

**Uniting Church in Australia  
Multicultural & Cross-cultural Ministry**

***“Space for grace - living in the ‘grace margin’ in respectful, empowering, and inclusive decision-making.”<sup>1</sup>***

A resource from the Multicultural & Cross-cultural Ministry National Reference Committee (MCM-NRC), for the UCA Assembly

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**Summary**

In exercising the responsibilities noted in the MCM-NRC *Operational Guidelines*,<sup>2</sup> the Committee is committed to developing some strategies to increase the possibilities of a healthy, respectful, and genuine conversation in the Church and society. This is of importance especially in the lead up to further discussions and discernment around the expected report from the Assembly Standing Committee on the responses to the *“Theology of Marriage”* paper at the coming 14<sup>th</sup> Assembly in July 2015. The 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the formation of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) and the declaration that *‘The UCA is a Multicultural Church’*,<sup>3</sup> are an added test of our level of commitment to genuine cultural diversity among First and Second peoples.

*“One Body, many members – Living faith and life cross-culturally”*, adopted by the 13th Assembly in July 2012 and issued as a Call to the Church as characteristics of life and faith to be lived in to provides the framework that shapes all our considerations and discussions in the MCM-NRC. The first 9 pages of the Manual for Meetings describing the journey of building community, and provides the context for that work.

The members of the MCM-NRC are seeking genuine ways for the broad diversity of cultural and linguistic contributions of Second peoples to be respectfully heard across the wider membership of the church, rather than being relegated to the margins. This applies across the life and responsibilities of all Councils in the UCA. So in this paper the committee shares its 4-year journey of the discussion on Christian Marriage as an illustration of the positive, affirming, inclusive and rich effects of that journey on our life and discernment together along the way.

It includes commentary on and responses to the Discussion paper on Theology of Christian Marriage distributed through the Doctrine Working Group, as well as stories and illustrations on other ways of perceiving and speaking about community, relationships, inclusion and respect.

This paper reflects the MCM-NRC members’ experience of paragraph 13: Basis of Union - GIFTS AND MINISTRIES

*The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ’s Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ. ... The Uniting Church will thereafter provide for the exercise by men and women of the gifts God bestows upon them, and will order its life in response to God’s call to enter more fully into mission.*

Revd Amelia Koh-Butler (Chair)

Revd Dr Tony Floyd (National Director)

Epiphany 2015



**Uniting Church in Australia - Assembly  
Multicultural & Cross-cultural Ministry**



*“Space for grace - living in the ‘grace margin’ in respectful, empowering,  
and inclusive decision-making.”*

**Epiphany 2015**

**Further contribution about processes and timelines in building conversations and decision-making for the  
ASC, Assembly and the Councils and communities of the UCA**

