

A brief account about the theology of marriage discussion at the 14th Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia (12-18 July 2015)

Note: this is a report and comment by Peter Bentley, prepared for the Assembly of Confessing Congregations membership and also information of the ACC National Council.

The overall context of the presentation of the discussion about marriage and eventual resolutions is one of continued 'conversation.' This had certainly been the context of the formal proposals arising from the report from the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine.

I perceived that basically the Assembly was not of a mind to make a radical decision that would have created immediate and long-term difficulties within the UCA – that is widespread local church chaos. With all the UCA cultural and linguistic diverse national conferences affirming a traditional understanding of marriage, and the position of the UAICC (Congress) well-understood, most of the more moderate Assembly members would not have been keen to split the church. It was also known that the overwhelming majority of local church members belong to churches that do not affirm or endorse the revisionist approach to marriage in society let alone the church. The Assembly of Confessing Congregations represents a significant part of the vocal body opposed to revision, but the majority of members would be certainly with the ACC on this matter.

There was still a vocal liberal element that argued from their understanding that the UCA should lead the way in terms of endorsement of 'same-gender marriage', rather than reacting to any federal decision. There was also a personal argument that outlined how some ministers already had same-gender couples ready and waiting now to be married by them, and they know cannot do this unless the church has endorsed an explicit change in its theology of marriage, or endorsed a de-facto change by allowing for example a conscience arrangement for celebrants. A conscience arrangement of course would have opened up a minefield in terms of any beliefs in the church, and also would have promoted the idea that the UCA makes decisions by pragmatism, rather than serious theological consideration. When it is difficult to easily resolve a matter, and unwise to force a decision, the usual way forward for any denomination is more discussion. Some may say the idea of more discussion is simply to lead people in one way, but often this type of decision is more simply a reflection of an inability to proceed in one direction and a lack of knowledge about what could be the next step. There would be a hope among a number of Assembly members of a certain eventual outcome, but I believe there is also goodwill among some more moderate and concerned members about the need to genuinely talk and consider all the issues, rather than having one council of the church pre-empt a decision, especially if no recourse was given to other councils to also provide their opinion.

Some members of course, only want to talk so they can lead you in the direction of a more liberal position – always the way for fundamentalist liberals, as they can never conceive of the idea that the Assembly may actually come to understand that the traditional and orthodox position is the right position after all.

A second significant context is one raised by the facilitation group at the Assembly (and other members highlighted); namely that the church should make its own decision and not react or follow the lead of society, especially in terms of a timetable (that is the Assembly should make a decision now in case [or when as some stated] Australia approves a same-sex marriage bill. I believe this was an important context, as it helped to provide an atmosphere that placed the matter back at least on the theological level, rather than a general sociological and ethical level that is often the context in the UCA. There was however, still relatively little theological debate, especially given the small amount of time spent on the matter in plenary sessions, and also the fact that the community working groups were not provided with an opportunity to discuss the marriage proposals.

The 15th Assembly will more fully consider marriage and same-gender blessings.

The idea to continue to discuss these matters is very much related to the further proposal below that was resolved. This proposal was outlined in general ways that I perceive highlighted the context that it was not an attempt to pre-empt any decisions, so the 15th Assembly in 2015 will have a critical focus on marriage at this time, including probably a large amount of resource material: -

“in consultation with the relevant Assembly working groups, to prepare a report to the Fifteenth Assembly with appropriate recommendations, as well as supporting theological, liturgical, pastoral and educational resources; and”

No change Made to Christian Marriage

Overall, it is important to note that no changes were made to the UCA position and statement on marriage. The UCA has therefore not changed its position on Marriage.

The present understanding and theology of the Uniting Church with regard to marriage still stands. There was no move to revoke or change the 1997 decision that affirms that marriage is between a woman and a man.

It was also confirmed at the Assembly (during the time of questions and discussion), that UCA marriage celebrants do not, and would not have the right to conduct weddings other than on the basis of one man and one woman, as this is the basis for the UCA’s understanding of marriage and also the celebration of the conduct of an official marriage according to the ‘rites of the Uniting Church.’

This is the context for the resolution that was eventually approved to:

“request the General Secretary, in the event that the Commonwealth Marriage Act, or other relevant legislation, is changed, to write to all Uniting Church marriage celebrants, advising them of their freedoms and constraints under that legislation and as celebrants authorised by the Uniting Church;”

Some specific aspects

The continuing work of the Doctrine Working Group in this area will be engaged (this outlined that much more work needed to be done). In one sense it could be argued that their report to the 14th Assembly was really a preliminary report that posited a longer term approach. It had really been about raising some awareness and issues.

