

A reflection on the journey towards 2018 and the Assembly Decision about marriage

*This is the **Third** of a series of papers that reflects 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 the sorting out of substance and myth.*

Here the events of 2018 begin to unfold and the Uniting Church presents the proposal to change the Church's historic doctrine of marriage.

Pre-Assembly Canvas 2018

Following the rather disturbing national debate and the voluntary public vote related to the re-definition of the institution of marriage the Australian Parliament had legally opened marriage to same-sex couples. The decision by the Government seemingly emboldened some within the church to conclude that the climate of public opinion had shifted and that riding that momentum, rather than proposing a blessing of same-sex marriage, that it was the right moment for the church to strike out for a total Christian redefinition of the age-long doctrine of marriage. The Anglican Church in New Zealand had not changed its Canon Law on marriage but had made provision for those who wanted to bless same-sex relationships. The Uniting Church Synod in Melbourne (October) had decided against following the New Zealand course of action.

On a national level the Uniting Church had been deliberating about sexual/gender relationships for more than 20 years, even before its re-affirmation statement at the 1997 Assembly in Perth so that it was hardly a new issue. It had been previously decided that the matter of marriage would be considered at the 15th Assembly but now its proposal looked more like 'crass political opportunism' than a spiritually discerned direction.

January 2018 The Confronting Letter

Rev Rod. James, who had often been an articulate spokesman for the Confessing movement in the Uniting Church, who had been a colleague during theological student days and with whom over the years I have both agreed and disagreed with, addressed his own independent, open letter to all Moderators, Secretaries of Synods, Presidents and Secretaries of Assembly and members of the Assembly Doctrinal Working Group.

James stated that the Uniting Church, through its Councils had already made room for ministers to practise a homosexual life-style and that the church had accommodated and developed a liberal stance towards those who identified with a LGBTI position and life-style. Through their own influential church Network, this group, under the equality banner had continued to lobby the Uniting Church on a justice basis to avoid discrimination and to alter its historic teaching in order to approve the practise of the same-sex lifestyle. James pointed out that through years of controversy many other groups **upholding the orthodox position** on sexuality and marriage had emerged in the life of the Uniting Church. In addition to the Assembly of Confessing Congregations these groups included churches in Queensland, Hope Network, 3D Network, Grace Network, based in South Australia, Pneuma-Western Australia, the EL250

Congregation, UAICC, the United Aboriginal Islander Congress and the CALD, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse group, to name a few.

From this somewhat diverse, and fragmented church, just 269 people would make up the National Assembly to make a definitive decision about marriage on behalf of the national Uniting Church in Australia. Determining the right balance and drawing on the right proportion of various groupings to make important decisions had always been a matter of contention. In knowing something of the generational differences towards the subject of marriage I personally felt a nagging concern about how members were selected to attend the Assembly. In some places the focus seemed to be intent on selecting young people who would be required to discern and vote on what matters were to be regarded as *vital to the life of the church*. While I believed in youth representation, was this an example of *diversity* being more highly regarded than the sound wisdom of years. or regarded as an informed Christian understanding?

Rod James pointed out the 2003 decision that provided for Presbyteries to approve ministers who had chosen to practise a homosexual lifestyle had later resulted in the National Standing Committee making amendments and that to change the church's doctrine of marriage would mean the end of the Uniting Church as we knew it.

He presented four points.

- (1) The great majority of Christians who hold the Reformed Evangelical faith regard the man/woman union in marriage to be integral to God's creative and redemptive purpose for humanity. Changing marriage would place the Uniting Church outside the faith of the one, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.
- (2) The Uniting Church would stand alone if it adopted a view different from all other Australian churches. A great many would leave and join churches with traditional Christian values, similar to previous exoduses that had taken place. This would bleed the church and downsize it
- (3) The effect of changing the doctrine of marriage would not only be numerical. (*ACC congregations are often multi-generational, migrant and ethnic*). The Uniting Church could cut off the flow-on from these groups and future generations.
- (4) A moving population often does not hold to denominational loyalty. People on the move would be less likely to relocate with the Uniting Church in their new locality.

James made it clear that his points were not to be read as a threat. The ACC had never encouraged people to leave the church. The policy had been to confess Christ according to the Basis of Union. Where the church departs from its own faith the ACC would distinguish itself from that departure and continue to contend earnestly for it. While the ACC has helped to stem the flow of people leaving the church, this could not be guaranteed in the future.