**From: the Multicultural & Cross-cultural Ministry National Reference Committee (MCM-NRC), UCA Assembly**

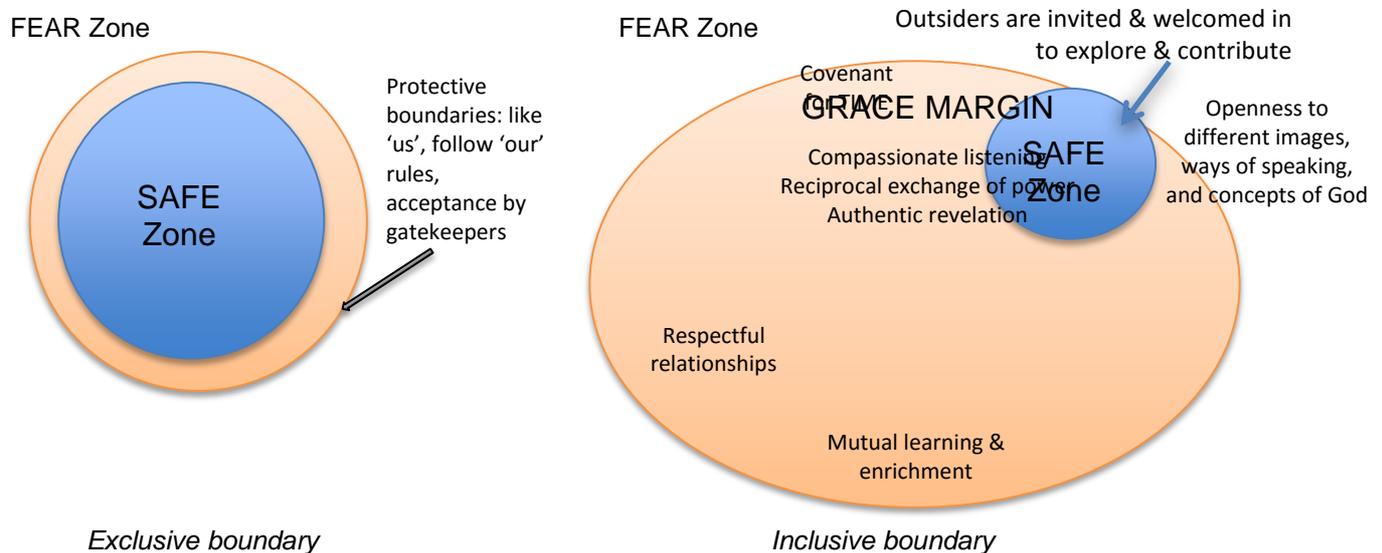
**A. Introduction**

In exercising the responsibilities noted in the MCM-NRC *Operational Guidelines*, the Committee is committed to developing some strategies to increase the possibilities of a healthy, respectful, and genuine conversation in the Church and society. This is of importance especially in the lead up to further discussions and discernment around the expected report from the Assembly Standing Committee on the responses to the “*Theology of Marriage*” paper at the coming 14<sup>th</sup> Assembly in July 2015. The 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the formation of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) and the declaration that “*The UCA is a Multicultural Church*”, are an added test of our level of commitment to genuine cultural diversity among First and Second peoples.

There has been a very extended conversation concerning marriage at the MCM-NRC that began sometime before the 2012 Assembly. The process and experiences of that journey

Encouraged by our conviction that God’s grace is real, meetings of the MCM-NRC always focus on the journey for building community in the *Manual for Meetings*.<sup>4</sup> On this journey we expect to receive the guidance of the Holy Spirit in open, trusting, honest, gentle, respectful speaking and listening. Commitment and faithfulness to this journey has led us to experience a quite remarkable increase in the ‘*grace margin*,’ that space between the safety of place, structures, processes, culture, and language, and the immobilising and disempowering fear of difference, change, uncertainty, culture and language. This enlarged space, this grace margin, enables the committee to listen to, and be challenged by the stories of culture, community and faith, especially about matters that often cannot be spoken of in public or ‘mixed’ company.

In simplified form the ‘Grace Margin’ looks and operates thus:



*(Simplified from © Eric H.F. Law 1999)*

A framework for all work and conversation in the MCM-NRC is provided by the formal proposal adopted by the 13th Assembly in July 2012 and issued as a Call to the Church as characteristics of life and faith to be lived in to. This affirmation, “*One Body, many members – Living faith and life cross-culturally*”, includes the following that shape all our considerations and discussions:

**A MULTICULTURAL CHURCH, LIVING ITS FAITH AND LIFE CROSS-CULTURALLY**

1. IN WORSHIP AND RESPONSE TO THE CREATOR GOD: celebrates, confesses and acts out its faith in the one sovereign God who through Jesus Christ binds in covenant faithful people of all races, ethnicities, cultures and languages.

## 2. RECEIVES CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AS GOD'S GIFTS AND:

- embodies these diversities as gracious gifts of the Creator God to the human family,
- rejoices in the variety of God's grace, and
- lives out its life and witness cross-culturally as a sign and promise of hope within multicultural, multiracial and multifaith Australia in the 21st century.

It is clear in face-to-face conversations by members of the MCM-NRC, with communities in their networks, and by the National Director in conversations with communities, leaders, and National Conferences, that there is a great richness of understandings and insights to be shared.

Those conversations relating directly to the proposed discussion on a theology of marriage in the UCA included a representation to a daylong consultation with some members from the Doctrine Working Group prior to the consultations required in the Proposal approved by the 13<sup>th</sup> Assembly.

From that meeting an agreed planning and consultation process was put in place with the purpose of gaining some understanding across the diversity of the UCA of the multiplicity of understandings of marriage, relationships, communities and the church prior to the writing and publication of the paper. We are thankful for this opportunity.

The material and information collected through this process by the Revd Dr Rob Bos contained some very helpful insights and warning signs for ways to proceed through genuine dialogue. When the formal discussion paper was released Revd Dr Bos' report was included as an additional resource. Dr Bos' concerns of First and Second (especially CALD) communities are quoted at the end of this paper for accessible background information,<sup>5</sup> and are reflected in this resource for discussion.

The members of the MCM-NRC are seeking genuine ways for the broad diversity of cultural and linguistic contributions to be respectfully heard across the wider membership of the church, rather than being relegated to the margins. This applies across the life and responsibilities of all Councils in the UCA. So in what follows the committee shares its journey with the discussion on Christian marriage as an illustration of the effects of the journey noted on our life together and discernment along the way.

