

Sexuality and Same Gender Marriage

The UCA's journey
(in brief)



BEFORE 1977 ... GROWING SUPPORT FOR LAW REFORM

1970: Presbytery Church in Australia general assembly

1974: Presbyterian Church of Victoria recommended decriminalisation of homosexuality in Victoria.

1975: Methodist Department of Christian Citizenship followed.

Methodist policy saw homosexuality as a natural condition, and not one that should be subject to the law.

By the time the Uniting Church was created in 1977 it had a history of supporting homosexual law reform that the Church would continue in further debates about decriminalisation.

POLICY FOR THE UNITING CHURCH ... FROM 1982

SEXUALITY AND LEADERSHIP **- Documenting the History**

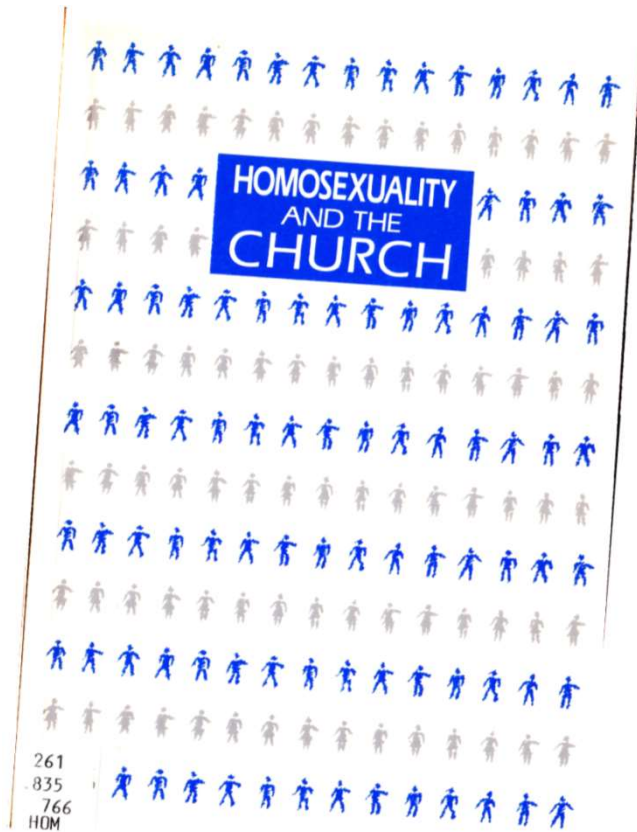
Received by the ASC in August 2009 (Minute 09.30)

The issue of sexuality and leadership has been a long standing and contentious one, having been before the Uniting Church for the past thirty years. This record of how the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) and Assembly have responded to it from 1982-2008 is provided in fulfilment of ASC minute 06.105.03 (b) which determined that the Assembly Standing Committee “provide a clear, readable and relatively brief summary of the debate about sexuality over the last thirty years;”

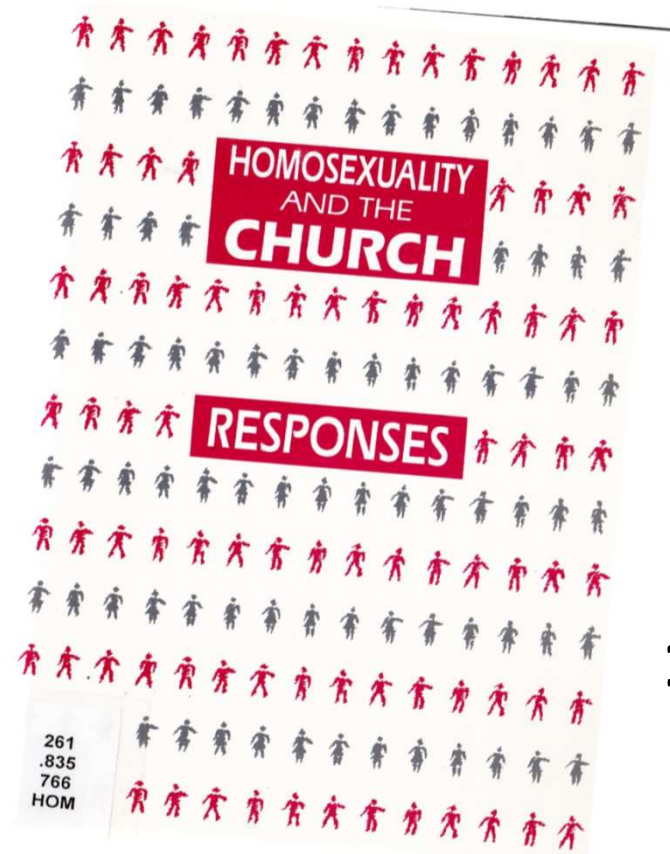
ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE 1982

1. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is all-inclusive, 'You are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians, Ephesians) and the Uniting Church declares in the Basis of Union, Para. 2, the belief 'that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ'.
2. Homosexuality is not a new phenomenon within the Church and community and current statistics would lead to the assumption that it also includes a percentage of members and ministers of the Christian Church.
3. Acceptance of the fact that sexual orientation is not a barrier to ordination does not imply approval of sexual promiscuity.
4. People considering suitability for ordination need to have in mind other behavioural questions, that may be equally as significant in their implications for ministry in the Church (ASC minute 82.101).

1984-87



1984



1987

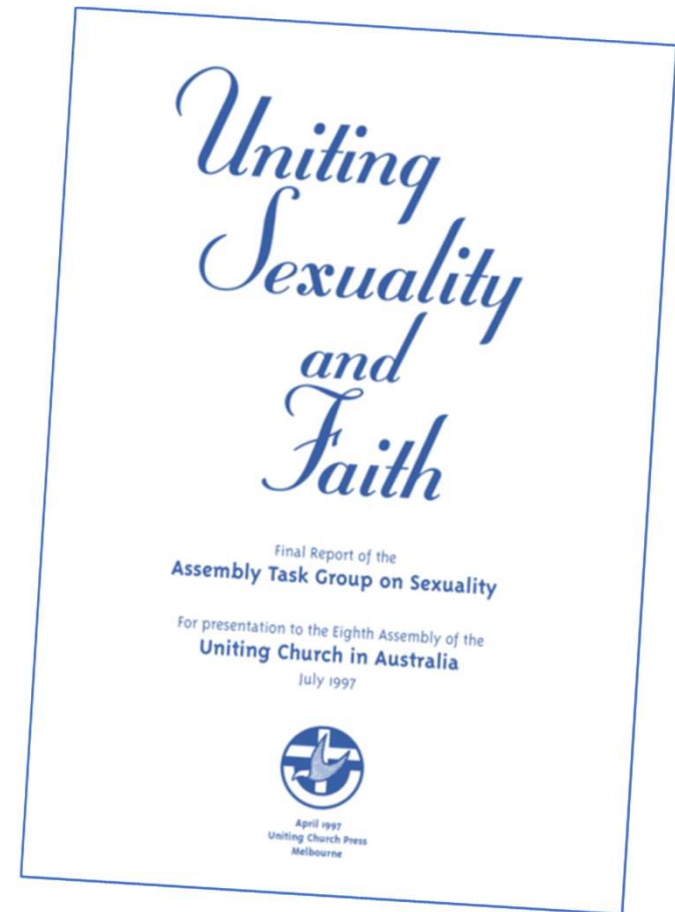
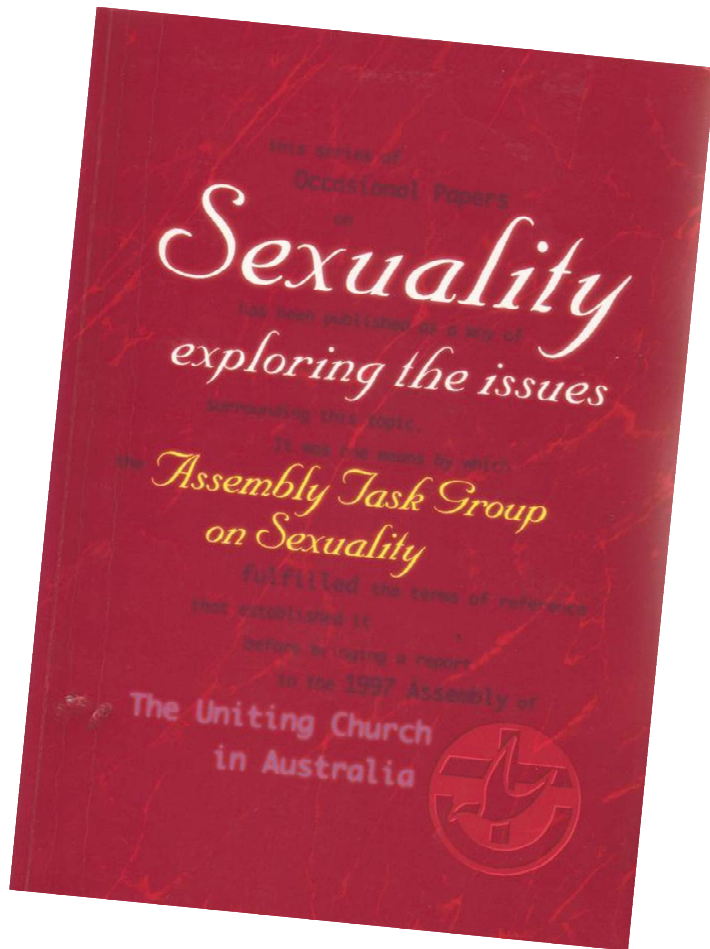
THROUGHOUT THE 1980s

