

Let's have a theological conversation on marriage

INTRODUCTION – David Busch (edited)

Friends, I welcome you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

My name is David Busch, and I'm the Presbytery Minister for South Moreton Presbytery of the Uniting Church, which is hosting this event with assistance from the Qld Synod.

This part of the Presbytery encompasses the traditional lands of the Turrbal and Jagera people. We begin by acknowledging them as the original custodians, we pay respect to their elders, past, present and emerging, and we commit ourselves to the journey of justice and reconciliation.

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This is an issue that can arouse deep and varied emotions ... it can touch our lives or the lives of people we love very personally ... and the turbulence being felt in parts of the church is also a point of pain and grief ...

And so, by respecting not just people's different views on this issue, but also people's emotional and personal well-being, by acting with kindness, respect and mutual care, honouring the presence of Christ in our midst by our honouring of each other, we will enjoy the safety of this space together. May that be our commitment to each other.

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Well, let's have a theological conversation – about marriage!

Some would say this is a conversation we should have been having a long time ago – and some would say we have been, in different ways.

Some might wish we didn't need to have this conversation at all – it can be confronting and difficult, and often divisive.

And some might say that no conversation is needed. We already have been given what we need to know on this matter.

The 15th national Assembly of the Uniting Church in July 2018 had before it some proposals on same-gender marriage.

There is a back story to this which we don't have time to narrate here, but it emerged from work initiated by the 13th Assembly in 2012, to discuss the theology of marriage and the possibility of the marriage covenant including same-gender relationships.

A paper from the Doctrine Working Group to this year's Assembly informed a proposal from the Assembly Standing Committee that sought to permit same-gender marriage.

The decision emerging from that week-long Assembly meeting was that the Uniting Church affirmed two statements on marriage – one, that it can only be between a man and a woman; the other, that it is between two people, without the gender being stipulated ... and that UCA ministry agents and celebrants, and Church Councils with regard to the use of Congregational property, could decide which of those statements expressed their belief and practice.

This was the latest step in a very long journey.

Well before the Uniting Church was inaugurated, the denominations which would enter church union were active in broader social debates about the decriminalisation of homosexuality, and in some places were leading advocates.

For most of its 41 years, the Uniting Church in Australia has engaged its councils and members in studies, discussions and decisions about sexuality and same-gender relationships as they sit within the life of the church – baptism, membership, leadership, ordination – and, more recently, same-gender marriage.

These various seasons and emphases of considering these matters have consistently revealed the extent and the depth of people's faithfully-held differences – informed by biblical, theological and other factors.

And the church's constant appeal has been that we respectfully accept the reality of these different views ... that we listen carefully to each other ... that we treat people with dignity and love, and not diminish the inclusiveness of the gospel ... and that we continue to study the scriptures and in every way seek God's mind on these questions and on how we live as a faithful church.

That journey has had moments of tension and division.

This year's decision to hold two contrasting views on marriage as equally valid, permitting an acceptance of same-gender marriage, has been welcomed by some, rejected by others, and led to a lot of commentary and debate in various forums.

And that brings us to the nature of this event.

It is a conversation, not a debate. Our conversation partners hold unapologetically to their different positions. They are convinced of the merits of the view they hold. Yet they also recognise the faithfulness of their conversation partner.

And so, what we will have is a probing, enquiring, respectful, at times robust, but always gracious, dialogue between two scholars within the fellowship of the Uniting Church.

We hold this event because we want you to enter into the convictions and ideas of two theologians, and hopefully gain a new appreciation of both positions.

We do this, because the Assembly decision calls us to learn to live with these two views side by side in the one church.

How might we learn to speak and listen across the different views, in ways that enhance our faith and fellowship and not damage it?

And we do this, because – frankly – the discernment continues. On this question, and on many other questions.

What does a commitment to **ongoing discernment** of God's truth and will for us ... of God's call to us ... of the meaning of the gospel in our time and place ... look like?

We hope that **part** of that ongoing journey of deep discernment within the church might look something like this.

I want to thank our conversation partners and in doing so let me introduce them ...

Dr John Frederick in 2017 was appointed Lecturer in New Testament at Trinity College Qld. He's an ordained Anglican presbyter, but has also served in Congregational, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches in the USA. Prior to Trinity, he was Assistant Professor of New Testament and Theology at Grand Canyon University, and he is also a church musician and composer.

Rev. Dr Geoff Thompson has had a long association with Trinity College Qld as Lecturer in Systematic Theology and a period as Principal. He is currently Coordinator of Studies in Systematic Theology at Pilgrim Theological College in Melbourne and Senior Lecturer in the University of Divinity. One of Geoff's research interests is the theology of the Uniting Church, and his latest books

on that subject are *Disturbing Much, Disturbing Many: Theology provoked by the Basis of Union* (2016) and *A Genuinely Theological Church: Ministry, Theology and the Uniting Church* (2018).

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The format for this event is pretty straightforward.

After a brief opening presentation from John and Geoff, we'll engage this conversation on marriage through four main talking points.

Geoff and John will each offer their thoughts on the key questions for the talking point, then they can briefly engage with each other – they have not shared their prep notes with each other.

Then we will have opportunity for engagement from the audience before moving on to the next talking point.

What we'll do is begin by asking if people have questions of clarification for Geoff or John – asking for further explanation of points they have made.

Then, if there's time, we can move to broader questions and brief comments.

So we will need to be strict with time for your questions and comments, and let's have the focus on engagement with John and Geoff as our main conversation partners.

We're planning for more time at the end for further questions and comments.

There'll be an afternoon tea break, and we will conclude with a theological reflection by Vicky Lorrimar – who is now in Geoff's old role, teaching systematics at Trinity College Qld.

So ... let's begin with prayer.