### ***B. The journey of the MCM-NRC through the discussions concerning Christian marriage, and the Discussion paper itself, illustrate these models and processes in practise.***

Since the 13<sup>th</sup> Assembly in 2012, the MCM-NRC has met on five occasions (a sixth will be held in February 2015). The members have participated in more than 20 hours of prayerful and respectful discussion about marriage, scripture, culture and identity, and more recently, guided by the Discussion Paper and the resources attached to it. In MCM-NRC discussions and conversations, the following are some of the points that recur.

**1. The restrictive use of the UCA Liturgical Resource for Marriage (as found in *Uniting in Worship 2*), as a prompt for conversations, suggests the need to widen the liturgical input:**

**1.1** As a commentary on the UCA Service of marriage both the subject matter (the Service) and the content of the commentary are neither well known, used, or understood. With the concept of "Ordered Liberty" (allowing liturgists the freedom to contextualize words and phrases, but not core meaning) in mind, many UCA celebrants utilize liturgical resources developed 'in community languages' or from partner churches.

**1.2** The use of other resources has happened in good faith, where people have assumed the liturgical resources of partner churches (often with a much longer history than the UCA) would be recognized as worthy of being included in the discussion. Rites, signs, symbols, liturgical actions (all conveying the meanings of faith) are part of the Tradition and Experience of many of the UCA's linguistically diverse traditions.

Using a Wesleyan model of theological engagement,<sup>6</sup> the MCM-NRC continues to hope these will be included in discussion and discernment about liturgical practice and expression of doctrinal understandings in the UCA. In the light of scholarly work, particularly in the areas of ethnography and communication theory, a starting place for conversation might be to agree on what valid sources of data should be considered. As an ancient philosopher purportedly said, "The beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms."

**1.3** There is a range of liturgical services in use in the UCA (for all manner of occasions) and attendance at a service of marriage is not a frequent experience for the majority of UCA members. That is in itself is a major gap for understanding.

**1.4** The language of both service and commentary forming the substance of the Discussion Paper are not simple English – this does not mean they should be 'dumbed down', but it most certainly means readily understandable, and critically, capable of clear interpretation into both every day usage, and languages other than English. Clarity and communication in engagement is, after all, the art of proclaiming the profound mystery of gospel itself.

**1.5** There is no history of the Service, how it came to be, and the context(s) in which it arose. Likewise, there is no mention of contextualization or any examination regarding culturally inherited interpretations and practices across the diversity of both First and Second peoples.

#### A MULTICULTURAL CHURCH, LIVING ITS FAITH AND LIFE CROSS-CULTURALLY

3. **SPEAKS TRUTHFULLY:** as it is called by God through Jesus Christ to acknowledge and confess its sins of racism and to repent and refrain from all acts of racial discrimination and bigotry to the First peoples of this land and to all Second peoples of differing race, culture and language within its own life and practise.
4. **EMBRACES THEOLOGICAL RICHNESS AND DIFFERENCE:** affirming Christian unity while celebrating the theological, biblical and liturgical richness and difference that arises from its racial, cultural and linguistic diversity.

### 2. The format of the Discussion Paper on Marriage

**2.1** The 'red boxes' are effectively red flags of contention prior to connecting with any theological grounds.

**2.2** The paper might have been written extremely differently if an understanding of its intended readers were taken into account first. Within the UCA that declared itself to be a Multicultural Church (1985), living its faith and life cross-culturally (2012), such understanding would include the elements of different ways of hearing, decision-making, processing things, imaging and ordering society and communal relationships.

**2.3** There is little or no assistance with the many Scripture passages that refer to relationships, expectations from God about such, marriage, sexuality and so on. They may well be available in other source documents over the past 15 years or so, but they are not to hand, or in the minds of people in the present.

**2.4** There are no helpful narratives as part of the information that would provide insight and meaningful ways into the meanings of texts or the intention of questions.

**2.5** The premise of a Creation-Fall-Redemption model was assumed by the MCM-NRC to be a Eurocentric reading of the concept of marriage, uncommon, mostly unknown and ultimately unhelpful for most CALD communities where the theological journey is more often Creation-Covenant-Re-creation (including within it a variety of models of Redemption and its place in this cosmic view).

#### A MULTICULTURAL CHURCH, LIVING ITS FAITH AND LIFE CROSS-CULTURALLY

5. **WITHIN THE MISSION OF GOD:** responds to God's call through the Holy Spirit to participate in God's mission of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God through Christ in all communities, with all peoples, in all places moving towards the fulfilled reign of God which will be multicultural (see Revelation 5:9-10).
7. **IN RACIALLY JUST STRUCTURES:** works to coordinate strategies and involve the entire membership of the church in making justice and equity a reality in the whole of UCA life and structures, in multicultural and multi-faith Australian society, and across the world.
8. **ENGAGES IN PROPHETIC ADVOCACY:** and public policy development on the issues of racial, social, economic and environmental justice with particular concern as to how these issues impact the quality of life of people of minority communities in Australia and throughout the world.

