

Views of marriage in the UCA



Report on a consultation process – 2013

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Views of marriage in the UCA

1. Introduction

1.1 The decision of the thirteenth Assembly

The thirteenth Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) met in July 2012. Among the resolutions passed was the decision to prepare a discussion paper on marriage.¹ The actual minute on the marriage issue was in two parts. The first part acknowledged the Statement of Marriage approved by the Eighth Assembly in 1997. This included the affirmation that:

Marriage for Christians is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of a man and a woman to live together for life. It is intended to be the mutually faithful life-long union of a woman and a man in every part of their life together.

The second part of the resolution reads:

[N]oting the desire for respectful conversation within the diverse community of the church and the current debate about same gender marriage, to ask the Doctrine Working Group, *after appropriate consultation across the Church* and with ongoing liaison with the Standing Committee

- to prepare a discussion paper on the theology of marriage within the Uniting Church, and to explore its implications for public covenants for same-gender relations;
- to circulate the paper widely ... requesting responses ...;
- to summarise responses and bring recommendations to the Standing Committee by November 2014, to enable the Standing Committee to bring a report to the 14th Assembly in 2015.²

This paper reports the findings of the consultation process during 2013 by way of preparation for discussion paper on marriage

1.2 The international context³

Over the past ten years or so, countries which have legislated in favour of same-sex marriage include Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, England/Wales, France, Iceland, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, United States of America and Uruguay. Some native American tribes also formally recognise same-gender unions. In some of these countries, such as Brazil and USA, same-gender marriage is possible in some jurisdictions and not others. Furthermore, Israel recognises same-sex marriage but does not perform it.

Some nations, including Hungary and Australia, extend partial or full legal recognition to same-sex couples without defining marriage to include such relationships.

On the other hand, in some African nations, same-sex relationships can incur imprisonment, and in some Arab states the death penalty may be imposed.

1.3 The Australian context

In Australia the issue received considerable publicity in May 2013 when the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, wrote:

¹ This resulted from Notices of Motion brought to the Assembly from various sources, including the Presbyteries of Port Philip West, South Moreton and Tasmania.

² Minute 12.31, emphasis added. The full text of the resolution may be found at http://assembly.uca.org.au/images/assemblies/MINUTES_OF_THE_THIRTEENTH_ASSEMBLY.pdf.

³ Source http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Same-sex_marriage_legislation_around_the_world.

I have come to the conclusion that church and state can have different positions and practices on the question of same-sex marriage. I believe the secular Australian state should be able to recognise same-sex marriage.

I also believe that this change should legally exempt religious institutions from any requirement to change their historic position and practice that marriage is exclusively between a man and a woman.⁴

Subsequently, prior to the 2013 national election in a nationally televised debate on 11 August with Mr Tony Abbott, Mr Rudd, then Prime Minister, promised that at, if re-elected on 7 September 2013, he would take steps towards making gay marriage a reality and bring a bill before parliament within 100 days of winning the election. Mr Abbott, on the other hand, stated that it was an important issue, but would not commit to a conscience vote.

A poll of 865 voters conducted by Galaxy Research in August 2012 reported that 64% of Australians support marriage equality, with support highest among young people and Greens supporters.⁵

1.4 Discernment in the Uniting Church

Given these international and national developments, it is not surprising that the UCA Assembly has opened the issue for discussion. As part of Australian society, the UCA may well want to have a voice in this debate. Furthermore, official statements by church leaders need to reflect official decisions of the UCA, rather than personal opinion.

Earlier discussions during the 1990s about same-gender relations focussed mainly on leadership in the church by people in same-sex relationships and the issue of ordination. The issue under discussion in 2013, however, was more about the UCA's views on marriage. Most Uniting Church Ministers are Marriage Celebrants under the Marriage Act 1961 and will rightly expect guidance from the Assembly if and when the legislation changes to enable same-sex couples to marry. While it is unlikely that the government will *require* Marriage Celebrants to conduct such marriages (as Mr Rudd's comment quoted above also indicates), nevertheless, if such marriages become legally possible, it would be helpful if the Uniting Church has a clear position.

Under the *Basis of Union*, the national Assembly "has determining responsibility for matters of doctrine." Such decisions are normally made by the Assembly only after widespread consultation across the church; hence the decision of the Thirteenth Assembly (2012) to engage in a consultation process. As the minute states, this was the first step. Following the initial round of consultation, the Doctrine Working Group is to prepare a discussion paper on the theology of marriage, and which will "explore its implications for public covenants for same-gender relationships." All sections of the church will be invited to submit comments. Recommendations will then be prepared with a report going to the fourteenth Assembly in 2015.

1.5 The consultation process

The Doctrine Working Group asked Robert Bos to design the consultation process and train a group of facilitators to lead sessions. Eight people conducted a number of consultations in every State and Territory. Response sheets were completed by table groups (each of about 4 people). In all 111 response sheets were received (over 400 pages) with approximately 417 people participating⁶. The participants were mostly selected by the organisers in each Synod, Presbytery or church organisation (generally not the facilitators of the consultation process).

⁴ *The Australian*, 21 May 2013, page 9.

⁵ <http://www.australianmarriageequality.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/GalaxyAug2012.pdf>

⁶ Not all groups indicated the number of people participating. As people were asked to meet in groups of 4, this was taken as the number of participants for the small number groups not reporting the number of people.

The consultation process was designed not to be a whole-of-church research project, but rather to elicit a representative range of views from across the church, including some Presbyteries, the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, the Uniting Network and the Assembly of Confessing Congregations. Nor was the process intended to foster debate among people with various views. This would come later once the DWG paper was released. It was essentially a listening process enabling the Doctrine Working Group to hear what some sections of the church think.

The consultation process was not designed to be a poll. The process was not designed to do accurate sampling of the membership. While local organisers were careful to invite a range of people (young and old, lay and ordained, “conservative” and “progressive,” male and female), attendance was skewed in favour of clergy.

Rob Bos also collated the responses and wrote the summary report for the DWG. In doing so, the wide range of comments were summarised and combined under various headings. The document was submitted to that group’s meeting on 22-23 October 2013.

2. Views of marriage in various communities

2.1 Indigenous church members

2.1.1 Pre-contact societies

While there were considerable variations across Australia, in most pre-contact communities, a boy and girl were “promised” to each other for future marriage. This was arranged by the older relatives and often had to do with creating bonds and alliances between clans. The choice of the potential partner depended on complex kinship networks, with the couple needing to be in the “right relationship” (for example, mother’s brother’s daughter).

The couple would then begin to co-habit once the girl reached puberty, sometimes with a small ceremony. The man might be significantly older than the woman. Once a child was born, the pair was fully recognised as a couple.

The couple’s relationship, when accepted by the family and community, was seen as important for maintaining the group and for survival. Continuing “the blood line” and enhancing the status and power of the clan through marriage alliances were key considerations. This could be done by working within the rules regarding potential possible partners and allowing senior people to make the decisions. “Wrong way” marriage was strongly disapproved.

When there were disputes about a boy-girl relationship, the couple would be separated until the extended family sorted it out. It all needed to be negotiated and settled out before a marriage was recognised by the community.

