



## Proposals from Members

### 27 Doctrine and practice of marriage

That the Assembly resolve:

- (a) That alterations that may be considered to the doctrine or practice of marriage are to be regarded as a matter which is “of vital importance to the life of the Church”;
- (b) To seek the concurrence of other councils of the Church, in accordance with paragraph 15(e) of the Basis of Union for any resolutions of the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly relating to the doctrine or practice of marriage; and
- (c) To include Synods, Presbyteries and Congregations as the other councils from which concurrence is sought.

Proposer: Andrew Everson

Seconder: David Hoffman

#### Rationale:

Is same-gender marriage a matter “of vital importance to the life of the Church”?

The question of whether the church should allow same-gender marriage, in doctrine or in practice, is undeniably one which is “of vital importance to the life of the church” for the following reasons:

1. It impacts the life of our members.

The public discussion on marriage and sexuality which occurred in the lead up to the legalization of same-gender marriage clearly showed that matters of gender, sexuality and marriage are of vital importance to the life of all Australians on all sides of the debate across the whole spectrum of our society, including members of the Uniting Church in Australia. That which is of vital importance to the life of the members of the church, and of Australian society as a whole, is of vital importance to the life of the church.

2. It impacts a wide range of doctrine.

An alteration of the church’s doctrine of marriage has implications which range far beyond marriage itself, impacting many other doctrines, including the doctrines of creation, humankind, reconciliation and redemption. The meaning of marriage is inextricably intertwined with (one might say of primary significance for) our understanding of who God is, who we are as humankind, and of how God relates to us eternally. To make such a wide ranging doctrinal change is of vital importance to the life of the church.

3. It impacts our ecumenical relationships.

The Uniting Church has received the doctrine of marriage as a member denomination of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. The Uniting Church’s ecumenical partner denominations within Australia and internationally uphold this same doctrine of marriage which they also have received. A departure from our commonly received doctrine of marriage puts at risk our ecumenical relationships, making this a matter that is of vital importance to the life of the church in its ecumenical mission.

4. It impacts our cross cultural relationships.

The Uniting Church is a multicultural church, which embraces a covenant relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, and relationships with many national conferences of ethnic-migrant communities. These communities are pivotal for the future health and vitality of the Uniting Church. While there is a range of opinion across the UAICC and the culturally and linguistically diverse communities, many of these communities (both within the church and more broadly) have expressed their firm belief that marriage is between a man and a woman. A change to our doctrine of marriage puts at risk our cross cultural relationships, making this a matter that is of vital importance to the life of the church.

In view of these considerations, the doctrine and practice of marriage are clearly matters that are of “vital importance to the life of the Church”, and any change to this doctrine or practice is also of “vital importance to the life of the Church”.

Why should we seek concurrence of other councils of the Church?

The Assembly is obligated, in accordance with paragraph 15(e) of the *Basis of Union*, to seek the concurrence of other councils of the church on matters which are “of vital importance to the life of the Church”. The wording could not be stronger. It’s not optional.

*Paragraph 15(e) of the Basis of Union states:*

“(e) **The Assembly** ... *It is obligatory for it to seek the concurrence of other councils, and on occasion of the Congregations of the Church, on matters of vital importance to the life of the Church.*”

The question of whether a matter should be referred for concurrence to the other councils of the church has been considered once before (on the matter of the ordination of people regardless of their sexuality). That Assembly meeting discussed whether it was a matter which was “of vital importance to the life of the church” and determined that it was not. The result was that many thousands of members and many congregations left the Uniting Church, an event which continues to impact the Church today. To make a similar error of judgement now would have significant ramifications for the level of trust with which members of the church view Assembly, and in and of itself would be a matter of vital importance to the life of the church.

From which councils should we seek concurrence?

Concurrence should primarily be sought from Congregations, because the Congregation is “the embodiment in one place” of the Church [*Basis of Union 15(a)*] and because it is the Congregation, more than the Synod or Presbytery, which shares in a marriage service. Uniting in Worship 2 starts the section about the marriage service with the statement “The Christian celebration of marriage is an act of worship ... in which the community of faith shares ...”.

It is also right and proper that if concurrence is to be sought from Congregations, then it should also be sought from Presbyteries (who have pastoral responsibilities regarding Congregations), and from Synods (who are involved in the registration of Uniting Church ministers as marriage celebrants).