### 3. Process

**3.1** There is deep and ongoing concern about the processes by which the UCA develops, is expected to hear and receive documents, and the manner in which it is expected to discuss/contribute to them. Creating 'space' to reflect and discuss in specific culturally appropriate ways - as with the UAICC at meetings of the Assembly, is a major acknowledgement and concession. However if those moments happen within an unchanged framework and process, then it becomes another way of marginalisation of those for whom dominant culture models are unhelpful overall. A proverb from Ghana in East Africa could well have such situations in mind: *"In someone else's house, walk humbly and gently"*.

**3.2 Relationships to 'home church':** These discussions and decisions cannot be separated from community's relationships to 'home church'. This is about the reality that the communal relationships and life forming, idea and faith shaping roots are not completely severed through migration, but remain a key element in discerning and shaping new identity and place. This is not about forced change, the need to adapt to another context and reality so often used to place migrants/newcomers outside an accepted reality of values, actions, ideas, and language.

How we as a Uniting Church process and journey through these marriage conversations may also have significance for 'home churches', many of which have some form of partnership agreement with the UCA. The ways in which we use the first sections of the Manual for Meetings, how seriously we do (or do not) take seriously the voices and the silences in minority communities could provide good and positive ways of sharing with, learning from and contributing to our partner churches or/and home church if at some points they are

going to discuss similar themes.

**3.3 Silence** – not speaking into a conversation or discussion should not be assumed to mean either assent or dissent. This can also be the silence of the margins! A sign that can point to many possibilities: embarrassment, uncertainty, this is not a place or subject for public discussion and so on. If people do not feel they are valued, heard, understood, then they will never belong in the most inclusive of ways. Their true faithfulness and insights will never find voice.

A reminder of the church's nature and identity as communal/community with many different ways of dealing with change, identity and leadership forms part of a recent article by the Revd Professor Andrew Dutney, where he reflects on the church as a 'one-anothering' community. This came from his recounting the gifted missional ministry of Alan Dutton and a conversation they had arising from a book they had read together.<sup>7</sup> In this section he speaks of the role of leadership in such complexity and sensitivity:

*"So what's the role of a leader in a one-anothering community? I think Alan Dutton's email points me towards an answer to that question.*

*"He mentioned a number of issues that can arise from the closeness and depth of relationship in small rural congregations. It can be "hard to express a contrasting viewpoint". So a leader needs to notice the silences, the things not said. There will be ways of drawing out the concealed insight safely – but the silence has to be noticed first."*

#### 4. Theological Areas for Further Discussion

Several other theological and political themes are also being explored in an ongoing task group of the MCM-NRC. These have prompted the following contributions:

**4.1 Covenant/Community:** A prime theological basis for marriage, named by many of the culturally and linguistically diverse communities, involved a discussion about Covenant relationships. These Covenant relationships are deeply connected to that between God and humanity (communal) and Christ and the church (also communal). When communal covenant is central through the Scriptures – it should be explored as the foundation for God-like/Christ-like relationships - including those between persons (irrespective of gender).

Among communities of First peoples and the diversity of Second peoples, communal life, networks, relationships, belonging and so on are the foundation of all of life, and all of creation. Western trained minds often hear these conversations as a loss of individual identity, an inability to make choices or decisions without the approval of others: spiritual or personal immaturity (as one applicant for ministry was recently told)! In an as yet unpublished book, Revd Brian Polkinghorne illustrates this fundamental difference between cultures thus:

*"... in Africa, the equivalent of 'I think, therefore I am' is 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.' Alternatively the basic African mindset can be expressed as 'Because you (plural) are, I am'. Outside of a relationship with 'you all', my life has no meaning. People find their individual sense of worth from being in relationships with others".<sup>8</sup>*

Community/communal life is at the very heart of the Scriptural stories of God's acts and interactions with the whole creation. There are relationships and responsibilities into which humanity are constantly called and recalled. Such foundational understandings are not matters that belong only to First peoples and the so-called CALD part of Second peoples and as such require a clearer understanding and articulation in all UCA conversations, documents and declarations on Scripture, theology, and mission. Andrew Dutney, reflecting on his conversation with Alan Dutton:

