

## **Reply from Rev. Rod James to Rev. Phil Gardner's letter of concern**

21 May 2018

Dear Phil

Thank you for your letter via email. It is so good to have someone engage the concerns I have been expressing. As I said in the letter:

In January I wrote an open letter to the leaders of the Uniting Church expressing my concerns that changing the Church's doctrine of marriage would mean the end of the Uniting Church as we know it. None of the leaders to whom I sent that letter have engaged with me and challenged those concerns.

I sent the January letter, personally addressed, to the following: all Moderators and Secretaries of Synods, the President and Secretary of Assembly, and the members of the Assembly Doctrinal Working Group. The concerns I expressed for the Uniting Church were very serious, but no one contacted me to take up those concerns.

(I contacted Andrew Dutney and requested a meeting with him about them. He listen to me and conversed with me without attempting to assert that my concerns for the Church were unfounded. Indeed, he seemed to be taking a rather neutral approach. Now I see that he was keeping his powder dry, and in due course would be the one to use his status as ex-President to move the proposals.)

Following the ASC meeting in March most of the leaders I had sent the letter to would have known about the proposals that ASC had adopted to present to the Assembly in July. But again, knowing that the proposals were the 'worst case' option in regard to the concerns I had expressed, no one contacted or engaged with me. One can only imagine that they held me in contempt as someone not worth bothering about, and likewise the people I give a voice to as not worth bothering with. Mind you, there are difficulties which arise from having a Church that embraces and affirms views so diverse that they are contradictory on important matters. One of those difficulties is that it places leaders in an awkward position. In attempting to be 'all things to all people', they tend to develop chameleon qualities which, in the end, disappoints everyone.

Turning to you first concern, Phil, you assert that 'there is misinformation in (my) letter', that I make 'blatant errors of fact', and that my letter contains 'misleading information and communicates that misinformation in way that heightens anxiety rather than respectfully informs others'. These concerns centre mainly around my assertion that 'ministers will be required to use a "genderless" form of the Declaration of Purpose' should the proposals on marriage be passed by the Assembly'.

The proposals have the Uniting Church adopting the following 'policy statement' and 'affirmation' on marriage:

Policy statement on marriage:

Marriage is a gift God has given to humankind for the well-being of the whole human family. For Christians, marriage is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of two people to live together for life. It is intended to be the mutually faithful life-long union of two people expressed in every part of their life together. In marriage two people seek to encourage and enrich each other through love and companionship, experience the fruitfulness of family, contribute to the well-being of society and strengthen the mission of the church.

Affirmation on marriage :

Marriage is a gift of God, at the heart of human society and culture.

In the life-long union of marriage people can know the joy of God in whose image we are made, male and female. In giving themselves to each other in love, two people reflect the love of Christ for his Church.

In marriage, two people are called to live together faithfully, and to love each other with respect, tenderness and delight. They share the life of a wider family and community and may be entrusted with the gift and care of children. They help to shape a society in which human dignity and happiness may flourish and abound.

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

Firstly, by adopting the above as the Uniting Church's policy statement that 'For Christians, marriage is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of two people to live together for life', this would make it a matter of policy (as well as theological and exegetical belief) that, for the Uniting Church marriage was essentially genderless. Any personal opinion to the contrary would violate the clearly stated policy of the Church, and would be tolerated as such, but only for a while.

Secondly, the proposal requests

the Assembly Officers to direct the appropriate Assembly body to prepare an authorised Marriage Liturgy suitable for opposite-gender and same-gender couples for approval by the Standing Committee at its August 2018 meeting; (c. iii)

Notice here that there is no room for the 'appropriate Assembly body' to prepare two authorised Marriage liturgies, one genderless and the other specifically heterosexual. Indeed, if that Assembly body did so they would be in contempt of the Assembly's decision and stated policy. There is no provision in the proposals that some other (specifically heterosexual) affirmation on marriage could be used in the Declaration of Purpose of a marriage celebrated 'according to the rites of the Uniting Church in Australia'. The clear intent of the proposals is that the 'authorised Marriage liturgy' for marriages solemnised 'according to the rites of the UCA' would be 'suitable for opposite-gender and same-gender couples'.

Andrew Dutney has given his own personal opinion that *“No, the intention isn’t to require a “genderless” declaration of purpose. The intention is to respect liberty of opinion – including the opinion that marriage can only be between a man and a woman”*.

The problem is that Andrew’s personal opinion flies in the face of the plain reading and sense of the proposals, and as such is of no value whatever in assuaging our concerns. For you, Phil, to confidently conclude that on the basis of Andrew’s unsubstantiated, personal opinion I have made ‘blatant errors of fact’ is itself a blatant error of fact.

Phil you also express concern that I ‘question the agenda of the Assembly leaders’ and you imply that I ‘suspect them of base motives’. I am not sure of what part of my letter you are referring to. Perhaps it is where I assert that the ‘Church is in the hands of powerful planners and controllers who have even more changes to unveil in the future’. My point here is that same-gender marriage (so called) is part of a larger reshaping of human gender, sexuality and relationships. It is impossible not to believe that, having embarked upon this road of reshaping humanity, those engineering these changes do not have more that they will want to achieve in the future. With respect to the people pressing for these changes, it is impossible for us to believe that to ‘name them as people we know’ would enable us to ‘trust’ them, or to believe that they ‘have the best interests of the gospel and the health of the church at heart’.

Furthermore, the biblical/theological groundwork for such reshaping is comprehensively laid in the DWG report accompanying the proposals. If the proposals are adopted, these biblical and theological heresies upon which the Church’s policies and practices would be based would become accepted Uniting Church theological statements.