Young people might refuse to marry their “promise,” especially if there was a romantic attraction to another person. The couple would then “run away” to live elsewhere. In time the family groups might come round to accepting the relationship, the length of time this took depending on where in the kinship system the couple’s relationship fell on the continuum between “most preferred” and “totally impossible.” The man might then be subjected to a non-fatal spearing and the woman to a beating, after which the “marriage” would be more or less accepted. Often the children of such relationship were left in ambiguous situations with people unsure what protocols applied to them; going through the mother’s line would make them a different relation from going through the father’s side, with varying protocols. Such relationships were therefore fairly rare.

Polygyny was common, with more powerful men having more wives than less influential males (occasionally a dozen or more, but two or three wives being not uncommon).

When a man died, his younger brother had to take over his wife and family. [RB - Polygyny was often therefore a way of caring for people, a form of social welfare.]

In Aboriginal societies, separation/divorce was and is possible, but only after extended tensions. Again, this affects not only the individuals, but their extended family members, and sometimes whole clans.

What this means, of course, is that marriage was seen as a relationship between a man and a woman, or a man and a number of women. (Polyandry was rare.)

2.1.2 Following European contact

After the establishment of mission stations a couple’s relationship contrary to kinship rules were sometimes legitimised by a Christian ceremony conducted by a missionary. Furthermore, once the traditional punishments for “running away” became more difficult to inflict because of European law, romantic liaisons contrary to kinship rules became much more common, with serious negative consequences resonating through the kinship network. The kinship system being a central institution in Aboriginal society, this had serious consequences for whole societies.

Today, wedding ceremonies are rare in most remote Aboriginal communities. Part of the reason for this in Arnhem Land may be related to the fact that there is a strict (respectful) avoidance between brothers and sisters, including classificatory siblings of different genders, and this avoidance particularly applies to anything even remotely to do with sexuality. A public declaration of a couple's relationship may therefore cause severe disturbance and conflict.

In urban situations, almost no couples go through engagement and marriage and then have children. If they do get married, it might be when the girl gets pregnant or after children are born.

Today people travel further afield and often meet and marry or co-habit with people from a long way away. Many younger people have little time for the old marriage rules. Marriage now is more about the couple and less about the wider community.

Often now young people ignore the social rules for appropriate relationships and have serial relationships, despite the disapproval of older people, who see the importance of traditional Law and Christian values. Older people grieve the lack of respect for and loss of culture among younger ones.

Many Aboriginal women feel that they carry the burden of much of the work and feel that there needs to be more Christian teaching about husbands caring for their wives and sharing the load.

Many Aboriginal people feel that traditional Law and Christian teaching are mutually supportive and cannot really be separated. Both are given by God and have the status of divine authorisation. While the revelation in Jesus Christ may refine or give further clarity to traditional Aboriginal Law, they cannot be contradictory. The Christian emphases of marriage as life-long commitment and faithfulness, as well as the appropriate context for producing and nurturing children are affirmed by Aboriginal cultures.

While understanding of traditional/Christian law may change with time, the Law itself is eternal. A society may decide to change social practices by careful consideration and consultation, but that is seen as a deeper revelation of eternal truth and its application to the current situation.

2.2 Recent immigrant communities

2.2.1 Whole families, rather than individuals

In many non-Anglo cultures, marriage is held in high esteem and is the norm.

Marriage in Pacific, Asian and African cultures is usually seen not simply as two people being joined; whole extended families are involved. Where the individuals come from families resident in different towns, two weddings may be conducted to ensure all can participate. In fact, if extended family members are not involved, it is often difficult for them to recognise the couple as married, even if under Australian law their status is registered as such.

If the couple insists on being married without community approval (which may happen, for example, in intercultural relationships), such marriages may not be recognised. The whole community bears witness and needs to be involved in blessing the union. In the process of a couple becoming married, the networks of families are changed and new roles and relationships are established.

One further indication of marriage being more a family matter is that couples are often expected to care for ageing parents.

For Christians there are three dimensions: the legal issues, the Christian aspects and the cultural aspects. It is often a drawn-out journey, entailing betrothal, engagement, marriage and parenthood, with extended families heavily involved in every stage. Because of the involvement of the Christian community and its convictions, inter-faith marriages, and even marriages between people from different Christian denominations may cause major complications.

2.2.2. Arranged marriages

In some communities marriages may still be arranged. Some African groups for example see this important in order to prevent genetic problems with children.

Nevertheless most groups can see that arranged marriages are becoming less common the longer the group is in Australia. There is then a gradual change from older relatives choosing the partner, to the choice by the couple being strongly influenced by parents and others, to the couple needing to seek approval for their choice, and eventually to the choice of a couple being entirely matter for them.

2.2.3 A rite of passage

Some commented that in their communities marriage marks the change to adulthood. People achieve a new status. This also extends to the parents of the couple.

2.2.3 Polygyny

Although not recognised in Australian law, some people come from societies where polygyny is widely accepted, and carry on this practice in Australia. Insisting on only one wife may cause great distress and even hardship.

2.2.4 Pre-marital sexual activity

Pre-marital sexual activity was regarded as uncommon in many societies and was often associated with shame. Some groups in Australia come from countries where cohabitation outside of wedlock is punishable under the law.

Unmarried children usually stay at home until married, particularly girls. This can sometimes lead to inter-generational tension with marriage seen as an escape from the family home.

2.2.5 Fertility

Marriage is often closely linked to fertility and child-bearing, with ceremonies symbolising these aspects. In some cultures, the marriage is not fully recognised until a child is born.

Nevertheless, sex is regarded as a very private matter, with few public displays of affection. In many communities, men and women may not even sit together in church. Sex and all associated matters associated are not easily talked about, particularly in mixed gender groups.

2.2.6 Gender roles

Roles will vary, but often usually the male partner is seen as dominant, with the woman entering her husband's family. In a few communities the man is regarded as "owning" the woman, having paid for her. When a woman marries, she may no longer have a claim on any inheritance from the family of her birth. Where there is a strong ideology of male dominance, domestic violence may be common.

2.2.7 Divorce

Divorce has been very rare in some communities, with great shame attached to the families. Many churches regard marriage is indissoluble. Where there are second marriages, the complexities often lead to problems. People have difficulty dealing with blended families, and step-children may be regarded as "second-class."

On the other hand, divorce may be more common among people of middle-eastern background, with church leaders having a determining say. Some groups report that divorce is also more common in Australia than in the country of origin.

2.2.8 In Australia

Cultural beliefs and practices are often carried on in Australia; for example, dowries may need to be paid by the girl's family, bride price by the boy's family, or gifts exchanged.

All communities reported that, with each successive generation, there was more openness, with a gradual shift towards Western values and practices. Having said that, migrant communities in Australia may sometimes be more traditional than people in the home country, where practices have changed since the family migrated.

2.2.9 Variations within national groups

It is difficult to generalise as, even within national groups, great differences exist. In some Indonesian and Melanesian communities, for example, rights and responsibilities may be inherited along patriarchal or matriarchal lines, or there may be equal emphasis on both.