*Alan's reference to "one anothers" was intended to point me back to a book we'd read together once: Gerhard Lohfink's Jesus and Community (1984). Lohfink had drawn our attention to the use of the reciprocal pronoun "one another" (allēlōn) in the New Testament, e.g. outdo one another in showing honour (Rom 12:10), live in harmony with one another (Rom 12:16), welcome one another (Rom 15:7), admonish one another (Rom 15:14), wait for one another (1 Cor 11:33), have the same care for one another (1 Cor 12:25), be servants of one another (Gal 5:13), bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2), comfort one another (1 Thess 5:11), build one another up (1 Thess 5:11), be at peace with one another (1 Thess 5:13), bear with one another lovingly (Eph 4:2), confess your sins to one another (James 5:16), pray for one another (1 Peter 4:9), meet one another with humility (1 Peter 5:5), have fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7)... And that's just a few examples.*

*The earliest church was a one-anothering community!*

*Pursuing this "linguistic clue" Lohfink showed that Paul, like Jesus, was primarily concerned with the gathering and building up of the one people of God now being established in the last days. It was about a people, an assembly, a body; not so much about individuals. The astonishing evidence of the*

*resurrection of the Messiah and the fulfilment of the promises of God to Israel and all the nations was the assembly (ekklesia) of Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women by the Holy Spirit – in little one-anothering communities numbering between a dozen and forty, in the homes of believers in towns and cities around the Roman world.*

*The edification or building up (oikodomē/oikodomein) of this eschatological community is the Apostle's vocation, but it was fundamentally "the responsibility which all in the community have for one another" (p. 102). The people of God, assembled in this place or that place, my house or yours, is essentially a one-anothering community.<sup>9</sup>*

In the conversations, discussions and interactions of members of the MCM-NRC and their respective networks, this is close to the heart of what that simple word 'community' means across cultural and language differences. A community that does not make space to hear both the words and silences of its most marginalised members cannot lay claim to their inheritance as a 'one-anothering community'!

A MULTICULTURAL CHURCH, LIVING ITS FAITH AND LIFE CROSS-CULTURALLY

2. RECEIVES CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AS GOD'S GIFTS AND:

- embodies these diversities as gracious gifts of the Creator God to the human family,
- rejoices in the variety of God's grace, and
- lives out its life and witness cross-culturally as a sign and promise of hope within multicultural, multiracial and multifaith Australia in the 21st century.

**4.2 The possible relationship of family or community in the Covenant of Marriage.** In many cultures, it is common for the religious rite of marriage to include sacred covenantal vows, entered into by extended families and clans, if not whole villages and communities (even when this is not the case in the secular society). Note: It has also occurred, in some communities, for eloping couples to not have their marriages recognized until the blessing is given formally and publicly by both families/communities. This is of particular concern among next/second generations and among those who marry interracially.

**4.3 Religious/spiritual rites for marriage and civil/legal requirements.** A number of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, societal traditions have included a separation of religious rites from secular, legal contracting of marriage. This begs the question: to what extent can and should religious celebrants serve the state. (This was particularly called into question when a UCA Minister married a couple in an Immigration Detention Centre. However, this religious marriage was not recognized by the state.)

**4.4 The question of same-gender relationships** is treated differently in various communities, and those differences frequently relate to responsibilities and relationships within clan/community groups. On this matter, there is no single position from CALD communities, or even within CALD communities. This is also the case across the diversity of the dominant culture within Second peoples. While the particular response may not have changed, there is a growing recognition that the foundational issue has to do with God's loving acts and commitment to the whole creation as revealed in the various Covenantal relationships into which God in Christ invites us through the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. If human relationships reflect and reveal those covenantal relationships as revealing the foundations of our faith, then the discussion about marriage, sexuality, same-gender relationships and so on must begin from a different place and approach to scripture and theology.

They well represent the notes from Revd Dr Rob Bos - Where is the Church now?

*Some noted that marriage is matter for the state and therefore there ought not to be any discrimination. Others noted that, even if the state continues to discriminate, the church cannot, adding that any rejection by the church is an "offence" to the wider community. Many people wonder what all the fuss is about and why the church is hung up on sexuality. One group noted that just as the church reviewed its position on slavery it now needs to reconsider its attitude to same- gender relationships.*

*Many noted that the church is now not where it was in 1997. Many more people have had personal contact with gay people and heard their stories. Furthermore, most young people in the church would be supportive of same-gender marriage. Yet, where people have not had personal contact with gay people or gay couples, they are more likely to hold "traditional" views. Others want to hold firmly to the 1997 declaration, but acknowledge that they are now more aware of the difficulties, struggles and aspirations of GLBTI people. Some regarded the movement towards same-gender marriage as inevitable.*

*All acknowledged readily that there were various views in the church about this, both within the Uniting Church and in other churches.<sup>10</sup>*

Through and throughout this journey the MCM-NRC has experienced deep spiritual growth as a community of believers. This has happened through the gift of investing significant time and energy in listening to one another and making space and time to value differences of approach. Stories have been shared of: ministry

with and from same-gender couples, those the communities have rejected, trans-gendering due to familial responsibility, gender-bias, discrimination or abuse associated with singleness or marriage and intercultural or hyphenated family stress. The conversation about these issues has extended into the gathering of Chairpersons and representatives of National Conferences during 2014.