- Chris Budden, ***Human Sexuality: a gift from God***. 1982.
- Warren Talbot (ed.), ***Affirming Faith and Sexuality: A collection of articles about Christianity and Homosexuality***, 1984.
- ***Looking beyond the fig leaves: An invitation to explore aspects of our sexuality as Christ's community***, 1984.
- Gordon S. Dicker (ed.), ***Homosexuality and the Church***: 1985.
- Stuart Reid and Warren Talbot, ***Who Is My Neighbour? A Study Guide for Homosexuality and the Church***, 1985.
- Gordon S. Dicker (ed.), ***Homosexuality and the Church: Responses***, Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 1988.

ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE 1987

1. records its appreciation of the study process by which members of the Uniting Church have been challenged to a deeper understanding of homosexuality and its significance for the church;
2. affirms that all baptised Christians belong in Christ's church and are to be welcomed at his table, regardless of their sexual orientation;
3. notes that there is a range of deeply held convictions within the UCA about significant aspects of the debate, particularly touching on the interpretation of scripture and the understanding of human sexuality generally;
4. encourages church members to explore more fully their understanding of issues relating to human sexuality and the family, including homosexuality;

6th ASSEMBLY (1991)



8th ASSEMBLY (1997)

to acknowledge the diversity of human relationships in which Uniting Church members are involved and the different Biblical, theological, ethnic and cultural responses of groups within the Church to these relationships;

8th ASSEMBLY (1997): 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.

8th ASSEMBLY (1997) Statement on 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.

8th ASSEMBLY (1997)

This Assembly also adopted a statement on separation, divorce and re-marriage, which affirmed that ... (inter alia) ...

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 grace and healing of God are available to people who are divorced, which may free them to marry again.”

8th ASSEMBLY (1997)

to request the Standing Committee, following consultation with the Commission on Doctrine, to appoint a group representative of the different perspectives in the Uniting Church in Australia, to prepare and make available material on ways in which the Church understands and uses the Bible in seeking to live in faithfulness to the Gospel;

- (a) commit the Church to a continuing dialogue on the matters as yet unresolved in the same spirit of openness and compassion that has prevailed during the meeting of this Assembly;
- (b) acknowledge the disappointment of those who were looking to the Assembly for greater clarity and direction in regard to these matters;
- (c) express deep regret to those whose personal pain remains unalleviated by its inability to reach further decisions at this time;

9th ASSEMBLY (2000): Statement on unity and diversity

We affirm

- the authority of the Scriptures as defined in the Basis of Union, acknowledging that within the church there is a range of views on questions of Biblical interpretation on various matters of Christian faith and practice;
- we are bound together by Christ, and because we love the Uniting Church as part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church we will continue to work together in our diversity as servants of the living God;

9th ASSEMBLY (2000): Statement on unity and diversity

We acknowledge

- that issues regarding committed same sex relationships and ordination were unresolved by the Eighth Assembly in 1997 and the Ninth Assembly in 2000 and remain unresolved;
- that the diversity of viewpoints and the lack of resolution of these issues have resulted in tension within the life of the church;

10th ASSEMBLY (2003): Resolution 84

recognising that:

- (i) within the church people of faith have wrestled with integrity to interpret Scripture in relation to the issue of Christian sexual ethics and have on some issues come to mutually exclusive positions;
- (ii) here are members of the church who have reached the conclusion that "celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage" is a faithful Christian standard for Christian sexual ethics;

10th ASSEMBLY (2003): Resolution 84

- (iii) there are members of the church who have reached the conclusion that "right relationships" as outlined in *Uniting Sexuality and Faith* is a faithful Christian standard for Christian sexual ethics; and
- (iv) membership of the Uniting Church is open to all persons subject only to the guidance of the Basis of Union, the Constitution, the Regulations and policies of the Assembly; to call upon members of the Church to seek to live together in peace as people of faith, notwithstanding differing views in the matter of same sex relationships;

ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE: Resolution 84

ASC responding to reaction against Resolution 84

- (i) “the concept of ‘right relationships’ was neither adopted nor recognised by the Assembly;
- (ii) the Assembly has not placed the Uniting Church outside of the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church;
- (iii) the Assembly has acted faithfully in accordance with the Basis of Union;
- (iv) the leadership of the Assembly did not mislead the Assembly;
- (v) those who adhere to resolution 84 have not separated themselves from the Uniting Church” (03.65.01.02).