2.3 Marriage in Anglo Australian society

2.3.1 Individual choice and an ideology of romantic love

In Anglo-Celtic (Western) culture, marriage is essentially a personal choice of the two individuals concerned. Their feelings for each other play a large role. There is an expectation that people will be “soul mates.” Notions of romantic love, portrayed in Hollywood movies and by royal weddings, arouse strong emotions. They may also promote unrealistic expectations. The fantasy of the “fairy-tale wedding” resulting in a couple which “lives happily ever after” usually bears little relationship to reality. A marriage is actually more about “walking in love” than “falling in love.” It is more a process than an event.

With so much weight put on the ceremony, this may be the only time conversations about the nature of the relationship happen and reflection on the ongoing maturing of the relationship is given little opportunity. (The Marriage Encounter movement provided this opportunity, but seems to have passed.)

Reasons for getting married may include the desire for companionship, wanting to have children and finding financial and other forms of security. In rural areas, having a helpmate on the farm and bearing offspring to whom the property may be passed on can also be reasons for desiring marriage.

Marriage is expected to be the locus of love, fidelity, mutual support, respect and companionship. It is about partnership, a committed and exclusive relationship, meeting emotional needs, all of which are regarded as personally fulfilling.

At the same time, economic considerations also come into play. Sharing resources may be a consideration in deciding to marry. The increasing incidence of pre-nuptial arrangements is also represents a recognition of an economic aspect.

2.3.2 The way people meet

Internet dating services and singles’ clubs now play a large role in people becoming acquainted, whereas previously it was church youth groups or other clubs and societies.

2.3.3 “Living together”

Today, having a loving, mutually supportive and enriching relationship may not actually be connected with being married. Many people live in long-term unmarried relationships, with their commitment expressed through having a child, or a joint mortgage, rather than a formal ceremony. Many see marriage as irrelevant to this, or at least it is not highly valued. Others want to ensure the relationship is a lasting one, before committing themselves to marriage. Some, aware of the divorce rate, do not want to commit to marriage. The quality of the relationship is regarded as more important. Some couples begin to think about marriage when they have children, or when they are thinking of having children baptised.

Younger people tend to be much more open to the various types of relationships. De facto couples have many of the legal rights of married couples. These de facto relationships are often regarded by

friends and colleagues in the same way as marriages. Some see marriage as an important social institution, but others see it as quaint, irrelevant, or even oppressive.

The decline in the number of marriages is sometimes regarded as a sign of the desire of freedom and self-fulfilment in western cultures, a desire to assert rights without responsibilities.

At the same time, some older people who are widowed or divorced choose not to marry when they find a new partner, because of inheritance issues.

While a wedding is always a significant occasion, if a couple chooses not to marry, this usually accepted by the family. For couples who do choose to marry, the wedding ceremony adds value to their commitment. Many people still hope to marry as an expression of a long-term loving, supportive relationship. The wedding is a public event in which two people declare their love and commitment to each other and the family and wider community declare their commitment and pledges support.

The term “partner” has become widely used, probably because it does not distinguish husband/wife, married/de facto or heterosexual/homosexual. Similarly, the use of “Ms” has become widespread, as it no longer distinguishes a woman’s marital status.

2.3.4 Weddings

There may be pressure from parents to marry, especially if the woman is pregnant.

Most couples choosing to marry have cohabited for a considerable time. The average age of marriage has increased. People will marry when they can afford it, or when their career is established. The wedding is seen as expensive luxury, possibly encouraged by a burgeoning wedding industry. More couples are sharing the costs of the wedding with parents. Nevertheless, economic considerations are often important in a couple choosing not to marry, preferring to use the money to reduce the mortgage or have an overseas holiday. A wedding is optional, nice when it happens, but not absolutely necessary.

The ceremony may be part of a string of events: engagement, hens’/buck’s party, church service, reception, baby shower, baptism. Some girls may want the wedding more than the marriage. There is a trend towards not bothering about it, but if and when it happens it is a huge event.

Some marry in order to have children baptised by the church.

2.3.5 A marriage of equals?

Marriage is regarded as a union of equals; but while this may be the ideal, it is not always the practice. In the past the church preached the submission of women, which has made some disaffected with the church. While notionally it is a relationship of equals, there is still an expectation that the man will “ask” the woman. On the other hand, the wedding is seen as more about the bride than the groom. Yet, the practice of the father bringing her to the groom (“giving her away”) is still common, in spite of the current UCA Marriage Service.

Even though the wife and husband are to be equal, it is still often the case that many women do the bulk of child care, and even housework, in addition to working outside the home. Nevertheless, at least there is broad societal agreement that marriage is never about “power over” another.

2.3.6 Gender roles

Male and female roles are much less clearly defined than they once were. Roles tend to be negotiated by the partners, rather than prescribed by social convention. While there are still lingering views about male headship and males being providers, most now question this. Both partners now often work outside the home, meaning that home duties are shared, even though many women still carry an extra load. Wives may choose not to use their husband’s surname. Males

now tend to be much more involved with child rearing. Girls are frequently more independent before marriage, having their own income and accommodation.

A few groups commented that men no longer have a defined role. [RB – with the suggestion that this is a problem]

2.3.7 Sexual expression

Marriage was once widely seen as permission to have sex. Sexual abstinence before marriage was the official norm (and therefore sexual activity before marriage was not spoken about in polite company, even when practised). This was reinforced by the lack of effective birth control. The church regarded celibacy in singleness as God's inviolable standard. One result of this is that people married for lust.

Pregnancy outside of wedlock was seen as great shame and girls went away to give birth and have their babies adopted. Casual sex and "one night stands," if such practice became known, was met with disapproval.

After marriage sexual relations resulting in procreation were seen as an important, even essential part of marriage. It was expected that marriages would be "consummated" during the honeymoon. Today it is probably more accepted that some marriages may be "platonic" in that sex is not part of the relationship.

The availability of the contraceptive pill was a major turning point in changing attitudes.

Many older people grieve over their children and grandchildren's casual relationships, de facto relationships, serial relationships and/or divorce.

2.3.8 Family life

Some commented that having children is no longer seen as an essential part of marriage. Others noted that family did not necessarily mean a biological family. Yet, where a couple desires to have children but are unable to do so, this can cause sadness and distress.

The number of children per couple has declined in Anglo-Celtic families. The cost of living is probably a factor. More women work outside the home, making child rearing more difficult to manage, especially in the early years. Some grandmothers take on considerable responsibility for child care (many gladly).

Because nuclear families are often isolated, many families are left without wider support and hence struggle to keep the marriage together. Stresses on families may be exacerbated by one partner working away (e.g. in mining towns, the armed forces) or by unemployment. In rural areas, there is usually more support from extended families.

2.3.9 Divorce

Because of the high rate of divorce (and sometimes remarriage) marriage is seen as a somewhat risky venture. While the intention may be for a life-long relationship, the reality is often for a shorter term. Although divorce has become more common, yet life-long marriage is still held as an ideal. Divorce still carries some stigma. Divorcees lose a sense of identity and have more difficulties socially. Some people are reluctant to divorce, even when their marriages are clearly not working and, for some, this has given marriage a bad name.