From our own experiences, a key to any enriched and healing progress on these matters is dependent on identifying leaders to build up 'one-anothering communities'. The heart of the Scriptures we noted in section 4.1 above, and in the Basis of Union, especially paragraph 13: Basis of Union - GIFTS AND MINISTRIES

*The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ. ... The Uniting Church will thereafter provide for the exercise by men and women of the gifts God bestows upon them, and will order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission.*

This can be further illustrated by a section on leadership in a 'one-anothering' community in Andrew Dutney's article:

*"So what's the role of a leader in a one-anothering community? I think Alan Dutton's email points me towards an answer to that question.*

*He mentioned a number of issues that can arise from the closeness and depth of relationship in small rural congregations. It can be "hard to express a contrasting viewpoint". So a leader needs to notice the silences, the things not said. There will be ways of drawing out the concealed insight safely – but the silence has to be noticed first. A small, close congregation can become a "closed shop", Alan said. So a leader needs to bring news, messages, and invitations from the wider community and wider church, modelling the "outwardness" that can make a small congregation so attractive. If nothing else it can generate opportunities to display that legendary country "hospitality" – especially towards the stranger, or even the enemy. Alan mentioned the "lack of anonymity" that can be a liability as easily as it can be a comfort. So a leader in such a congregation needs to be practised at balancing personal boundaries and interpersonal intimacy. He mentioned a tendency for small rural congregations to separate their "church" commitment and their "community" commitment. So a leader needs to have a vision of following Jesus into the community and its organisations. "Conflict can be poisonous", Alan warned. So a leader needs to understand and apply the tools of peace making and peace building (they're different things).*

*The leader in such a small community is not the only or chief one-anotherer. One-anothering is everyone's responsibility. The leader's role is to sustain the vision, share the information, deploy the tools, conduct the conversations that enable a small rural church to be a one-anothering community that is a sign, foretaste and instrument of the reign of God.*

*It requires genuine faith, emotional intelligence, knowledge of the way people and communities work, and skills in conducting a pastoral conversation. Leadership like this builds up one-anothering communities ..."<sup>11</sup>*

**C. A Multicultural Church, Living its life and faith cross-culturally – receives cultural and linguistic diversity as God's gifts and:**

- *embodies these diversities as gracious gifts of the Creator God to the human family,*
- *rejoices in the variety of God's grace, and*
- *lives out its life and witness cross-culturally as a sign and promise of hope within multicultural, multiracial and multifaith Australia in the 21st century.*

Every member of the MCM-NRC has been profoundly touched by God's grace in the conversations from the past three years. We have struggled together and there have been tears and laughter. We do not currently have end-solutions to complex questions and issues. But we do believe that the Spirit has spoken to us in ways that we could not have foreseen, and led us into deeper awareness of and acceptance of our diversity, differences, and ability to live by grace with the tensions within which we are called to live faith and life cross-culturally. It is the conviction of the members of the MCM-NRC that this is the manner of journeying anticipated in the *Manual for Meetings* as it assists in shaping the processes that can lead to communal discernment and genuine consensus.

In proposing following through on these insights as part of a way forward MCM-NRC are very aware that by western measures this will be 'time consuming'. However two images of 'time' shared within the membership of MCM-NRC may be helpful:

- Coconut time (the Pacific) - often spoken of as 'whenever!' Coconuts do not have a 'ready for harvest' season. When each coconut is ready/ripe it falls. Hence the advice not to sit under a coconut tree: because one (or more) may be ready and fall at any time.
- Bamboo time (Asia): When some of the very tall bamboo is planted, nothing seems to happen for 5 years. Then, suddenly the bamboo begins to grow - up to 18-25 metres in 6 weeks.

Some of the Parables of Jesus, along with other stories from the Scriptures (Hebrew and Christian) seem to point clearly to God's use of such ways and such concepts of time. It is known in Greek as *kairos* - God/appropriate time, a time and a plan to be honoured: differentiating it from *chronos* another concept of time that might be simply called – clock time. A call to faithfulness in action, and trust in waiting for the nurture and the harvest belong to God's activity, God's *kairos*, and not our *chronos*.

