

Game of Churches

I was going to use the title Game of Thrones¹ for this reflection. This TV show is apparently the most popular legally and illegally downloaded program in the world. From what I have read the program is really about politics, with an interesting debate going on at present as to the outcome (who will win the battle and sit on the Iron Throne). There is a growing idea that there will be two equal and distinct rulers. I think anyone who understands politics knows that this is of course a fantasy, and achievable only in a fantasy world.

The 15th Assembly was a game in the sense of a political game. Yes, there is worship and many features of a Christian meeting, but if you believe that politics is not at the centre of a major decision like the one on marriage then you are clearly with the group at the centre of power. Numbers are very important, and any keen person would have known basic numbers 'for and against' revising marriage, as most members would have been reasonably identifiable. The community working groups would have also provided an ongoing running tabulation to help see where the lay of the land was, particularly to know if there was enough overall support (75%) for a move to go to formal decision-making. The examination of support for key proposals is a normal process in the meeting and the group reporting back (through the facilitation committee) enables further consideration to amalgamate or tweak proposals that may have more of a chance of success. Another way of gauging support is by members showing cards, and in the initial presentation of all the proposals on marriage, the President noted the warmth toward Proposal 8 (the ASC proposal to revise marriage). This comment was not made after any of the proposals seeking to retain the orthodox position on marriage.

It was always going to be difficult to hold up the revision of marriage when the Assembly base is oriented to liberal members being elected. I know some people start to have convulsions when this is mentioned, but please take a reality check for once and just admit that is the case – after all, even liberal members I have discussed this with privately agree and had concerns about the Assembly making a decision at this time, at least when the wider church membership was not 'fully prepared'. The Assembly is simply more representative of the small group of liberals in the Uniting Church, than the overall conservative and orthodox membership.

Many of you will know that I did not provide a blog, or Facebook updates during the 15th Assembly. I had been given an ultimatum by the Manager for the Assembly Media and Communications regarding communication arrangements. For myself, this meant that I was welcome to be present as a member of the church (as a visitor), but not in any 'reporting' capacity as this would be deemed 'media' and I would then be excluded. Visitors were kept in a separate room and watched proceedings (as available) on a video link.

¹ Note: I am not suggesting readers watch this TV show, though one could not be unaware of the impact of TV on culture today, and there is an increasing amount of academic study about this show, and other significant cultural leaders like The Walking Dead. I am interested in how moral decision-making is made in a world where these shows and reality TV dominate and provide the immediate context for many people making decisions today, and this is personal and situational ethics.

The reason given for the communication arrangements was to protect the discernment process of the Assembly by ensuring that there was no 'parallel reporting'. I understand this arrangement applied to anyone seeking to 'report' and so I chose to not 'report', but to observe.

I am not sure of the arrangements for the oversight of social media, but from my casual observation, this did tend to be a bit of a free-for all, and in my view, any experienced journalist following this and the material available could have had a reasonable idea of what was going on during this time in any case.

Even the new version of *Proposal 8*; *Proposal 61*, was available publicly on the Assembly App until it disappeared. No further proposals on marriage appeared publicly until the final (and very similar) *Proposal 64* (and ultimate resolution) was officially released well after the decision.

In hindsight, if isolation from 'outside influence' was the Assembly base, it may have been better to have a sequestered jury approach, or even a conclave.

After the 15th Assembly meeting I decided that it would not be as helpful to provide an overall report as such, but to consider the major matter of the meeting (marriage) in the light of questions that I have been receiving since the decision. While the latter sessions on marriage were in private sitting (closed session of members only), the initial introduction of the proposals (and a reporting back from community groups) and one discussion night, provided quite a good context to understand the dynamics of the meeting. I believe that most went into the meeting with one outcome in mind. There are liberal fundamentalists who would disagree that Mary had a little lamb if it was proposed as an orthodox statement!

I could not see any evangelical orthodox members voting for change. There would have been a small group of moderates, probably genuinely perplexed about how to vote until they saw the final proposal, but they would have leant toward the personal dynamics of change and the idea that a proposal having two equal and valid statements could help the church stay together in the context of diversity.

Why did we get to where we are in terms of marriage?

