Doc. bytes

The 15th Assembly decision on marriage sparked many conversations across the Uniting Church. These papers have been written as a resource to those ongoing conversations.

6 In what areas do we hold diversity of beliefs?

Summary Sentence:

From its beginning the Christian faith has generated paradoxes which at face value appear to contradict each other but which can legitimately co-exist within the deeper logic of the gospel.

What scope is there for unity-in-diversity of belief, over and above the unity-in-diversity of the church's membership? Apart from diversity of beliefs held by individual members, can the church formally hold doctrines which are in tension with each other? This is not a new question. From its beginning, the Christian faith has generated paradoxes which seem at face value to contradict each other.

The most startling example of such paradoxes are the simultaneous confessions that God is utterly distinct from creation and that God is utterly close to it. By the laws of logic and the usual meaning of words, these two affirmations are in tension. Similarly, the doctrine of the Trinity was developed over time to affirm beliefs which are paradoxical: God is three and God is one. Trinitarian doctrine does not resolve the paradox, it provides the framework by which both are held together.

A similar example would be the Uniting Church's position on baptism. The Uniting Church is called to "baptize both those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the Church takes responsibility" (*Basis* #7). Those two practices presuppose seemingly contradictory understandings of the respective roles of human belief, God's grace, and the Spirit's renewing work. The Uniting Church is able to practice both forms of baptism because of its conviction that both of them, without denying their distinct theologies, "initiate[s] people into Christ's life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit" (*Basis* #7). On this there is no diversity of belief.

This provides some parallel with the Assembly's decision on marriage. The acceptance of both same-gender-marriage and traditional marriage imply different understandings of the theological significance of gender and the body, and of the purposes of sex. What holds the two definitions of marriage together are the convictions that:

- marriage "is a gift God has given to humankind for the well-being of the whole human family"

- it entails "a public covenant between the partners and with God";

- it is "intended for life"

- "those who pledge themselves to each other in marriage" are to be nurtured by the church

- all people are to "support, uphold and nurture those who pledge themselves to each other in marriage"

On these matters related to marriage there is no diversity in the Uniting Church's belief.

The biblical witness

Texts: James 2:14 and Gal. 2:16

Comment: Notice how these two verses point to different, seemingly contradictory, understandings of the place of 'works' within Christian faith.

Quotable Quote

[G]iven the diversity of biblical witnesses to Jesus, orthodoxy actually demands that we speak about Jesus in more than one way. To privilege one part or another is to reckon with a diminished Jesus, a Jesus whose personal identity is less fully rounded than the complex Jesus offered us by the great cloud of witnesses in the Christian tradition.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays, "Reflections on a pilgrimage," in Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 323-325 (324).

Connections

Reflecting on all the above material, what do you hear and see which connects with your own journey of faith and that of your particular church community?

Uniting Church in Australia
ASSEMBLY