

## UCA Where are You ? No 8

This is the EIGHTH paper in a series that reflect on the course of the Uniting Church. Tracing the personal journey and reflections of Rev Ted Curnow they bring together a wide range of statements and insights related to the position of the church and Christian marriage. Cultural context, lead up stages, Assembly 2018, the aftermath and sorting out substance and myth.

### The Fall-out

*Immediately following the decision of the Assembly the rush was on to inform Uniting Church members across the nation that all was well.*

### 14 July 2018 Uniting Church in Australia Assembly Pastoral Letter

*To all congregations and faith communities re Marriage and same-gender relationships*

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The Assembly, the national council of the Uniting Church, has been considering the issue of marriage and same-gender relationships.

This long conversation over almost 30 years in our Church has been a difficult one, as it has been for many people of faith.

This week members of the 15th Assembly meeting in Melbourne have voiced a wide range of strongly and faithfully held views, from different theological and cultural perspectives.

Assembly members have taken the opportunity to speak for and against a range of different proposals. In doing so, I am proud to say they have modeled a loving Christian community, holding together and caring for each other.



God's grace has been abundant... and together we have reached a decision on a way forward for our Church. To honor the diversity of Christian belief among our members, we will hold two equal and distinct statements of belief on marriage. This decision will allow ministers and celebrants in the Uniting Church the freedom to conduct or to refuse to conduct same-gender marriages. The existing statement of belief 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" has been retained. A new additional statement of belief has also been adopted. That statement reads "marriage for Christians is the freely given consent and commitment in public

and before God of two people to live together for life.” What this means is that ministers who, in good conscience, are willing to conduct same-gender marriages are able to do so. This does not compromise the rights of those ministers who, in good conscience, cannot conduct same-gender marriages. They will continue to be able to teach their belief that marriage may only be between a man and a woman, and can continue to use a marriage liturgy that reflects that conviction.

I want to acknowledge the ministry and struggle of LGBTIQ people in the Uniting Church over many years. I know that this conversation is painful and difficult for you. At the same time I also acknowledge those who are not able to support this change – and your pain and difficulty in this space. I offer my prayers that God grants you comfort and healing as we move ahead.

I want to reassure all members of the Uniting Church - your rights to follow your beliefs on marriage will be respected and protected.

Church councils will have the right to determine whether marriage services take place on their premises.

Grace and peace to you all. as we continue to witness to God’s abundant grace, the liberating hope of Christ, and the wondrous movement of the Holy Spirit in our beloved Church.

Dr Deidre Palmer President

**14 July also produced a response from ACC Chairman Rev Hedley Fihaki**

*At the same time the Assembly of Confessing Congregations was ready to point to the Basis of Union that says that the Church is intended ‘to go forward in sole loyalty to Christ.’*

Dear ACC Members,

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ

On Friday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2018, the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia exercised its determining authority on matters of doctrine to ‘vary its policy on marriage’ to include same-gender relationships. This decision is grounded neither in Scripture, nor The Basis of Union, but on a secular understanding of ‘diversity’; a diversity that has now gone beyond the acceptance of a diversity of theologies to include a ‘diversity of religious beliefs and ethical understandings’.

**Key points :**

- The lack of opportunity to debate the Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships made the Assembly process extremely difficult.

- Because of the process, many orthodox and evangelical members did not feel the Assembly was a ‘safe space’.
- The failure to seek concurrence on such a matter of vital importance should be highlighted in every congregation.
- Despite stating in 1985 that we are a multicultural church, the Assembly did not allow its 12 Migrant-Ethnic National Conferences to participate fully in the decision-making processes.
- Ecumenical relationships have been placed in a low order of priority and this will have a significant impact on local congregations.

In our view, the UCA Assembly has removed itself from the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

On behalf of the National Council of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations, we therefore say in the strongest terms possible, that we reject not only this decision, but the authority of the National Assembly and therefore stand aside from this Council of the Church. We continue to stand firmly in the ‘Assembly’ of Confessing Congregations as a ‘distinct’ Assembly through which we can continue to Confess our sole loyalty to Jesus Christ the living head of the Church and as a way of continuing to express our adherence to the Basis of Union.

Please be encouraged to know that though we were a minority in the Assembly, we did not compromise our stance in anyway. I am very proud of the Assembly members who spoke with grace and truth, including several second-generation leaders who stood their ground well even in the face of distinct opposition.

Thank-you for all your prayers for us. It is greatly appreciated. Despite the enormous responsibility we all felt for the whole church as members of the Assembly, we still felt peace and joy knowing that we were simply participating in the reconciling work of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The National Council of the ACC will meet on July 23.

We will also seek a national meeting of leaders from the various Networks, National Conferences and cross-cultural communities and UAICC leaders.

Peter Bentley will continue to keep you updated on these important meetings.

Please continue to pray for the Church at this critical time.

*Grace and peace*

Rev. Dr. Hedley Fihaki

On behalf of the ACC National Council.

## **On the Ground,—‘Business as Usual’ for most.**

On the back of the weekly News sheet in the local church in Victoria I found the following report from the local minister. There was no reason at all for concern of any kind. It was very much a matter of business as usual.

*“There are many positive resolutions out of the Assembly meeting. The most publicised is the decision to proceed with two recognised statements about marriage which ministers can use according to their conscience: the traditional formulation and one which now allows for same-sex marriage. I am very grateful for the careful reflection that has gone into this, and the recognition of the creative and positive benefits for all couples who seek God’s blessing on their union. I am also impressed by the wisdom and grace which allows for the holding together in the church of those.”*

## **The Deep Wound Exposed.**

By the end of the year Rev Robert Griffith, of Lismore Regional Mission, in a paper entitled **‘Holding Fast and Standing Firm’** wrote about the feed back and grief he was receiving from Congregations in his part of the world.

*“Many members and a number of Ministers have already resigned and many more will follow if Resolution 64 from the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly remains in place.---*

*I affirm my respect for the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly, of which I am a member, and I respect their right to govern in accordance with the regulations of the Uniting Church. However, that respect does not equate to agreement with every decision they have made. At the very heart of this whole debate lies the real issue which is absolutely vital to the life of the church; can we accept the Assembly decision on marriage and still be guided by the Basis of Union and regulated by the Scriptures? Hundreds of our ministers and thousands of our members are answering an unequivocal “No!”*

*The most vital issues in the life of the Uniting Church in 2018 are*

- (a) our poor handling of the Scriptures;*
- (b) our refusal to engage with the wider body of the Christ on theology and who understand marriage differently.*
- (c) our blatant disregard for the Basis of Union and its foundational guiding principles. Unless all three are addressed urgently, we will rapidly become an apostate, impotent, shrinking shadow of the miracle that once was the Uniting Church in Australia.”*

This series will be continued with paper Number 10. View this site or [tedcurnow.wordpress.com](http://tedcurnow.wordpress.com)

**Further Reference:** On the above web sites, **The Story of Colliding Worlds**. The Church is caught in a remarkable period of rapid cultural change. Many Christians grieved over the loss of the past. Other are passionate about moving ahead. This resource explains two very different world-views and ways of thinking, the colliding of two worlds. It calls the church to face change, to faithfully discern the truth and with courage to be loyal in following Christ.