Recently members of a MCM-NRC working group identified some 'what if' questions that bear on and arise from our long conversations, our processes, and our prayers:

- What if - there is not any choice to be made between 'this' or 'that', concerning 'marriage' or same-gender relationships and place of equality and acceptance fully in the life of God's people?
- What if - all we can or need to know is that God's creative and re-creative acts of loving-kindness and mercy are the foundation of all relationships?
- What if - that is all we need to know, and we don't need to insist on one way or the other, God makes those decisions?
- What if - God's gift is that there is a path between our absolutes, and paradoxically the Christ 'who in his own strange way constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church',<sup>12</sup> walks with all of us, with all our profound differences, complex safety barriers and means of exclusion, all of our rich and enriching insights, views of truth, and hopes for wholeness?
- What if - such a middle path is not a passive path, a sitting on the fence avoiding struggle, difficulty, and some form of perceived theological purity? But rather is a very active, insightful and wise path that provokes significant change in our minds and transformation in our lives, and is another step in God's intention for the redemption of all creation?
- What if - God is calling us to faithfully journey, and the learning and faithfulness is not in our answers, but in our being a 'one-anothering community' in Christ, with a full and honoured place for all?

Members of the MCM-NRC repeat the invitation we issued at the 2012 Assembly, to the wider church and Australian multicultural society, to hear and value one another and the blessings of God in all our lives, by including the stories and experiences of diversity in all our processes and deliberations. We invite people to meet in coffee shops and clubs, in lounge-rooms and around fine mats, at the dinner table and in parks, in the sands or on the beaches, in the shade of ancient trees and landscapes ... please talk about marriage ... please experience and nurture 'one-anothering community' in Christ: they are gifts of grace, and we do well to treasure our conversations about it.

In the process this UCA can model creating spaces of safety, even of silence, in which we as God's people may hear each other's voices, and in them the voice of the Holy Spirit herself. This is not about culture/language differences, but about how in our personal and communal living out of our faith in the One God we discern, hear and respond to the Spirit of God in our midst. Delight in and risk living in God's grace margin made possible through the acts of the Creator God in every land and place and people since creation itself.

Revd Mrs Amelia Koh-Butler  
(Chairperson)

and

Revd Dr Antony (Tony) Floyd  
(National Director)

For: the National Reference Committee: Multicultural and Cross-cultural Ministry

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> **Eric Law** in several of his publications – For example *Inclusion: making room for Grace*, chapters 2-4, Chalice Press, St Louis Missouri, 2000 - where trust in God's grace, in the face of unknown or uncertainty, aids in reducing the barriers of fear and anxiety and creates space for God's grace to work.

<sup>2</sup> **From the Operational Guidelines of MCM**

Within the Mandate of Uniting Faith and Discipleship, the work of Multicultural and Cross-cultural Ministry will:

- be grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ
- build upon the inherited tradition of the Uniting Church in Australia
- use insights from theological, biblical and mission studies, worship and spirituality that are gifts to the Uniting Church in Australia from our racial, cultural and linguistic diversity to reflect on the shape of witness and mission, outreach and evangelism in cross-cultural and multi-faith contexts
- respect and seek understanding and insight from Indigenous people in endeavouring to further develop faith language, images and metaphors appropriate to this land and its environment
- work to advance the witness to Christ in 21<sup>st</sup> century multicultural and multi-faith Australia
- reflect the racial, cultural and linguistically diverse life, faith experience and expressions of Christian life of those who share a common faith in Christ and that are consistent with the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia
- be undertaken in co-operation with synods and other Assembly agencies, ecumenically and in consultation with 'home' churches
- be conducted on the basis of the best research available

<sup>3</sup> **At the 4<sup>th</sup> Assembly, 1985**

<sup>4</sup> **Manual for Meetings** – almost exclusively section A: Meeting together (The formation of community; Why we meet together; How we meet together; and How we make decisions). In focusing on this process, we only make decisions after we have heard, reflected on and discussed all of our business. We have always reached consensus because the time taken to do this changes the need for safety and opens the margin for grace.

<sup>5</sup> **"Views of marriage in the UCA" - Report on a consultation process – 2013** - Revd Dr Robert Bos – October 2013

**Section 5. Same gender marriage?**

**5.1 Indigenous views**

*People recognised that issues of partnering cannot be isolated from other aspects of a culture; it is all part of one inter-connected fabric of beliefs, values and norms. We need to look at how relationships work in a particular cultural community. While there is undoubtedly same-gender attraction in Aboriginal societies, these do not receive formal recognition and are not talked about.*

*It is noted above (2.1.2) that traditional stories are essentially creation stories and therefore the Christian creation stories are particularly influential. The Genesis account emphasise male and female and procreation. It is therefore difficult for people to come to terms with same gender marriage.*

*The word "marriage" entails a man and a woman. If there is a different ceremony offered for same gender relationships, does this necessarily mean they would be regarded as "second class"? Can't they just be different? Do people feel less equal or less accepted if it is not marriage? Recognising a relationship is not necessarily the same as marriage.*