Older couples are often more likely to stay together, while younger ones more ready to consider divorce. Open discussion in the church about divorce in the 1980s has helped divorced people to feel more accepted in the church. The ending of a marriage may be marked by Christian ritual. For good or ill, divorce is rarer where there has been a strong Catholic influence. If a relationship is destructive, people do not have to stay (because of economic or social pressure). There is more community support for couples choosing to separate.

When is a marriage not a marriage? When the decree nisi is granted, or is it when the relationship does not exhibit the essential relational features of marriage such as companionship, support, affection, emotional fulfilment?

Is divorce too easy? Do people opt out of marriage, rather than engage in the struggle to make it work? Often people enter into new relationships without learning from experience.

There are many one parent and blended families. These may present great challenges.

2.3.10 The declining influence of the church

Many more civil ceremonies are being conducted than forty or fifty years ago. In these, couples often write their own vows and find words meaningful to them.

Marriage is now seen as being purely between the two people being married, with little or no reference to God. Some people still believe the church should “own” marriage, unreasonably. Some couples still want a church wedding, but have no obvious Christian allegiance. Marriage is regarded more as a social rite of passage and a legal arrangement rather than a sacred covenant.

2.3.11 Rural and urban

There are differences between urban and rural contexts. Gender roles tend to be more clearly defined in rural areas. In urban areas, the roles are usually negotiated, rather than prescribed. Rural people regard themselves, often proudly, as more traditional, with marriage seen as “for life”, and less acceptance of recent changes such as de facto relationships, couples having children out of wedlock and divorce.

2.3.12 Awareness of other cultures

Inter-cultural, inter-racial and inter-faith marriages are becoming much more common, whereas previously they were frowned on, or even illegal. Also, the couple’s denominational affiliation is now rarely an issue.

Greater awareness of traditional Indigenous marriage arrangements and migrant-ethnic communities has helped many Australians to see the diversity of approaches to marriage. While many people are aware of these recent changes, few have any historical overview of marriage and how it has changed over the centuries – e.g. to what extent are our expectations of marriage shaped by the rise of the market economy?

Western culture puts enormous expectations on one relationship to meet a person’s needs. It idealises the nuclear family and this is isolating and puts great pressure on couples. In other cultures individuals are much more embedded a range of relationship networks.

2.3.13 Various views

Marriage in Anglo Australian society may be variously seen as:

- A valued form of social recognition of a relationship, in which the couple has mutual rights and responsibilities confirmed by public vows in the presence of family and friends
- A social and cultural construction which has changed over history. (One group commented that that initially it was a way of securing property within families, public civil ceremonies were first conducted by the Romans. They added that Boswell argues that the liturgy derives from a civic Roman liturgy for two men making a public commitment of life-long friendship and the church probably chose this liturgy to subvert the then dominant idea of marriage as serial monogamy for economic reasons. Some stated the Catholic Church only conducted its first ceremonies in the mid-1500s and that love was not considered an important part of marriage until about 200 years ago. Would what we claim to be “Christian marriage” today be recognised by Christians of other times?)
- An outmoded patriarchal system.

- The best way to raise children i.e. by a married man and a woman who are also the birth parents of the children.
- An institution which disenfranchises and discriminates against GLBTI people.
- An institution ordained by God.

One or two commented that, with no strong societal consensus about marriage, there are few role models. Along with that, there is little marriage preparation and couples have to invent their marriage with little support.

At the same time, the words of a former marriage service still resonate in people's consciousness – "love, honour and obey," "until death us do part."

2.3.14 Problems and advantages

Sadly, some people see marriage as a prison, with aspects of abuse taken for granted. Some couples stay together because of children, family, church or social expectations, even though the relationship is not a happy one. While the UCA does not see marriage as a sacrament, Christian couples do see themselves as making promises before God and may therefore be more reluctant to name the ending of a marriage.

Some people see the fact that adults are sometimes in serial relationships as problematic, creating psychological and social problems for their children. Conversely, long-term marriage is seen as providing a secure environment for children. At the same time there is the recognition that people are living much longer and having one person meet all needs over many decades may be unrealistic.

While de facto couples have some recognition in law, there are still some advantages of being married e.g. wife and children may be better looked after if the husband is away on army service, or being accepted as the next of kin at the bedside in hospitals, or when one partner dies. Not being married may also create problems for couples in terms of visa conditions and has implications for immigration. Marriage is internationally recognised; de facto relationships not necessarily.

In all, long-term, committed, loving marriages are still valued and seen as important achievements and a sign of success.

3. Christian views of marriage

3.1 Bible passages

Passages regarded as relevant and specifically cited in the responses were:

- Gen. 1:27. "God created humankind in his image ... male and female." Some interpret this as excluding homosexual persons. Others noted that God is beyond gender. Some noted that if all are created in the image of God, then we need to celebrate same gender relationships.
- Gen. 1:28. "Be fruitful ..." Some saw this as confirming that it had to be male and female.
- Gen. 2:18. "Not good to be alone." About companionship.
- Gen. 2:24. "Two become one." Some see this as confirming that marriage can only be between a man and a woman. (Some themes here are loyalty, faithfulness, covenant, respect, love, companionship, procreation, humility.)
- Gen. 5:2. "Male and female he created them and he blessed them and named them 'Humankind.'"
- Gen. 18:16-19:29. God condemns Sodom and Gomorrah.
- Lev. 18:22. Homosexual relations forbidden.
- Ruth 1:16, 17 is sometimes used in weddings, but it has nothing to do with marriage and is about a same gender relationship.
- 1 Sam. 18. Jonathan's covenant with David.
- Prov. 1:8,9. Children to heed parents.
- Eccles. 4:9,11,12. "Two are better than one ..."
- Song of Songs. An affirmation of erotic love.
- Hosea helps us to see what is important in marriage.
- Matt. 5:27ff. "You have heard ... not commit adultery."
- Matt. 19:5//Mark 10:7-8. Eph. 5:31. "A man shall leave his father and mother ... one flesh." A reference to the creation story.
- John 2:1-12. The wedding at Cana. Some understood this as Jesus confirming or blessing marriage, while others questioned this interpretation.
- John 13:31-34. A new commandment.
- Rom. 1:26-27. What is natural and unnatural.
- Rom. 12. It is about transformation, mutuality, respect.
- 1 Cor. 7. Directions concerning marriage.
- 1 Cor 13 "Love is ..." Is it a relatively new thing to associate this passage, and love, with marriage?
- Gal. 3:28 "in Christ ... neither male nor female."
- Gal. 5:22ff. Fruit of the Spirit.
- Eph. 5:21-33. "Be subject to one another ..." "... as Christ loved the church." The verse about wives submitting to their husbands has been repeatedly used out of context to oppress women. On the other hand, Christ loving the church is an image both rich and challenging.
- Eph. 6:1-2. Some saw this as endorsing the nuclear family of mother, father, children.
- Eph. 6:10-20. "Put on the whole armour ..."
- Col. 3:14ff. "Let Christ rule in your hearts."
- Col. 3:18-25. Rules for households.
- Phil. 2. In marriage we empty ourselves for the sake of the other, put the other first.
- 1 Tim. 3:12. Deacons to have one wife [RB – or "marry once"]
- 1 Tim. 5:14. Younger widows should remarry.
- 2 Tim. 2:4. Women should love their husbands and care for their families.
- Heb. 13:4. Let marriage be held in honour.
- 1 Peter 3:17. Show consideration for your wives.
- 1 John 3:11ff. Love one another.

