

Discussion Paper on Marriage

Study Guide

Introduction

At the request of the 2012 Assembly, the Doctrine working group has provided this Discussion Paper on Marriage. The Resolution (12.31) reads as follows.

The Assembly resolved to:

a) acknowledge that the current position on marriage is provided in the 8th Assembly Minute 97.31.12

The Assembly resolved to approve the following policy Statement on Marriage:

“The Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia declares that

1. Marriage

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.

It is intended to be the mutually faithful lifelong union of a woman and man expressed in every part of their life together.

In marriage the man and the woman seek to encourage and enrich each other through love and companionship.

In the marriage service

- the woman and man make a public covenant with each other and with God, in the company of family and friends;
- the couple affirm their trust in each other and in God;
- the Church affirms the sanctity of marriage and nurtures those who pledge themselves to each other in marriage and calls upon all people to support, uphold and nurture those who pledge themselves to each other in marriage.

Where sexual union takes place the partners seek to express mutual delight, pleasure and tenderness, thus strengthening the union of their lives together.

In marriage, children may be born and are to be brought up in love and security, thus providing a firm foundation for society.

2. Separation, Divorce and Re-marriage

- An inability to sustain the marriage relationship breaks the commitment to be together for life and may be painful for the couple, the children in their care, as well as for parents, friends and the Church community.
- In cases of the irretrievable breakdown of marriage, the Church acknowledges that divorce may be the only creative and life giving direction to take.
- The Church has a responsibility to:
 - (a) care for people, including children, through the trauma of the ending of a marriage;
 - (b) help people where appropriate to grieve, repent, grow in self-understanding, receive affirmation, grace and forgiveness;
 - (c) support them as they hear God's call for new life.
- The grace and healing of God are available to people who are divorced, which may free them to marry again."

b) noting the desire for respectful conversation within the diverse community of the Church, and the current public debate about same-gender marriage, to ask the Doctrine working group, after appropriate consultation across the Church and with ongoing liaison with the Standing Committee:

- to prepare a discussion paper on the theology of marriage within the Uniting Church, and explore its implications for public covenants for same-gender relationships;
- to circulate the paper widely, and specifically to the UAICC National Committee, synods, Chairpersons of National Conferences, presbyteries, UAICC Regions, Uniting Network, The Assembly of Confessing Congregations, congregations, agencies and institutions of the Uniting Church, requesting responses to the Working Group by a date to be determined by the Standing Committee; and
- to summarise the responses and bring recommendations to the Standing Committee by November 2014, to enable the Standing Committee to bring a report to the 14th Assembly in 2015.

In order to fulfil its responsibility to consult across the church first, a consultation process was developed and a selected number of presbyteries and groups took part in workshops across the country. Rob Bos wrote up these consultations in a report, “Views of Marriage in the UCA” which is attached as an appendix. These consultations informed the discussion paper.

The Discussion Paper on Marriage was then written and takes the form of a theological commentary on the marriage service in *Uniting in Worship 2*. It sets out to explain the core convictions of the Uniting Church through a close reading of the Marriage Service. The shaded text boxes briefly describe various contentious matters related to marriage. Several issues are touched upon, the primary one being the issue of public covenants for same-gender relationships.

Process

It is recommended that the Discussion Paper on Marriage be considered in groups. If it is a large group, it should be broken into smaller groups of 5-8 people. Participants should read the paper prior to coming together and, if possible, the consultation report “Views of marriage in the UCA”. A time frame of 1.5 to 2 hours is suggested.

Ahead of the meeting identify someone in the group prepared to take notes of what is said. Sheets of paper will need to be provided for this purpose.

The leader of the group will take responsibility to ensure that all participants have equal opportunity to contribute to the conversation; and to open and close the conversation in prayer.

It is recognised that for various reasons some individuals or communities within the Church may not be in a position to respond about issues relating to same-gender marriage. It will be valuable for the Working Group to hear responses to those parts of the Discussion paper that participants are able to address – cultural expectations, traditions and practices that could be very useful to the whole UCA in better understanding marriage and its implications/expectations. In this case, please answer questions 1, 4, 5, and 6.

Participants read together the 'RESPECT' guidelines (by Eric Law, *The Wolf shall dwell with the Lamb*, Chalice Press, 1993) before commencing the conversation.

R – Responsibility. Take responsibility for what you say and feel. Use “I” statements.

E – Empathetic listening. Use empathetic listening. Put yourself in other’s shoes. Create a goal of mutual understanding.

S – Sensitive. Be sensitive to differences. Some people tell stories. Some people give succinct points. Some people spiral around a topic. Some people communicate through silence.

P – Ponder. Ponder what you hear and feel before you speak.

E – Examine. Examine you own assumptions and perceptions.

C – Confidentiality.

T – Trust. Trust ambiguity. We are not here to debate who is right or wrong.

In order to commence the discussion it is recommended that the following questions be asked, with each participant invited to respond if they wish.

Were there any surprising elements in the commentary for you?

Were there any aspects you would want emphasised more?

Were there any issues, other than the same-gender one, that you would like to discuss?

Response Form

Written responses are requested for the following questions in relation to marriage and same-gender partnerships. Allow sufficient time for this discussion. Please note, the aim of these conversations is not to try and achieve consensus on any of these questions in your group. The response form needs to indicate the range of views expressed.

1. Identify any challenges or new insights raised for members of the group by the commentary on the theological dimensions of marriage service.
2. If the government were to legislate to enable same-gender couples to marry, what issues or questions would this raise for you?
3. What would you see as appropriate responses by the Uniting Church?
 - pastorally for its members and the wider community?
 - in the church's practices concerning Christian marriage?
 - in relation to the government and the church's role in conducting marriages?
 - in any celebration or blessing of same-gender relationships?

4. Should the Uniting Church reconsider its understanding of marriage at this time? Why or why not?
5. What other issues are important to you in relation to these matters?
6. Are there particular questions or insights into these issues that you want to share from your ethno-cultural community?

Please provide a summary of how people answered these questions. They should be sent to the Assembly by email or by post using the response form below.

Uniting Church in Australia Discussion Paper on Marriage Response Form Cover Sheet

The purpose of gathering this information is to enable the Uniting Church's Doctrine Working Group to prepare a report for the Assembly Standing Committee to consider.

The information may be provided anonymously. It would be helpful, however, if the person supplying the information would indicate what type of group you are reporting for (e.g. leaders in a Korean congregation, members of a Presbytery, etc.) The material on the response forms will be collated in a way that no group can be identified.

Response from (type of group): _____

How many people participated in the group which prepared the responses? _____

Please attach the response sheets to this form. If you need to, please use more paper and staple the extra sheets to this form.

When you have completed the form, please mail it to:
Uniting Church in Australia
Marriage Discussion Paper response
Uniting Church in Australia – National Assembly
P.O. Box A2266
Sydney South NSW 1235

You may also scan and send the response by email to:
marriagediscussion@nat.uca.org.au

Or fax to: 02 8267 4222

Comments will be received up until Friday 10 October 2014