

## MARRIAGE DISCUSSION PAPER

## SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO THE DISCUSSION PAPER

## Introductory notes:

1. The marriage Discussion Paper and consultation process is intended to resource the Assembly in its deliberations on this matter. It is an active conversation rather than a survey or poll of members. The Discussion Paper and response form were not designed to facilitate a poll because the Uniting Church does not seek to discern the will of God by plebiscite. It is as we discern together, as a community, that we can discern the will of God.
2. A significant number of groups or individuals sent copies of the responses to two or more addresses in the Uniting Church and these all found their way to the people collating the responses. While some of the duplicates were picked up, with the large number of responses, it was not possible to find them all. Responses have not been weighted by number, although very small and very large numbers have been indicated.
3. The size of the reporting groups, not always clearly indicated, varied enormously (from an individual to 250 people).

**Q1 Identify any challenges or new insights raised for members of the group by the commentary on the theological dimensions of the Marriage Service.**

## Insights:

- Understanding and appreciation of the equality of husband and wife in Christian marriage.
- Recognition that the promises made by the couple are the core of the Service.
- Understanding of why the bride isn't 'given away' in the Uniting Church Service.
- Recognition that the Uniting Church Service could be readily adapted for same-gender couples.
- Recognition that marriage is one means of grace through relationships among several i.e. that marriage has a particular but not privileged status.
- Learning that Uniting Church ministers may already conduct ceremonies to bless same gender unions provided such ceremonies do not resemble the Marriage Service

## Challenges:

- Differences in generational and cultural perspectives.
- Need to complement this discussion with contemporary biblical scholarship, insights from psychology, etc.
- Need to clarify the role of the Christian community in the Marriage Service.

**Q2. If the government were to legislate to enable same-gender couples to marry, what issues or questions would this raise for you?**

- Church-state relationship
  - The church should lobby government against any change in legislation.
  - The church should lobby government for a change in legislation.
  - The need to protect ministers and church members who choose not to be involved in the marriage of same-gender couples should that be legalised.
  - Many responses asked whether it is time to move to a system widely practised in Europe, in which ministers no longer act as agents of the state in performing marriages, but couples may request a Christian blessing service if they wish.
  - Some responses suggested that a change to a purely religious role for ministers

preserve the integrity of the Christian ceremony more effectively than the current arrangement in Australia?

NOTE: While this issue is beyond the Terms of the current task the Working Group thinks the Assembly could profitably explore this issue further, perhaps ecumenically.

- Theological-legal issues
  - What is the difference between theological and legal understandings of marriage?
  - What is the theological status of a civil union?
  - Is there a difference between a couple who profess no Christian faith but choose a church marriage and a Christian couple who are married in the context of Christian worship?
- Ecclesiological and Ecumenical concerns
  - Concern for the unity of the Uniting Church in the event that changes are made to the definition of marriage.
  - Concern for the wellbeing of ecumenical relationships if the Uniting Church broadens its understanding of marriage to include same-gender couples.
- Personal responses
  - A small number of responses came from members of the church who indicated that they would marry their same-gender partner if same-gender marriage was legalised

### **Q3. What would you see as appropriate responses by the Uniting Church?**

- Pastorally for its members and the wider community?
  - Clarity, guidance and relationship support for same-gender couples.
  - Reinvigoration of the Marriage Enrichment movement.
  - Support for congregations to be properly welcoming of all people.
  - Honesty about the diversity of views between different congregations and different ministers.
  - Recognition that there are a number of Uniting Church members who are personally and profoundly affected by this issue.
- In the church's practices concerning Christian marriage?
  - In the event of legislative approval of same gender marriage, ensure continued freedom for ministers to conduct or refuse to conduct marriages according to their conscience.
  - Openness to exploring the possibilities of same-gender marriage and advocating for legislative and attitudinal change.
- In relation to the government and the church's role in conducting marriages?
  - Move towards the model of separating the legal requirements from the church's role.
  - (In the event of legislative approval), the Church offer freedom to ministers to perform marriages without regard to gender, according to their own conscience.
- In any celebration or blessing of same-gender relationships?
  - Affirmation of the Uniting Church's conviction regarding the full membership of GLBTIQ people as valued members of our congregations.
  - Some interest in a universal blessing service for use in a Sunday service
  - Concern that a distinct blessing service (rather than marriage) for same-gender couples would be demeaning for those involved.
  - Concern that a distinct blessing service (rather than marriage) for same-gender couples would be tokenistic.
  - Openness to the church having a covenant service for same-gender relationships.
  - Interest in a new label (other than marriage) for same-gender covenantal relationships.
  - Desire for 'marriage' to include same-gender couples.

- Concern for the children of same-gender parents, believing that children are best raised by a mother and a father.
- A few felt that a change in the church's practice to celebrate same-gender marriages would render their own membership impossible.

#### **4. Should the Uniting Church reconsider its understanding of marriage at this time? Why or why not?**

Those who do not want further consideration of the understanding of marriage hold that position for a variety of reasons:

- The current position as affirmed by the Eighth Assembly is *the* biblical view which is eternally valid at all times and in all societies.
- The unity of the church is at risk, including concern for Indigenous and CALD Christians who [some respondents] believe to be largely in favour of the status quo.
- The potentially negative impact on ecumenical relationships.
- Other issues such as climate change are more pressing.

Those who are open to further discussion hold that position for a variety of reasons:

- A theological conviction that same-gender covenantal relationships are of equal value and should be considered to be 'marriage'
- Extending to GLBTIQ people the welcome and hospitality that is available to others.
- Extending marriage to GLBTIQ people as it is available to others and hence a matter of justice.
- Conservative members will be welcome in many different churches but GLBTIQ members are limited in where they can hear the Gospel and be nurtured in their discipleship.
- More discussion is needed.
- The Uniting Church needs to have a clear position to be ready for a change in legislation.
- Further discussion would allow a serious conversation about the church-state relationship

#### **5. What other issues are important to you in relation to these matters?**

- Concern for those cultural groups unable or unwilling to discuss same-gender relationships, and for their relationship with the church if the Uniting Church position were to change.
- Concern that the emphasis on male/female duality in creation fails to take into account the existence and experience of transgendered and intersex people
- Recognition that arranged marriages and polygny (multiple wives) are also issues of complexity in a discussion of marriage.
- A strong desire for celibacy to be acknowledged as a faithful choice and high calling for men and women that the church has considered it to be since the time of Jesus.
- Belief that the Church's 20th Century revisions on divorce and remarriage allow for hope for serious consideration of same gender marriage.
- A small number of respondents continue to disagree with the positions allowing for divorce and remarriage reached by the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches pre-1977.
- The church needs to address the experience of a community that no longer regards marriage as normative: e.g. sexually active young people, long-term de facto relationships and the practice of 'serial monogamy.'

#### **6. Are there particular questions or insights into these issues that you want to share from your ethno-cultural community?**

- Some respondents expressed the view that diversity of position might be grounded in rural/ urban and cross- generational responses.

- Some respondents noted that taboos about discussing sexuality in mixed gender groups could have important cultural significance and this ought to be respected.
- Some responses from CALD congregations and individuals described the cultural factors that made *any* acceptance of same-gender relationships difficult in their community.