*To see marriage for same-gender couples as question of civil rights may be to misunderstand it. It is a gift from God, a gift of grace, not a question of "rights." The language seems inappropriate. This also points to the fact that church and state may see marriage quite differently, and it may be inappropriate for Ministers to be the public servants of "empire" by continuing to undertake legal functions (as also noted in 4.1).*

*While Indigenous people have as a starting point that traditional (i.e. religious) practices are divinely ordained, they recognise that there is a diversity of views among Christians. They also recognise that, while they may not endorse same gender relationships themselves, they recognise that other faithful people may make different choices.*

*Yet the church should not feel pressured by societal changes. Above all, Indigenous members want the opportunity to consider the matter carefully, looking closely at what the Bible says and doing careful theological reflection.*

**5.2 Migrant-ethnic views**

*In communities of fairly recent immigrants from non-Anglo countries, people may know that there are same-sex couples, but it is simply not discussed, and therefore not well understood. In some countries, homosexual activity is illegal. If it is talked about, then the couple would probably be condemned or alienated. There is something strange, shameful and foreign about people with a same gender orientation. It is regarded as outside of what is acceptable behaviour.*

*Having said that, in at some tribes a warrior may, in addition to wives, have a boy sex slave. Same gender relations are therefore associated with abuse. It is also often subject to mockery. At best, people will be pitied, rather than valued.*

*In some cultures, a man who demonstrates what are regarded as female traits may be regarded as female, and vice versa.*

*While some of Ministers, especially those who have had their ministerial formation in Australian theological colleges, are open to discussing and even affirming same-gender marriage, they know that they are not where their communities are. They are also aware that "second generation" people are much more open to GLBTI relationships.*

*Others said that the issue was only very slowly being opened up and required lots of careful conversations and teaching, listening to various insights into Scripture. It is important not to polarise the discussion into "them" and "us"; there is only "us" in all our differences.*

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*One group also noted that, while in their language there is one term for "husband" and "wife", it would not be considered appropriate to use this term for members of a same gender couple.*

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Generally people were of the opinion that their cultural practices and the Bible were mutually supportive.

### **5.3.6 Where is the church now?**

More people would be supportive if the church's position was an equal but alternative service of recognition, rather than extending our definition of marriage.

Some noted that marriage is matter for the state and therefore there ought not to be any discrimination. Others noted that, even if the state continues to discriminate, the church cannot, adding that any rejection by the church is an "offence" to the wider community. Many people wonder what all the fuss is about and why the church is hung up on sexuality. One group noted that just as the church reviewed its position on slavery it now needs to reconsider its attitude to same- gender relationships.

Many noted that the church is now not where it was in 1997. Many more people have had personal contact with gay people and heard their stories. Furthermore, most young people in the church would be supportive of same-gender marriage. Yet, where people have not had personal contact with gay people or gay couples, they are more likely to hold "traditional" views. Others want to hold firmly to the 1997 declaration, but acknowledge that they are now more aware of the difficulties, struggles and aspirations of GLBTI people. Some regarded the movement towards same-gender marriage as inevitable.

All acknowledged readily that there were various views in the church about this, both within the Uniting Church and in other churches.

A few groups thought that small rural communities were less open to same-gender relationships than urban centres. They also acknowledged that there were many same sex relationships in rural areas, but people generally pretend it does not exist.

Some groups expressed confusion and asked for further clarification. What are the right questions to be asking? What key Christian convictions and values should influence our thinking? Along with issues like refugees and the environment, marriage needs to be a social issue under discussion. There seems to be a readiness to consider the issue further.

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### **6. Conclusion**

Clearly, there is no agreed theology of marriage in the Uniting Church. The responses to the consultation process reported a wide range of views. At the same time, many demonstrated openness to change and reviewing their position.

A resource document on the theology of marriage which thoughtfully and fairly considered the issues, rather than seeking to persuade people to a particular point of view, would be well received.

<sup>6</sup> Wesley's Quadrilateral – an interaction/balance of Faith, Reason, Scripture and Experience

<sup>7</sup> Gerhard Lohfink's *Jesus and Community* (1984).

<sup>8</sup> Rev Brian Polkinghorne, (unpublished manuscript) So you want to go to Africa?

<sup>9</sup> Revd Prof Andrew Dutney, "Leadership in the one-anothering community" in Australian Leadership, December/January 2015)

<sup>10</sup> Revd Dr Rob Bos - see extract above from: "Views of marriage in the UCA" - Report on a consultation process – 2013 – October 2013

<sup>11</sup> Revd Prof Andrew Dutney, "Leadership in the one-anothering community" in Australian Leadership, December/January 2015)

<sup>12</sup> Basis of Union, paragraph 4 (1992)