One thing was clear and that was that it was obligatory for the Assembly to seek the concurrence of other Councils of the Church, on matters of vital importance (Const. 15c) The "Space for Grace" conversations across the church were non-decision making occasions and having failed to refer a vital matter in 2003 and to do it again with all that was at stake would be serious. If the church failed to refer the matter beyond the discussions of the 269 members of Assembly, it would indicate a far greater problem of trust that would destroy the church.

A late January response.

In responding to the James letter I had pointed out that the issue of marriage being ‘core’ to the faith (*of vital importance*) was the first issue to address. I had not come across anything really convincing in that regard, even from overseas churches and I anticipated that it would not be regarded as ‘core’ here in Australia. The question itself was questionable and was typical of what was historically known as the ‘higher critical school’ that chopped up the Bible into important and un-important parts. (*the matter of doctrine will be covered in a later paper in this series*)

It seemed that the possible loss of members was no cause for panic in Victoria. Leaders in Victoria were more concerned about *moving the church on* than they were over loss of numbers. In fact some tended to suggest people who were not prepared to join a progressive vanguard for change within the churches in Australia should leave the Uniting Church..

Although Rod James presented an impressive summary of groups advocating a traditional position, their effectiveness was diminished without a common consensus enabling them en-block to speak with one voice. From my understanding this had always been a historical feature of factions within the church, although this time it was orthodoxy rather than dissenters who seemed to lack a unified voice. Rod James points were hardly convincing. Not many members today would define themselves as Reformed, Evangelical nor would they know what those terms meant or represented. Rev Jonathon Button had presented an impressive, confronting appeal to the Assembly Standing Committee to consult with other Councils of the Church before presenting its proposal to the Assembly but it had made little impact.

I think I had concluded along with a number of authors and commentators like Keith Suter, Mark Durie and Tom Frame that where the church rejects heteronormality, the new emerging, ‘progressive’ Uniting Church in the long-term would be unsustainable. To be frank, I had concluded sometime before this that we needed to be ready to let the institution itself slowly die. This being the case, I had also concluded that it’s not the short term crisis that should consume us, but that the real key was having a clear strategy/steps towards developing a effective long-term confessing community. The question then is, “How are those of orthodox conviction within Uniting Church shaping up and moving towards the next step of discerning God’s will in a post-modern world?”

March 2018 More Grace upon Grace

Under the banner ‘Unity in Diversity’, not ‘Unity in Christ,’ the theology of the church has been progressive, but--- progressive in downsizing theology in order to overcome difference. **I could not recall a significant Uniting Church leader publicly defending the Scripture as a unified word and tradition in defence of marriage between a man and women.** In many ways this could have been because the church had already crossed that line!! Helpful leadership statements were limited. President Stuart McMillan’s Pastoral Statement, after the passing of the governments Marriage Act noted that during the triennium we had had formal and informal conversations about marriage and he urged the church to continue to, ‘*make space for grace*’ and to treat one another in respectful ways as a fellowship of reconciliation in Christ.

President, Deidre Palmer had attempted to point to various options before us as a church.

- (a) **Simply change the doctrine of marriage**---decide that further conversations were unnecessary. The Presbyterian Church in the USA, 2014 changed the definition of marriage to read, “*Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives.*” This did not delete **male and female** and aimed at pleasing everyone.
- (b) **Change the doctrine subject to agreement** by Synods, Presbyteries, Congregations. This would honour the requirements of the Basis of Union 14d and 15e constitution 39a that requires concurrence of other Councils on matters of vital importance.
- (c) **Retain the UCA doctrine but provide a Blessing Service** for same-gender couples married by the State.
- (d) **Make no change** to the doctrine of marriage.
- (e) A conscientious objection to change could be embarrassing and reflect a bigoted minority. This could be overcome by **allowing both options** in order to include UAICC and CALD cultural groups.

The option for some was to downsize the clear biblical pro-creative purpose of marriage to highlight *fruitfulness as companionship* rather than *sexual union and parenthood*. However this sets aside the command to honour father and mother for an individualistic, non-biological concept of marriage. And how does this respect the basic right of children to live with biological parents? Dr Riley Case from the United Methodists USA pointed out that Wesley gave high esteem to mutual respect for another’s freedom of conscience but is conscience the ultimate authority in determining God’s will?