- 1 John 4:7-21. Love is from God.
- Rev. 19:7. Marriage of the Lamb and his bride.

Some groups commented that the New Testament actually says little about marriage, but a lot about love. Relationships grow and change, and love can accommodate that. Passages relevant to marriage are not necessarily specifically about marriage.

Another group noted that while Jesus objected to divorce and Paul allowed it under certain circumstances, does this suggest that the biblical teaching on marriage should not be regarded as immutable law?

3.2 Comments about the Bible on marriage

In light of the Genesis passages, some in the church see marriage as strictly between one man and one woman as an indelible gift of creation, rather than a cultural institution variously expressed in different societies and changing over time. When this is placed alongside the references to procreation in the Genesis accounts, and the passages about homosexuality, people resist the possibility of recognising same-gender relationships. They see their views supported by Scripture and church tradition.

Others see it differently. Were Abraham and Sarah married, or were they in a committed relationship? Levirate marriage was practised in Biblical times, probably to provide protection and support for women. The patriarchs and kings of the Tanakh practised polygyny and had sexual access to their wives' servant girls and concubines. The story of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz emphasises economic relationships. Women were owned and passed from one man to another. The impression is that Biblical marriage was about procreation and security. There was pressure on woman to be fertile and bear sons or she felt shamed. With these various biblical models, how can we assert the Bible endorses our current societal view of marriage?

There is actually very little specifically about marriage in the gospels. Jesus attended a wedding in Cana, and spoke against divorce – that's about it. The New Testament epistles view a relationship of one male and one female; not multiple wives, as in some parts of the Tanakh.

While Jesus is a role model in other areas of life, he was probably single, as was Paul. Perhaps Priscilla and Aquila represent a positive model. Ananias and Sapphira certainly don't! In any case, biblical models are culturally embedded. "As Christ loves the church" is often used as an ideal. While that is a powerful assertion, what narrative examples are there?

Does "covenant" language help us? The Biblical covenants were established by God unilaterally, even if people could opt out. Might the analogy reinforce patriarchy?

Many more passages deal with the quality of relationships than the formalities. "Faithfulness" is a key biblical concept.

In fact, Scripture is not really about marriage as understood in contemporary Western societies, which includes legal recognition by the State. It is dishonest to say the Bible supports marriage as we understand it. Often people argue for a so-called "Christian" view when, in fact, they are looking to justify some preferred cultural practice or belief. Scripture has a diversity of views.

3.3 Hermeneutical issues

In what sense is the Bible "the word of God?" People use this to bolster literal interpretations and to argue for upholding 2,000 year old cultural practices today.

How much of the Bible offers divine instruction or where does it describe social practices at the time of writing? What are the implications of seeing the passages as culturally determined? Does that then make it irrelevant to us, or can it still have meaning or authority for us? If we do not take them literally, does that mean we can ignore them? Jesus did not interpret Scripture legalistically.

Some commented that many Bible passages which are used to support traditional marriage are not about marriage at all. It is easy to use Scripture to support our position, whether a particular cultural perspective, feminism, a social prejudice, or some experience. To what extent is the church's so-called "traditional" view of marriage (male and female, no sex outside of marriage, for life etc.) shaped by relatively European culture? Do we use the Bible and theology to claim too much for marriage?

The church may be led by the Spirit into new understandings, as the early church was on the issue of circumcision and the later church on the issue of slavery, apartheid etc.

3.4 Issues of theological method

What weight do we put on the words of scripture and tradition over against experience and culture(s)? Two groups also commented that Wesleyan quadrilateral should not be used to overturn the Reformed "sola Scriptura" principle.

It is a fact that societal changes have helped us to reconsider our theology. Awareness of other cultures also helps us to reconsider our theology. Many groups reported that hearing people's stories of their personal experiences made them reconsider their theology. People's experience is that there are great couples, with great relationships and some are married and some are not.

A few groups said that we should give further consideration to the issue of marriage, without wanting to be clear what the outcome of such consideration might be. Scripture, the views of people in the church, community standards and the legal situation would all be relevant. A number of groups noted that they had changed their positions on de facto relationships, divorcees etc. Is this how the Spirit guides the church, or are we simply following social conventions and standards?

Furthermore, some have the right to be married and others not. Our personal experience of family and friends has forced people to reconsider how they see marriage, divorce, de facto relationships, inter-racial couples and same-gender attraction. Some, however, asked (rhetorically?) "Can our experiences change God's law?" Some noted that our theologies are affected by our age, culture, gender, psychological issues and wondered if this was valid.

Others noted that our theology should be governed by scripture as an expression of God's will and not experience.

A Trinitarian theology, with its emphasis of unity and diversity, will help us build a relational theology of marriage. The relationships of the Persons of the Trinity are based on mutual love, commitment, respect and submission, and so also the relationship between a man and woman in marriage. One group noted that the heterogeneous nature of the Triune god was at odds with homosexual relationships.

One group asked "How might a New Testament eschatological worldview, often helpful in considering ethical and lifestyle issues, inform our understanding of marriage?" Paul thought it made marriage irrelevant and the gospels report Jesus as saying there is no marriage in heaven.

3.5 The Declaration of Purpose

Many strongly affirmed the wording of the Declaration of Purpose in the Marriage Service, especially the references to mutuality, love, respect, faithfulness, sharing life together and the clear implication of equality. It has theological depth and a richness of meaning; it is profound.

Others critiqued the Declaration.

- Are we being selective in picking bits of theology to reinforce female-male relationships and marginalising others?
- Are we idealising marriage and giving the impression that the ceremony or the certificate guarantees the quality of the relationship?

A gift of God and a means of grace

- It is all about grace.
- An earlier UCA statement repeated the phrase “marriage is given that ...”. The previous wording was also more about marriage in society, rather than the two individuals.
- A few groups doubted that marriage is given by God, stating the arguments for this do not stand up to scrutiny. Furthermore, to emphasise this may be to put great burdens on people e.g. pressure to stay in a destructive relationship, not giving people a second chance at marriage.
- Where does this leave people who are not married but in committed long term relationships? Can we re-visit the “right relationships” in *Uniting Sexuality and Faith*?

Made in the image of God

- Are we made male and female in the image of God? God is beyond gender. Perhaps “...in whose image we are all made.”

Founded on God’s loving nature

- Many affirmed this.

Reflect the love of Christ for his church

- Some saw this as a key, or at least a key image.
- Some objected to the lack of inclusive language, declaring Christ is beyond gender. One group suggested that the non-gender specific pronoun “hir” should be used. One group thought Jesus was transgender or intersex, commenting that if Jesus was born of a virgin, there was no male DNA.)
- The church as the bride of Christ is still a useful analogy, some thought.