Very recently, an excellent, experienced and fruitful minister here in South Australia was reportedly rejected as a Uniting Church Minister of the Word because he was honest enough to acknowledge that he had concerns about the biblical/theological method in a report used to justify a certain UC policy. The fact that he was quite happy to comply (and had for some years been complying) with that policy was deemed insufficient. Such totalitarian control of thought and conscience is becoming endemic in the society around us, and as this sad example illustrates, is gaining traction in the Church. I have no doubt that those crafting changes in the UC’s view of gender, sexuality and relationships will also press for compliance in thought as well as deed.

I appreciate the Moderators call for ‘respectful conversation’, but let us be clear that respectful conversation is not the ultimate good for the people of God. The prophets, the Lord Jesus, the apostles and the Reformers were not known for their respectful conversation but rather for speaking the truth of God and being persecuted for doing so. ‘You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil?’ ‘If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.’ The people of God are not saved and reformed by listening respectfully and speaking respectfully, as appropriate as that may be. Rather they are saved and reformed by speaking the truth of God fearlessly and without amelioration. On the day of the Holy Spirit, Peter put it out there: ‘This Jesus whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ.’

Phil, are you able to see the nature of your primary concern—its is that I may have expressed myself inappropriately. You incorrectly discount one of our expressed concerns as being unfounded, but then happily ignore the others in your keenness to take issue with the way I express myself. This is, indeed, an effective strategy for discounting someone. As you admit, 'It is too easy to dismiss your genuine concerns'.

As Executive Officer for Pastoral Relations, I take it that your letter is pastoral in nature, and yet, in dealing with me you seem happy to pass over my many other concerns, namely that

2. While the proposals allow that a UC marriage celebrant 'may exercise freedom of conscience with regards to accepting requests to celebrate marriages, including same-gender marriages', such celebrants would be legally vulnerable if taken to an equal-opportunity tribunal by an aggrieved same-gender couple. Given that Australian law and Uniting Church doctrine and liturgy both state that marriage is between two persons regardless of gender, the position of such ministers and congregations would be precarious. Definitely not a safe place to be!
3. Furthermore, the proposals' freedom of conscience clause for celebrants and congregations would certainly be temporary, and, with the passage of time, would be removed. One of the requirements of leadership and ministry in the Uniting Church is that leaders and ministers be willing and able to minister to all people across the diversity of the Church. It would be a very short time indeed before applicants for ministry would be asked, "Are you willing and able to minister to same-gender couples and to marry them? In the unlikely event of a reformed/evangelical person wanting to candidate for ministry in this future Uniting Church they would surely be regarded as unsuitable. Not a safe place for to be!
4. The proposals on marriage, together with the theological method behind them and the controlling way in which the marriage question has been handled, all signal to Uniting members that their Church is in the hands of powerful planners and controllers who have even more changes to unveil in the future. "For" as Jesus said, "if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:31, ESV). Surely not a safe place to be!
5. The proposals make no mention of seeking the concurrence of the other councils of the Church, as is required for a matter that is so vital to the Church. From past experience, in the Assembly in 2003, and in our own Synod in 2017, we know that seeking concurrence would be strongly resisted within the Assembly meeting (Trust me; I tried it in 2003). Not a safe place to be!
6. In the past, congregations of the Uniting Church who have reached a point where they are no longer able to live with where the Uniting Church is heading and have sought to leave have found the UCA quite unwilling to allow them to have their own church property. Reportedly, one such congregation here in South Australia has been told quite recently by the Synod that if the congregation leaves the Uniting Church their church building will be put on the open market and sold to the highest bidder. Definitely not a safe place to be!

7. Likewise, any attempt by a group of congregations to remain 'Uniting Church' but live apart from the Assembly and its unbiblical theology would, no doubt, be fiercely, and probably legally resisted. Certainly not a safe place to be!

Phil, you have interpreted my expression of these concerns as 'hyperbole', but hyperbole means 'exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally'. Let me assure you that, for us, these statements are not hyperbole and are certainly meant to be taken literally.

Having dismissed my first stated concern with an unconvincing opinion from Andrew Dutney, you are content to ignore the other concerns on the basis that, in your opinion, I made 'blatant errors of fact'. Your real concern seems to be to discredit me and coerce me to back down from making these concerns known. For so many of us, this is entirely unhelpful and unsatisfactory. We feel that we are fighting

- for the credibility of Uniting Church as holding to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church as that faith is expressed in the Basis of Union.
- for the Uniting Church's ability to retain its membership without a massive exodus of people to other churches (see my first open letter to leaders, included below).
- and for our own place in the Uniting Church as members and ministers, which we believe would become untenable should these proposals be passed by the Assembly.

I am overjoyed that my 'Open Letter to the Leaders of the Uniting Church' 'has generated considerable conversation'. Yippee!! The letter has resulted in a huge number of people expressing appreciation that, in writing the letter, I have given voice to their concerns. But it would appear that the letter has not yet generated enough conversation among Church leaders to alleviate the very real concerns of so many UC folk. I (together with others, I'm sure) would value the opportunity to meet with you, the Moderator, Andrew Dutney, the President Elect or any other leaders in order that you might engage our stated concerns more realistically.

Yours in the service of Christ

Rod James

**Ps. Although your letter 'was intended for Rod only', I feel compelled to share its concerns and my reply with others who have so much at stake in these matters. So strong is the identification of many with my open letter that you are, in fact, dealing with many, not just with one.**