The need for continued conversation was highlighted with certain groups.

This was certainly a key as the Assembly agreed to continue cultural and appropriate conversations with:

- CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities) and the
- Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC)

And in a separate resolution passed by formal procedures it was agreed to engage with the LGBTIQ community (this acronym is now used, rather than Uniting Network as previously noted at the 2012 Assembly), and ‘the wider Church’.

It is worth noting that the brave raising of the need to specifically include the Assembly of Confessing Congregations in any formal discussions was not well-received judging by the number of blue cards, and lack of orange cards, so this was never proceeded with as a formal amendment, even though the ACC was included in the 2012 Assembly resolutions. I have often wondered though if the cards were not used, but an electronic based private ballot, whether some of these decisions would be different. The immediate and strategic blue-carding of ideas by a certain grouping can be done in a dominant and perhaps even intimidatory manner that unwittingly prevents more moderate people from attempting to express an opinion.

Affirmation in terms of the context of UCA membership of certain identified groups of people, (now termed LGBTIQ) will be undertaken via a pastoral letter to the church by the President. The context for the resolution for this affirmation was:

- a) Personal – reflecting in the first instance the number of lesbian and gay members at the Assembly and the perceived belief by some members of the need for an affirmation at this Assembly and time;
- b) Wider church and society perception. It was clear that some people wanted to at least provide a basic statement and position outline, not only to the wider church, but also Australian society through this arrangement.

Consideration as to whether the church should be a ‘civil’ marriage celebrant?

The Assembly has resolved to investigate what is sometimes called the European Model, whereby the state conducts the marriage and those couples who wish can come to the church for what is regarded as a church marriage or blessing. This was in the context of the wider church given the ecumenical implications as per the decision to:

“in consultation with our ecumenical partners where appropriate, to investigate the implications of changing the Church's current relationship with the Commonwealth Government with respect to the conduct of marriages.”

What the Assembly did not do.

As noted, the Assembly did not change the UCA position on marriage.

Note: The process for decision-making in the UCA is either very easy or incredibly laborious and sometimes confusing, especially if too much focus is on the ideal of consensus when it is evident that this is not a viable arrangement. Other people will comment, but as one observer, I thought the marriage discussion was usually laborious.

While it did not change its position, the Assembly decided not to:

- a) Publicly state the present UCA position on marriage and;
- b) Approve of the rejection of covenants for same – gender unions

The proposal that outlined this (the basis of is above and was referred to as Number 61) was moved by two Queensland ministers, Hedley Fihaki and Lu Senituli [yes, they are also members of the ACC National Council, but as per the integrity of the Assembly meeting they moved this as members of the Assembly who in good conscience wanted a discussion of the wider issues]. This was a brave move given the overall membership of the Assembly, but even by submitting this proposal, the two members provided a wider witness to the UCA's position, highlighting the need to consider all the theological elements raised as a critical matter of faith and order.

Why did the Assembly not like this proposal?

No doubt there are many reasons given the large number of members.

Clearly one speaker in the ensuing 'debate' viewed the proposal as hateful and denigrating, and this would have resonated with those members who are affirming of same-gender relationships, especially of the personal relationships they had knowledge about (and some were quite public). Having the two parts of the proposal held together in this way was a direct threat to those who endorse and practice blessings now as well as affirming traditional marriage understandings that they may not believe at all. Also, while some liberal people are quite happy to endorse marriage as being between a man and a woman, they would not want to rule out blessing other relationships.

Some people may not have wanted to simply publicly state the UCA position at a time when the Assembly had decided to have further conversation. This is different to being ashamed of the UCA's present position, but there may be some who are deeply ashamed of this position.

Certainly the UCA does not stand out as a denomination that has a strong record of issuing public statements or comment about its understanding that marriage is between one woman and one man during any of the wider public debates arising from same-sex marriage bills. I meet a wide variety of people from other denominations each year in visitations, gatherings and conferences, and have lost count of the number of times I have to tell them that the UCA's position is the same as every other mainstream denomination in Australia. The ecumenical context of this debate is surely very important given the ecumenical foundation of the UCA and also the growing ecumenical links and partnerships, especially in rural areas.

The 2015 ACC National conference will explore more of the implications and issues arising from the 14th Assembly and certainly the National Council will address this before-hand and provide papers and information for members. Your prayers for wisdom and discernment are much appreciated.

Peter Bentley is the National Director of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations and attended the 14th Assembly as an observer, providing a blog overview and Facebook posts to update ACC members and interested members readers. Further reports about the 14th Assembly will be provided in the future and a special feature in the September 2015 ACCatalyst magazine.

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