Instead of a sound biblical theology with integrity. The Assembly would later decide on a contradictory doctrine of “**two integrities**”, a gymnastic, sociological-pluralism with no integrity. You could pick and choose according to the inclination of your conscience, but how can we know conscience is not prejudice? One view is as good as another and even the rule, ‘*celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage*’ offends some and can be interpreted broadly. The church has in fact moved from the primacy of scripture to embrace subjective, personal preference as a guide to all matters? Sadly, this is not un-similar to the way we buy our brand of dog food at the supermarket.

We were not Alone in 2018

A similar ferment has been evident in the global Anglican Church for the past ten years. The GAFCON, Global Anglican Future Conference, a response to similar issues within the Anglican Church was held in Jerusalem during 2018. It was the largest International gathering of Anglicans in the last 50 years. Archbishop in Jerusalem Suheil Dawani urged delegates to remember that we are called to exclude no one from the love of God. Rev Richard Tice, in an on line interview had spoken of “*the road to destruction in England*”, He said the ideology was defined by: “*you can do what you please and you can think what you please*”. He said, “*If we have church leaders who are putting people on the road to destruction, it’s a **salvation issue** and that’s why we have to distance ourselves.*” Archbishop Peter Jensen, past Secretary of GAFCON in speaking of a ‘**mythical middle,**’ has said, “*It appeals to the natural human desire, to the supposedly rational in thought, calm, and fair. There is a belief that the truth in any matter is not at either ‘extreme,’ but inevitably in the middle and if we occupy the middle ground we cannot go far wrong.---But in the present case , there is no middle. We are faced with a choice between the teaching of scripture backed by the continuous interpretive tradition of the church catholic, and a shift from scripture into what God disapproves of.*”

Late March 2018. The deafening Silence

Time had now moved on so I contacted Rod James for the feedback / response to his widely circulated letter. I was also concerned that someone needed to be addressing the claim that marriage was not part of the primary message of the Christian faith. I knew that a popular strategy/approach overseas had been to first depreciate marriage and to make it secondary.

Those who agreed with Rod James were affirming and appreciative. However the personal letter to State Moderator's, Secretaries, the mover and shaker Rev Andrew Dutney and members of the Working group on Doctrine produced no real response at all. This was explained by: (a) A reluctance to offer any personal opinions and (b) An underlying sense that the primary point, the grave consequences of changing the Christian doctrine of marriage, could in fact be valid. No one had tried to make a case that the Uniting Church could change this basic doctrine and survive in its present form.

The ACC contended that marriage was **part of the substance** of the faith and their declaration about marriage sought to make this case. However it was also thought that anyone with a different hermeneutic would just argue differently. Of course I agreed with this but I also thought that the central point of this issue needed to be more specifically addressed. It all seemed quickly by-passed. One thing was plain, the leaders of the church knew they were facing sharp controversy and in their silence they had closed ranks, more like a secret society ready to pounce when the time was right than being an open, transparent, loving community.

The Assembly Standing Committee met in the last weeks of March and would have made a decision on what proposal to bring to the July Assembly. At this stage few in the body of the church had really anticipated a full scale change to the doctrine of marriage. Perhaps it was thought by some that a sort of blessing of homosexual couples who had already undertaken a civil ceremony would be recognised.

April 2018 The proposal.

The crafted report to the Church was finally unveiled. The Port Phillip East Presbytery notified its members that the 63 pages of the Assembly Report on, "Marriage and Same Sex Relationships", along with a proposed way forward had been released by the Assembly Standing Committee. Rev Greg Crowe would bring a proposal to a special Presbytery Meeting on 23 May. The Presbytery would affirm the work of the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine and the Standing Committee Report. It endorsed the proposal to allow Ministers the freedom of conscience to celebrate or not to celebrate the marriage of same-gender couples according to the rites of the Uniting Church. It supported the preparation of suitable liturgy and the freedom of Church Councils to permit or refuse the use of congregational property for same-gender weddings.

Many Christians across Australia and internationally however believed that there was no solid theological foundation behind the proposal to change the church's doctrine or to bless same gender marriage. In fact the previous years that led to the infamous Resolution 84 had already set the trend and been a back-door that would change the Uniting Church for ever. The proposal was no surprise to Bob Brenan from Cairns who said in Catalyst, *"In spite of repeated denials by liberals over three decades, this is the end game that conservative Christians within the church have been expecting all along."*

This series will be continued with paper Number 4. Visit this site or 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 grieve over the loss of the past. Others 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.*