Husband and wife

- A number of groups wanted this removed either because it suggested certain gender roles, or because it meant the service could not be used for same gender couples.
- In some languages used in the UCA there is one term for both husband and wife, yet that term seemed not applicable to a same-gender couple.

Live together

- What is added to a relationship that has been a reality for years when a couple decides to marry?
- It speaks of living together, and the life of a home, while it is a fact of contemporary life that husbands and wives live separately, mainly because one partner, usually the male, needs to go where work is. This is common in Indonesia and India, for example, as it is in “fly-in-fly-out” mining communities. What are the implications of this for our theology of marriage?

Love each other with respect

- Important!
- Our culture has made us look at equality between the partners.

Physical love

- The sexual union is God-ordained.
- Is it better to emphasise all dimensions of love?
- There is the suggestion in scripture that a sexual union connects us to that person for ever, yet few people today stay with the person with whom they first had sexual intercourse.
- What does “enables the full expression” mean? Are we saying here that sex is only appropriate within marriage? That sexual expression outside of marriage is less than ideal?

Shape society

- “Good” marriages may perhaps do this, as do “good” de facto relationships.
- The view is sometimes put that society will crumble if we do not uphold male-female monogamy; it won’t.
- We need to be reminded that it is not just about the two individuals; there is a community context.

Whole of their lives

- It speaks of a marriage being a life-long relationship, even though this is not the reality for many people.
- Did we ever expect to live as long as we do now and to have such long marriages?

Begin this life together

- Almost all couples who come to be married have been in it for quite some time.
- A Christian marriage is much more than a Christian wedding.

God has created and Christ has blessed

- Did God create marriage? Did Christ bless marriage? Some think not.

A number of groups thought it all sounded a bit dour. Where is the humour, the fun, the romance?

3.6 The statement of the eighth Assembly (1997)

Quite a few groups commented that this was well-crafted and scriptural.

Some affirmed strongly that marriage is between a man and a woman.

No groups objected to the possibility of divorce. There was general recognition that marriages fail, that sometimes it is better for the marriage not to continue and that God forgives and majors on new beginnings. Divorce is often extremely difficult. Grace applies. The biblical objection to divorce had to do with leaving women vulnerable. One group did wonder if the law makes divorce too easy, preventing people from trying to make the marriage work.

Some commented that the UCA is seen as more accepting of the realities of our humanity, so people come to us when their own denominations will not marry them. There is certainly no place for judging people whose marriages are not life-long.

3.7 Uniquely Christian aspects

Civil ceremonies have the same legal status, but the theology of marriage is not well understood.

There is little understanding of the difference between a civil and a church union; the couple has the same status, even in the church.

A number of people doubted that many Christians had views all that different from general societal ones. Others thought a Christian view of marriage was completely different from non-Christian views. The blessing of a marriage within the Christian community was seen to be important, and that promises are made before God. One group noted that what made a marriage Christian was not that it is celebrated in a church, but that the couple are Christians.

Comments about what might be regarded as Christian emphases include:

- Part of God's purpose for humanity; a gift from God, a "three-way bond."
- A theology of covenant i.e. it is not just about the two people, but includes God.
- A wedding can be part of Sunday worship so the congregation witnesses the marriage and supports the couple.
- Some see marriage as sacramental, or at least quasi-sacramental. We certainly no longer see it as inferior to celibacy. But should we see the relationship as sacred, rather than the ceremony?
- Important aspects are mutuality, support, mutual submission, life-long, faithful, monogamous, selfless commitment, acceptance, trust and forgiveness, sharing everything, especially who we really are. A good marriage is a beautiful thing and a clear expression of the love of God.
- There is a depth of theology about marriage; it is about much more than two people loving each other. For example, it is about companionship, but perhaps being "one flesh" points to something deeper.
- Raising godly children (some saw this as the purpose of marriage; most saw bearing and raising children as optional). The quality of the relationship is important, rather than reproduction.

- An important aspect is relying on God in difficult times. Christians are therefore essentially optimistic and hopeful about marriage.
- Marriage may well entail self-sacrifice.
- We need to hold the “ideal” but acknowledge human frailty.
- There needs to be commitment and forgiveness, just as God pursues us with love and wants to forgive so we can make a fresh start. God’s gift includes the possibility of new beginnings.
- The church in Acts cared for the widows (i.e. the vulnerable). Today that might include abused women, divorcees.

Some asked if the ceremony and the certificate make a marriage. Is the long-term public living together not also a public declaration? Others asked, referencing Jesus’ statement on the Sabbath, if marriage is made for humanity, rather than humanity made for marriage.

The uniquely Christian emphases may be better understood by people who come from countries where there are larger communities of other faiths.

3.8 The church community

Being single in the church is sometimes difficult, when the emphasis is on families and couples. Well-meaning people often pressure singles to be married. There is still some status attached to being married and having a family. The status of being single was seen to be of less worth. “Who is your family?” is a different question from “Do you have children?” which leaves some people feeling as less than complete.

In the church there is clearly a variety of views. Older ones were critical of Julia Gillard for not being married. For younger ones it was much less of an issue; they want to emphasise the quality of the relationship, rather than the formality.

Is the expectation too high? When is it appropriate for someone to leave a marriage? What if one of the partners or children are at risk? Many people in distressing or destructive marriage find difficulty talking about this in the church community.

The church has become more accepting of people living together before marriage, and of realising some marriages need to end. We also need to be aware that there are probably gay people in our congregations who have not “come out” and there are probably marriages where one partner is “gay” and the other “straight.”

Some expressed concern that the issue of same gender marriage would again create conflict and division in the church. People at either end of the spectrum of views on same gender relationships could leave the church. Others thought that this would undermine the authority of the Basis of Union, the institution of marriage and our commitment to a Trinitarian theology. Still others stated that the church could live with diversity, especially if it was recognised that marriage is state issue and ministers as celebrants are free to act according to their conscience.

Clearly some people believe strongly that to extend any understanding of marriage to other than one man and one woman, we would be departing from the biblical view and the view of the church universal throughout the ages and cease to be the church of Jesus Christ.

Others, while more open, asserted that we are part of the ecumenical church and need to live within that. Can the Uniting Church go it alone in its theology of marriage? What about churches with whom we have formal partnership agreements? Some felt that these ecumenical relationships might mean we move more slowly.

3.9 Additional comments from Indigenous Christians

Traditional Dreaming stories were creation stories. The Bible creation stories have therefore been regarded as particularly important. These emphasise Adam and Eve and, like traditional stories,

stress the importance of fertility (“be fruitful and multiply”). This plays a key role in the way people understand marriage.

Marriage is therefore seen as a gift of God. It is also deeply interconnected with other aspects of society, such as economics and politics. In Aboriginal society, social practices are divinely given and sanctioned.

Today many Indigenous Christians believe that the move towards one man and one woman (rather than multiple wives) is good. They see this as a revision of traditional Law in the light of Christian revelation. They are therefore saddened when younger people who know neither traditional Law nor Christian teaching have multiple partners.

Marriage is seen as a vocation. The blessing of the relationship imparted in sacred ceremony sets Christian marriage apart.

