



Presbytery of Yarra Yarra

20 Amending the Marriage Rites

That the Assembly resolve:

- a) To welcome the changes made to the Marriage Act by the Federal Parliament of Australia in December 2017; and
- b) To request the Standing Committee to amend the Uniting Church Marriage Rites to include same-sex couples and to allow ministers to celebrate such marriages or not, according to their conscience.

Proposer: Lauleti Tu'inauvai

Seconder: Matthew Julius

Rationale:

The Church conducts marriages as an agent of the government. As the church has spent many years discussing this issue, and with the strong support given to the changes in the plebiscite, it would seem that now is the time for the church to also make changes to the words used in the Marriage Rites of the Uniting Church. In fact, it could be argued that were we not to make the change, we should recuse ourselves from the right to conduct marriage at all.

While there has not been consensus on this issue within the church, significant theological work has been offered in documents such as the *Interim Report on Sexuality* (1996) and *Uniting Sexuality and Faith* (1997) and *sexuality: exploring the issues* (1996). These documents have informed us in much of our discussion and growing understanding on issues related to a variety of expressions of sexuality.

Often the debate around this issue sees many Biblical justifications and quotations. The view of marriage expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures sees marriage very differently to our modern understandings. Marriage is primarily arranged for property and social reasons. There appears to be no reference to anything that looks like a marriage ceremony. In fact, marriage ceremonies do not begin in the Catholic church until the mid-16th Century and the mid-18th century in the Anglican church.

A number of references in the Hebrew Scriptures point to a man having multiple wives. Often it seems that marriage to a relative is preferable (as in the case of Ruth and Boaz). In all cases it seems that the man is to protect his wife as her "Lord" or "Master". Deuteronomy 22:21 points to the importance of a girl being a virgin when given for marriage, on pain of death if she is found to have been deceptive on this issue.

The Christian Scriptures have more to say about the role of man and woman in a marriage. However, Jesus only refers to marriage once, in Matthew 19:4-6, and then he quotes from Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24. In Matthew 5:17-18 Jesus reiterates the place of the Law as expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Paul, in Corinthians 7 seems to argue for marriage as a remedy for lust and to avoid sinning so that sex can occur without worry of punishment. In other places, including Luke 18:29-30, marriage is clearly less important than devotion to God.

In the 21st Century we have arrived at very different understandings of marriage, moving away from the Biblical references. Marriage is an equal relationship where two people strengthen each other through their union, with some using phrases such as "soul mate" and "completion in each other". Many would argue that in Christian Marriage two people commit to each other and seek to serve God in their union. As they flourish together, so too they flourish in their ability to serve God and the world.

As we have already moved away from many possible Biblical approaches, it would seem that we are in a position to embrace the idea of same sex marriage as marriage between two people that will strengthen commitment and enable a strong basis for strong monogamous relationships.

Historically, many issues have been debated, and opposed, on Biblical grounds that we now accept and cannot imagine anything different. Slavery and the role of women in leadership are two such issues. More recently, the sexuality of our church leaders has been accepted as a "non issue". The change to the marriage act is a big social change. The church has shown in the past that it is able to embrace and advocate for social change. In fact, it would be the mantra for many members of the Uniting Church. To advocate for the marginalised and the exiled is to follow the way of Christ.

If the church fails to make this change, it will be asking its ministers to be out of step with the government legislation, and community expectation, and we will continue to alienate people who seek marriage that is now legally possible in this country. Our ministers will find themselves standing in the way of God's unconditional grace, offered to all people.