My now slightly older articles on the Uniting Views website provide an overview of the liberalisation of the church and sexuality matters. There are historical factors here including the liberal dominance in Victoria and this is where the direction for change has come from. For this 15th Assembly, the immediate catalyst was the change in the Marriage Act in Australia. If this change has not been made the focus at the 15th Assembly may have been on a service of blessing?

Another critical reason for a focus on revising marriage is the elevation of personal experience within the Uniting Church, culminating in the enshrinement of personal story as the contemporary story on which decisions are based.

Why did the 15th Assembly decided to push the decision through by formal procedures instead of consensus?

The simple answer is, the 15th Assembly would never have been able to achieve consensus or consensus by agreement with this matter. The bottom line is that the 15th Assembly wanted a decision and outcome and the only way was the formal decision-making process. That was the end game.

Why did the 15th Assembly want a decision at this 15th Assembly meeting?

Bearing in mind it was only seven months after the marriage plebiscite, and no other major denomination in Australia was moving toward a change, it is worth considering why there was no deferral to the 16th Assembly and to have a period of broader consultation and discussion. While sexuality issues have been on the agenda for many years, the specific issue of marriage and a recommendation to change has only been within the wider church for a comparatively short time.

The specific report that outlined change (Report on Marriage and same-gender relationships) had only been out since the end of April, and from anecdotal reports, and the limited coverage in Synod newspapers and preparing of congregations, probably a good number of members (especially without social media connections) would not have even been aware of the matter for discussion, or at least the issues.

There has been in liberal circles a conflation of the whole sexuality debate. For many liberals, there was no need for further discussion because the next logical step was marriage if the Assembly was to continue down the path it was on. There was simply no reason to wait another three years.

Why did the 15th Assembly not refer the decision for concurrence?

Well basically the 15th Assembly can make up its own mind as to what is vital to the life of the church. There is no automatic referral for concurrence so essentially the power is in the hands of the 15th Assembly. Other members on the ACC website have commented about how this matter is vital, and certainly I think most liberal members thought it was a vital matter otherwise it would not have been acted upon with such passion and urgency, so why did the 15th Assembly not consider this matter vital after the decision had been made? As a long observer of church meetings, one theme is prominent: **Never make a major decision unless you know the outcome, and once you have made the decision, don't unmake it at the same meeting.**

Some thoughts about why the move for concurrence failed are below:

- Overall, there was the dominant mantra abounding that highlighted the Assembly as its own council/counsel. Did this unwittingly lead to an arrogant position that simply thought it did not need the opinions of other councils of the church?
- There was an undeniable sense of urgency to make the decision now. People wanted to get on with being married and marrying their friends and members in a Uniting Church.

- Some people wanted the Uniting Church to claim the mantle of first (major) church to introduce same-gender marriage. They believe the Uniting Church had to lead the way (and not only on this matter).
- There was no mood for what would be considered compromise, namely referral.
- Any referral to other council raises issues and questions, including;
 - a delay in the implementation of a decision;
 - Unpredictability of the outcome, especially if congregations were included (NCLS statistics on same-sex marriage seem to indicate that it would be unlikely that the needed concurrence of congregations would have been achieved)

One could say the Assembly was at least consistent in its approach. In 2003, Resolution 84 was not considered vital and yet we know what the impact on the wider church was. Déjà vu?

Summary

Overall, the numbers for an orthodox no-decision (to prevent a decision being made to revise marriage) were simply not there. It is very difficult for evangelical members to present a positive case in a church meeting when they are perceived as the pharisees of today. I know there are some members of the Assembly who have genuine and tolerant attitudes to those who are orthodox on the matter of marriage and would not think this, but there are other members who would probably throw up if the church had maintained its orthodox position on marriage.

I had wondered at the start whether some of the moderate members may have swung to ‘no-decision’. However, even the practical issue of the catastrophic impact on the wider church, especially in CALD and indigenous communities, did not carry as much weight as the focus on helping people achieve their personal goals of marrying and helping others marry in the church. The personal focus coupled with the idea that diversity is the cornerstone of the Uniting Church produced a winner.

Winter may have come, but evangelical and orthodox congregations will not simply live with the decision to revise marriage. The 15th Assembly will however have to live with the practical consequences of not declaring marriage to be a matter vital to the life of the church, as they were the ones that initiated the divorce.

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