants may exercise their right to accept or refuse couples for marriage according to their own discernment
- (b) To amend the definition of marriage within the Uniting Church in Australia (replacing Minute 97.31.12) and declare that:

1. **Marriage**

Marriage for Christians is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of two people to live together for life.

It is intended to be the mutually faithful lifelong union of a couple expressed in every part of their life together.

In marriage two people seek to encourage and enrich each other through love and companionship.

In the marriage service:

- the couple make a public covenant with each other and with God, in the company of family and friends;
- the couple affirm their trust in each other and in God;
- the Church affirms the sanctity of marriage and nurtures those who pledge themselves to each other in marriage and calls upon all people to support, uphold and nurture those who pledge themselves to each other in marriage.

In their sexual union, the couple seek to express mutual delight, pleasure and tenderness, thus strengthening the union of their lives together. In marriage, children may be born and are to be brought up in love and security, thus providing a firm foundation for society.

2. **Separation, Divorce & Re-marriage**

An inability to sustain the marriage relationship breaks the commitment to be together for life and may be painful for the couple, the children in their care, as well as for parents, friends and the Church community.

In cases of the irretrievable breakdown of marriage, the Church acknowledges that divorce may be the only creative and life giving direction to take.

The Church has a responsibility to:

- a) care for people, including children, through the trauma of the ending of a marriage;
- b) help people where appropriate to grieve, repent, grow in self-understanding, receive affirmation, grace and forgiveness;
- c) support them as they hear God's call for new life.

The grace and healing of God are available to people who are divorced, which may free them to marry again.

- (c) To authorise ordained ministers and approved celebrants to conduct marriage services in accordance with the amended definition in (b) above from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2018 which may be developed in line with current available UCA liturgies with the inclusion of language appropriate for relationships between lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, other sexuality and gender diverse people as required.

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Seconder: Benjamin Gilmour

**Rationale:**

Why is this important for the Church at this time?

- Since the 1<sup>3th</sup> Assembly, significant consultation and respectful conversation has occurred across the Uniting Church regarding the theology of marriage, sexuality and same-gender relationships. The 14<sup>th</sup> Assembly established further work, guided by the Standing Committee, with the aim of bring recommendations to this 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly meeting.
- In 2017, *Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017* was made law by the Australian Parliament making legal marriage open to all couples, regardless of gender.
- In light of the broad reaching and lengthy process the UCA has undertaken and the social context in which it finds itself, it is important for the Church to make a decision regarding its understanding of marriage at this time.
- This proposal seeks to provide an inclusive definition of marriage to allow all couples to marry within the Uniting Church while still affirming a minister's right to discern which marriage services they find appropriate to conduct.

History of UCA Marriage and Sexuality Discussion

- The Uniting Church has been in conversation regarding the theology of marriage since the 13<sup>th</sup> Assembly and for over 35 years regarding sexuality and same-gender relationships.
- In 1982, the Assembly Standard Committee determined that sexual orientation, per se, is not an impediment to ordained leadership in the UCA.
- Under existing UCA polity there are a number of ordained Ministers, in placement, who are living in a committed same-gender relationship and these Ministers have been placed in accordance with specific decisions of Councils of the UCA.
- Since 2011, the UCA Beneficiary Fund has provided equal benefits and recognition for the same-gender partners of ordained Ministers.
- There has been significant consultation since the 13<sup>th</sup> Assembly in relation to same-gender marriage across the whole church with a particular focus on discussing this topic in respectful and culturally appropriate ways.
- Public "Blessing Ceremonies" for same-gender couples are already permitted in the UCA, although there is no formal liturgy.
- This proposal presents one further evolution in the Uniting Church's understanding of human sexuality, relationships and marriage.

Biblical and Theological Principles

- All human beings are created in the image of a loving God and are therefore worthy of dignity and respect (Genesis 1). Human beings image the glory, creativity and love of God (Psalm 8).
- Diverse gender and sexual identities are a good gift from the Creator, to be affirmed and celebrated as a means of grace and love. The cultural understandings of gender, sexuality and marriage have changed, including within the tradition of the Scriptures themselves.