While the Uniting Church sees the freely given consent of the couple as an important part of marriage (Min. 97.31), this was not a key part of the way Aboriginal society saw marriage. [RB – Probably also true for other societies in which arranged marriages are or were the norm.] The UCA also sees marriage as a public event, and this may have difficulties for Aboriginal people, as 2.1.2 has indicated. Does the ceremony itself need to be a large public event, or is the wearing of a ring for example sufficient public statement?

Changes in marriage practice have resonated throughout the culture, contributing to the kinship system going awry, which in turn has implications for other institutions and systems. The fact that de facto couples are treated the same way as married couples by Centrelink, means that the link between marriage and economics, for example, has been weakened.

In less traditional Aboriginal communities today, especially where groups were subject to missions which did not understand or respect the culture (generally those leaning towards the more fundamentalist end of the theological spectrum), Aboriginal people are confused by the current discussions in the Uniting Church and find it very difficult to reconsider their views. “The missionaries taught us that our Law was not God’s way, so we left our culture to follow God’s way (celibacy in singleness, one wife, until death, get married in church, homosexuality is a sin). Now you are telling us that what missionaries taught us was God’s way is not really God’s way!!??”

Perhaps past missionaries confused God’s way with their own culture. Christian teaching was mixed up with colonisation thinking. It was simply handed on without detailed explanation or discussion. Today Indigenous church members want and need to consider these questions carefully and thoroughly. As noted above, change is not impossible. People recognise that the early church dealt with the issue of circumcision, a deeply entrenched Jewish cultural practice, and adapted to the new situation of having non-Jewish church members.

4. Revising our view of marriage?

4.1 Agents of the State?

Many groups thought it was time to get out of doing the government's work. Church and state need to be separate. Let the government worry about the legal aspects. Where people then wish a church blessing, this would add an additional aspect to their relationship and would then have some integrity. Conducting blessings of civil unions for people for whom that has significance has good support.

Conducting weddings is often a very demanding part of a minister's role and is generally not valued by congregations or seen as ministry. If it brings in money, congregations may be more tolerant of the ministers spending time with couples and conducting weddings. Many ministers take the role seriously, but it may be a point of tension with the lay leaders.

4.2 Beyond patriarchy

Some groups thought that the opportunity now will enable us to move beyond patriarchal residues and move toward "right relationships". The practices of a woman being walked down the aisle by one man and handed to another, and a woman taking her husband's name, should not be continued.

Others thought that it was important to give the message that sex has to do with respect for the other. Some thought that, for some people, being married gave them a licence to exploit or victimise. Some reject marriage because they associate it with male headship, with "protecting" women and children, or with procreation.

4.3 Resources requested

A number of groups requested good contemporary resources for marriage preparation. One group noted that marriage preparation actually begins when children are very young.

The "marriage enrichment" movement some decades ago was seen as very helpful. This could well be revisited.

4.4 People living with disabilities

A few groups thought that it would be helpful to have a statement on marriage in relation to people living with various disabilities.

4.4 How important?

A few noted that the church should not be preoccupied with this at all. There are other, more pressing social issues. Jesus had lots to say about wealth and almost nothing about sexuality or marriage.

5. Same gender marriage?

5.1 Indigenous views

People recognised that issues of partnering cannot be isolated from other aspects of a culture; it is all part of one inter-connected fabric of beliefs, values and norms. We need to look at how relationships work in a particular cultural community. While there is undoubtedly same-gender attraction in Aboriginal societies, these do not receive formal recognition and are not talked about.

It is noted above (2.1.2) that traditional stories are essentially creation stories and therefore the Christian creation stories are particularly influential. The Genesis account emphasise male and female and procreation. It is therefore difficult for people to come to terms with same gender marriage.

The word “marriage” entails a man and a woman. If there is a different ceremony offered for same gender relationships, does this necessarily mean they would be regarded as “second class”? Can’t they just be different? Do people feel less equal or less accepted if it is not marriage? Recognising a relationship is not necessarily the same as marriage.

To see marriage for same-gender couples as question of civil rights may be to misunderstand it. It is a gift from God, a gift of grace, not a question of “rights.” The language seems inappropriate. This also points to the fact that church and state may see marriage quite differently, and it may be inappropriate for Ministers to be the public servants of “empire” by continuing to undertake legal functions (as also noted in 4.1).

While Indigenous people have as a starting point that traditional (i.e. religious) practices are divinely ordained, they recognise that there is a diversity of views among Christians. They also recognise that, while they may not endorse same gender relationships themselves, they recognise that other faithful people may make different choices.

Yet the church should not feel pressured by societal changes. Above all, Indigenous members want the opportunity to consider the matter carefully, looking closely at what the Bible says and doing careful theological reflection.

5.2 Migrant-ethnic views

In communities of fairly recent immigrants from non-Anglo countries, people may know that there are same-sex couples, but it is simply not discussed, and therefore not well understood. In some countries, homosexual activity is illegal. If it is talked about, then the couple would probably be condemned or alienated. There is something strange, shameful and foreign about people with a same gender orientation. It is regarded as outside of what is acceptable behaviour.

Having said that, in at some tribes a warrior may, in addition to wives, have a boy sex slave. Same gender relations are therefore associated with abuse. It is also often subject to mockery. At best, people will be pitied, rather than valued.

In some cultures, a man who demonstrates what are regarded as female traits may be regarded as female, and vice versa.

While some of Ministers, especially those who have had their ministerial formation in Australian theological colleges, are open to discussing and even affirming same-gender marriage, they know that they are not where their communities are. They are also aware that “second generation” people are much more open to GLBTI relationships.

Others said that the issue was only very slowly being opened up and required lots of careful conversations and teaching, listening to various insights into Scripture. It is important not to polarise the discussion into “them” and “us”; there is only “us” in all our differences.

One group also noted that, while in their language there is one term for “husband” and “wife”, it would not be considered appropriate to use this term for members of a same gender couple.

Generally people were of the opinion that their cultural practices and the Bible were mutually supportive.

5.3 Predominantly Anglo responses

5.3.1 Same gender attraction and the Bible

A few thought the issue was simple. Genesis speaks of male and female being created in the image of God and man and woman being companions for each other. God has instituted marriage between a man and a woman in creation for all time and cultures. Same gender marriage is not what God has instituted.

Some of the same people believe the Bible teaches that homosexuality is a sin and so we have no choice but to regard it as such. We all recognise boundaries around relationships.

Others highlighted other parts of Scripture noting, for example, that Jesus moved beyond exclusion to inclusion, especially the marginalised and oppressed. Jesus recognised the image of God in those who were socially excluded, adding to GLBTI people are often victimised or outcast today. God locates Godself with the oppressed and hurts when some are excluded. Furthermore, if love is of God, and a gay couple evidences the qualities we look for in other relationships, and these are life-giving for the couple, how can we deny full recognition?

5.3.2 Views on same gender attraction

Many groups stated that, as same gender attraction was biological and/or genetic and not a choice; same gender sexual expression should not be regarded as sinful. Some see it as part of God’s good creation while others see it as an expression of the “fall.” One group noted that there is a spectrum of biology. Paul objected to people exchanging what is natural for something unnatural, so is same gender attraction natural for some?

