



Standing Committee

08 Marriage and same-gender relationships

That the Assembly resolve:

- (a) To note that the Working Group on Doctrine Report documents a continuing and faithful struggle on matters relating to sexuality and marriage spanning several decades in the Uniting Church; and that the issue of same-gender marriage is one about which many Uniting Church people faithfully hold strong and at times mutually exclusive convictions;
- (b) To adopt the following policy statement on marriage:
- Marriage is a gift God has given to humankind for the well-being of the whole human family. For Christians, marriage 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 life-long union of two people expressed in every part of their life together. In marriage two people seek to encourage and enrich each other through love and companionship, experience the fruitfulness of family, contribute to the well-being of society and strengthen the mission of the church.
- (c) (i) To affirm that Ministers and celebrants authorised by the Uniting Church in Australia may exercise freedom of conscience with regards to accepting requests to celebrate marriages, including same-gender marriages, according to the rites of the Uniting Church in Australia;
- (ii) To request the Assembly Officers to direct the appropriate Assembly body to prepare an authorised Marriage Liturgy suitable for opposite-gender and same-gender couples for approval by the Standing Committee at its August 2018 meeting;
- (iii) To note that Church Councils:
- have the authority under Regulation 4.4.1 to permit or refuse the use of any property held for the use of the Congregation for same-gender weddings;
 - do not have the authority to require a Minister in placement in their Congregation, or prevent a Minister in their Congregation from, celebrating same-gender marriages.
- (d) To adopt the following affirmation:
1. Marriage
- Marriage is a gift of God, at the heart of human society and culture.
- In the life-long union of marriage people can know the joy of God in whose image we are made, male and female. In giving themselves to each other in love, two people reflect the love of Christ for his Church.
- In marriage, two people are called to live together faithfully, and to love each other with respect, tenderness and delight. They share the life of a wider family and community and may be entrusted with the gift and care of children. They

help to shape a society in which human dignity and happiness may flourish and abound.

Marriage is not to be entered into lightly or selfishly, but responsibly and in the love of God. It is a gift of God and a way of life that all people should honour.

2. Separation, Divorce and 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.

Proposer: Andrew Dutney

Seconder: Alistair Macrae

Rationale:

The Assembly Standing Committee was asked by the Fourteenth Assembly to support the continuing work of the Working Group on Doctrine in relation to marriage and same-gender relationships, to consult widely and bring a report with recommendations to the Fifteenth Assembly. The work over the past triennium is a continuation of the ongoing conversations on human sexuality and marriage that the Uniting Church has been engaged in over many years. This indicates the importance the Church has placed on considering its theological understandings of this issue, as well as within the contemporary cultural contexts in which it seeks to faithfully be about the mission of God.

It is important to acknowledge that the Eighth, Tenth and Eleventh Assemblies have recognised an enduring disagreement between members of the Church on a range of questions concerning human sexuality. The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Assemblies have engaged the church in a process of respectful conversation on same-gender relationships and marriage.

The Working Group on Doctrine Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships offers to the Church a thoughtful and extensive document that examines the biblical and theological perspectives regarding marriage, as well as drawing on contemporary thought and experience. The principles and conclusions in the Report provide the Church with a framework to consider changing its policy statement on marriage to include the opportunity for same-gender couples to be married according to the rites of the Uniting Church.

In 2017, after a voluntary national survey on the question, the Commonwealth parliament passed legislation making marriage available to same-gender couples as well as opposite-gender couples – decisively changing the social context within which the church will reflect on the Working Group on Doctrine Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships.

Among other important findings, the process of consultation and study reflected in the Working Group on Doctrine Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships has confirmed that:

- The diverse understandings identified by previous Assemblies are all able to be justified biblically and theologically – even though they are mutually exclusive interpretations;
- Diversity of understanding is itself explicable in biblical and theological terms, and can be recognised as a gift and a sign of health in the Body of Christ;
- The diversity in the understanding of marriage is in fact greater than can be imagined in the dominant culture when the witness of Indigenous and non-Western cultures is listened to. In

many cultures marriage is primarily a community arrangement and fundamental to social and cultural structures and understanding, and only in a secondary sense about the love between two people.

The Assembly Standing Committee has provided two Proposals to help the Fifteenth Assembly wait upon God's Word and discern God's will in relation to this matter.

Proposal (b) recommending a change in the Uniting Church's policy statement on marriage is offered to help the Assembly discern whether God would have us continue to sustain the diversity of understandings of human sexuality and marriage within this fellowship. Within the diversity of our fellowship there are Ministers and Congregations who believe the change in our social context that allows same-gender marriage is consistent with the Gospel, and want to be able to celebrate same-gender marriage as well as opposite-gender marriages. They are seeking the consent of the rest of the church to have this ability. They are not asking the rest of the church to agree with them, but allow them to follow their conscience in this way. The Working Group on Doctrine Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships confirms the biblical and theological legitimacy of this request.

The proposed change in the statement on marriage also recognises marriage as a life-long union characterised by the fruitfulness of family, a union called to bring life, not only for the two people who are married, but for others.

As stated previously, members in the Uniting Church hold a diversity of views, in good faith and conscience. Therefore, the ability for Ministers and UCA authorised marriage celebrants to perform marriages or not, exercising their freedom of conscience, remains. The Standing Committee also believes that Church Councils and Congregations may determine what types of marriage will be held on the properties for which they have stewardship.

Whatever the Fifteenth Assembly discerns in relation to that proposal, the Proposal (d) offers the Assembly the opportunity to make an affirmation about marriage that reflects the richness of the conversation on marriage with First Peoples and across the cultural diversity of the Uniting Church.