- Covenant is the primary motif in the Scriptures, both God's covenant with Israel (Genesis 15) and the new covenant made known in the person of Jesus confessed as the Christ (Ephesians 2). In God's covenant strangers are to be welcomed (Exodus 22) and the gracious and welcoming love of God is often seen in the social/racial/religious outsider (Ruth). All human beings are relational creatures and worthy of the gifts and graces of kinship and covenanted relationships which marriage symbolises.
- The ministry of Jesus, as testified to in the Gospels, overwhelming emphasises the inclusion of those who have been rejected and marginalised by society. LGBTIQ people hear with gratitude Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth: "Good news to the poor...liberty to the captives" (Luke 4). Following the Way of Jesus calls the church to lean on the side of including, not excluding, people.
- The Apostle Paul widened the ministry of the early Christ communities by the inclusion of Gentiles. Paul declares that "...all are one in Christ Jesus" beyond categories such as religion, social status or gender (Galatians 3). LGBTIQ people respond to the spirit of those words, discerning that "in Christ" human barriers based on sexual orientation or gender identity are also "no longer".
- In the reformed and evangelical traditions of the UCA, there have been major changes in church order over the past 500 years. Changes range from the practice of married clergy through to the affirmation of women as equal partners in the church's life and ministry, in which the uniting churches have been pioneers. Marriage is not a sacrament with the UCA and its ordering has evolved in recent years to reflect the equality of women.
- Church teaching in this area should also be informed by its pastoral and justice ministries with LGBTIQ individuals, couples, families and communities. The health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ people and their relationships has vital importance in the life and witness of the Church's mission and ministry. LGBTIQ exclusion from marriage continues to cause much discomfort within many in our churches. As the church, we are called to be agents of Christ's healing and reconciliation.
- We believe that the broad and overarching biblical, moral and ethical teachings do not prohibit LGBTIQ couples into the celebration of the love, commitment and grace that we name as marriage in the UCA. We affirm that such celebrations can be seen as embodied fulfilment of the great two commandments of Christ Jesus – loving God and loving our neighbour.

### Social Context

- The Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey showed a clear majority of Australian's were in favour of marriage equality under civil law including many Christians.
- The UCA did not take a position in the postal survey debate and instead allowed its members to vote according to their beliefs.
- Following the postal survey, the *Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017* was passed on 9 December 2017 and marriage under civil law is now open to all couples, regardless of gender.

### Impacts on UCA Members

- There are many members of our church, including ordained Ministers, who now seek to be married by Ministers and other approved celebrants within the Uniting Church.
- Uniting Network has been a support to LGBTIQ people and an active advocate within the Uniting Church for their full inclusion and we thank them for their input to this proposal.
- Making no change to our definition of marriage is likely to continue to cause pain to LGBTIQ people within our church, many of whom have been marginalised and hurt by the church before.
- In practical terms, Uniting Church polity already accepts ordained Ministers living in committed same-gender relationships, according them the same responsibilities and benefits as those in heterosexual marriage. It is unjust to exclude a class of UCA members from one significant liturgy of the church.

- Following the change in marriage laws, some congregations and ordained Ministers have also had enquiries to conduct same-gender weddings from those outside the church and would wish to proceed should the definition of marriage be changed.
- Ordained Ministers who do not wish to conduct same-gender weddings would be respected and can use their discretion, as they do with all couples, though they would be expected as a courtesy to make an appropriate pastoral referral.

#### The Time for Decision is Now

- These changes to our definition of marriage come after years of work and reflection and are not solely reactive to the social context. The 2015 Assembly had intended for recommendations regarding to be discussed at this Assembly without knowing what the social/legal context would be in 2018.
- Many church members have discerned is that some action is now required. We have been having discussion and consultation for years within the church – we should not prolong making a decision as this will continue to cause harm to parts of our church.