Homophobia is always damaging and hurtful. There is certainly no place for violence, demonisation or other forms of discrimination. The church’s theology should not contribute to this, but offer protection.

Some mentioned that, while they felt personally uncomfortable with gay people being openly “amorous,” there was no place for discrimination. The church needs to be inclusive of and unconditionally hospitable toward of GLBTI people. (A few reported instances where this was not so, with sadness.) The church should lead society and not just tolerate, but celebrate GLBTI relationships. We do not normally inquire into people’s sexual preferences or practices as a condition for church membership.

A number strongly affirmed giving the same status, social support, ethical understanding and theological recognition to all, irrespective of sexual orientation or lack of it. If sexuality is a gift from God, is not same gender attraction a gift from God? Same gender attraction is fundamental to GLBTI identity and the ability to form relationships. Hence the church needs theology and ethics to provide support. Human dignity and happiness would be enhanced by same gender marriage.

On the other hand, some groups saw same gender attraction as an aberration and a sin from which people should repent and be assisted to be freed. They asserted that biblical teaching on sexual practice is unequivocal. Departing from this would eventually lead to polygamy, incest, “polyamory” and a general decline in social morality. Some saw it as resulting from childhood abandonment or abuse. One group commented that we so emphasise grace that our theology becomes wishy-washy and accepting of everything. In reaction to such views, some noted that that this reflected a stern judgmental God, rather than a loving relational God.

Some groups acknowledged that same gender attraction was “genetic” and “from the beginning of time” yet regarded it as foreign to a Christian lifestyle; adding that people with such attraction should be helped to change by the grace of God. They saw it similarly to people having to battle other sins or addictions. All thought that not judging people and ensuring all felt included in the church were important.

Many saw the issue as being much more about the quality of the relationship, about *how* to love, not *whom* to love. Recognising that the church does not have a fixed united view on the subject some simply say, “if that is what they want, that’s their business.”

5.3.3 Is marriage what GLBTI people are looking for?

The responses showed that people thought it appropriate that LGBTI people should have the same rights and privileges as others, even where they were not sure about same-sex marriage. All commented that they should be welcomed and included in our churches, including any children.

Many thought that same-gender couples should have the opportunity to be married if they so wish, seeing this as the way of Jesus and an expression of Christian love. “If marriage is a good thing, why limit it to heterosexuals?” People should be given the opportunity for a loving, faithful, committed, long term, respectful relationship with all the social, economic, legal and ethical protection that can be given. One or two groups commented that if we fail to recognise same-gender commitment and fidelity in some formal ceremony we may be encouraging promiscuity. The relationship characteristics we look for in a marriage are also there in same-sex relationships, and this needs to be recognised publicly. If we do not affirm such relationships, we are “segregating” them. The high ideals of the Declaration of Purpose applied equally to gay couples. Some same gender couples grieve the fact that the church does not fully recognise the sanctity of their relationships.

One group noted that same gender Australian couples are being married in other jurisdictions where such ceremonies are allowed. They also noted that there are people married to opposite sex partners in their home countries, but are in same-sex relationships in Australia.

Quite a number of groups thought that some parallel legal recognition and church ceremony might be more appropriate. Where people were fully supportive of same-sex unions, not all thought that “marriage” was the right term for such unions. One group drew the analogy between the alternate services for Baptism and the Service of Thanksgiving and Blessing of a Child. [RB – Probably not helpful; the ordination of Deacons and Ministers of the Word may be a better parallel, if we need one at all.] Others thought that to deny marriage to GLBTI couples is to imply that they and their relationships are “second-rate”.

One or two groups noted a certain irony in that, while fewer heterosexual couples were getting married, gay couples were seeking it! Many commented that same gender couples ought to be able to make a public commitment of their relationship, whatever it is called.

Some noted that the 1997 statement on divorce emphasises grace, compassion and not judging. The same attitude should be extended to same sex couples.

Many stated that the church needs to have a clear position, and not simply do, or not do, what the state decides. One group asked if the state legalises same-sex marriage and the church does not, will individual ministers be able to exercise “liberty of opinion?” Conversely, if the church approves same-sex covenants or same-sex marriage, will ministers be allowed to refuse to conduct such ceremonies if they do not wish to?

A number of groups commented that it was not simply a matter of civil “rights;” there were theological issues to consider. On the other hand, some said that, just as we accept OH&S standards, so we should be prepared to accept Equal Opportunity legislation.

5.3.4 Gay couples and children

Does a child need a parent of each gender? Some believed firmly that they do, or their psycho-social development would be impaired. Children need relationship with both genders if they are to be well-rounded, mature individuals. Others thought that the quality of the relationship and the care they extend to children is the key, not the parents' genders.

One person commented that the notion of a child needing both a father and mother in order to grow up as a well-adjusted person is a "myth" and cited the example of her father and his brother who were born in the early 1880s and raised by a widowed mother and her sister. He became a very well adjusted and much admired man, caring for his own family and making very worthwhile contributions to his church and community.

5.3.5 The church community

A number of people thought the church made it more difficult for GLBTI to feel accepted than in the wider society. It is clearly more of an issue in the church. While many are greatly supportive, others are not.

One group stated that celebrating same gender relationships and their children would add to the richness and diversity in the church. Others would be strongly opposed to any change in the church's current position.

5.3.6 Where is the church now?

More people would be supportive if the church's position was an equal but alternative service of recognition, rather than extending our definition of marriage.

Some noted that marriage is matter for the state and therefore there ought not to be any discrimination. Others noted that, even if the state continues to discriminate, the church cannot, adding that any rejection by the church is an "offence" to the wider community. Many people wonder what all the fuss is about and why the church is hung up on sexuality. One group noted that, just as the church reviewed its position on slavery, it now needs to reconsider its attitude to same-gender relationships.

Many noted that the church is now not where it was in 1997. Many more people have had personal contact with gay people and heard their stories. Furthermore, most young people in the church would be supportive of same-gender marriage. Yet, where people have not had personal contact with gay people or gay couples, they are more likely to hold "traditional" views. Others want to hold firmly to the 1997 declaration, but acknowledge that they are now more aware of the difficulties, struggles and aspirations of GLBTI people. Some regarded the movement towards same-gender marriage as inevitable.

All acknowledged readily that there were various views in the church about this, both within the Uniting Church and in other churches.

A few groups thought that small rural communities were less open to same-gender relationships than urban centres. They also acknowledged that there were many same sex relationships in rural areas, but people generally pretend it does not exist.

Some groups expressed confusion and asked for further clarification. What are the right questions to be asking? What key Christian convictions and values should influence our thinking? Along with issues like refugees and the environment, marriage needs to be a social issue under discussion. There seems to be a readiness to consider the issue further.

6. Conclusion

Clearly, there is no agreed theology of marriage in the Uniting Church. The responses to the consultation process reported a wide range of views. At the same time, many demonstrated openness to change and reviewing their position.

A resource document on the theology of marriage which thoughtfully and fairly considered the issues, rather than seeking to persuade people to a particular point of view, would be well received.

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