It stated that “proposal 84 did not introduce new policy for the Church (03.65.02).

The ASC varied the resolution to clarify these points.

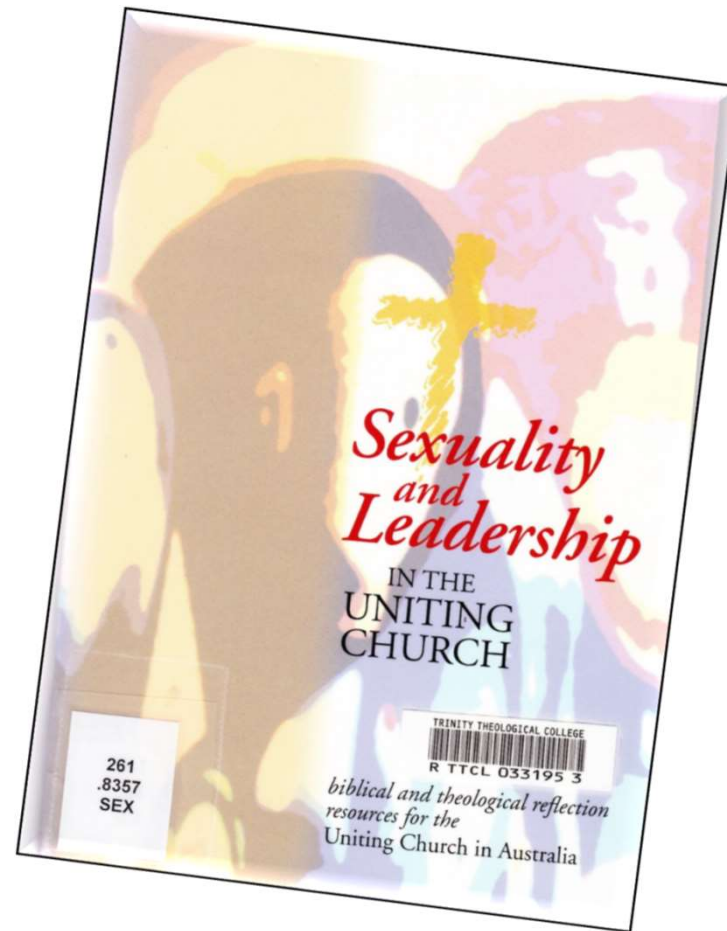
ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE: Resolution 84

ASC added additional clauses, including:

informs the Church that congregations and councils of the Church who wish to state a sexual ethic may elect to do so after prayerful consideration and study of the Scriptures providing that

- there is respect for and acknowledgment of those who hold a different view;
- such statements do not prevent the consideration on a case-by-case basis of individuals related to candidature, ordination or commissioning, and placement, according to proposal 84.3” (ASC minute 03.69.04).

STUDY GUIDE ON SEXUALITY AND LEADERSHIP (2004)



11th ASSEMBLY (2006)

5. to acknowledge:
 - a) that Assembly members are not of one mind regarding the issue of the acceptance into the specified ministries of those living in committed same-gender relationships; and
 - b) that some members of the Assembly adhere to the traditional teaching and practice of Reformed and Evangelical churches in this matter, while others who also adhere to the Reformed and Evangelical tradition believe that God may be leading this tradition to a different understanding and practice; and
 - c) and therefore, notwithstanding the hopes of many in the Church, that the 11th Assembly, having prayerfully sought to discern God's will and after much deliberation, is not prepared to exercise further its determining responsibility in this matter.

11th ASSEMBLY (2006)

7. to encourage Congregations:
 - a) to be aware that within many Congregations there is a diversity of belief on matters of sexuality and leadership and that some members do not feel free to express their beliefs;
 - b) to become safe communities where people may hold diverse beliefs on these matters and work together as the Body of Christ; and
 - c) to recognise that the possibility of living with difference is a gift which Christ offers to the world.

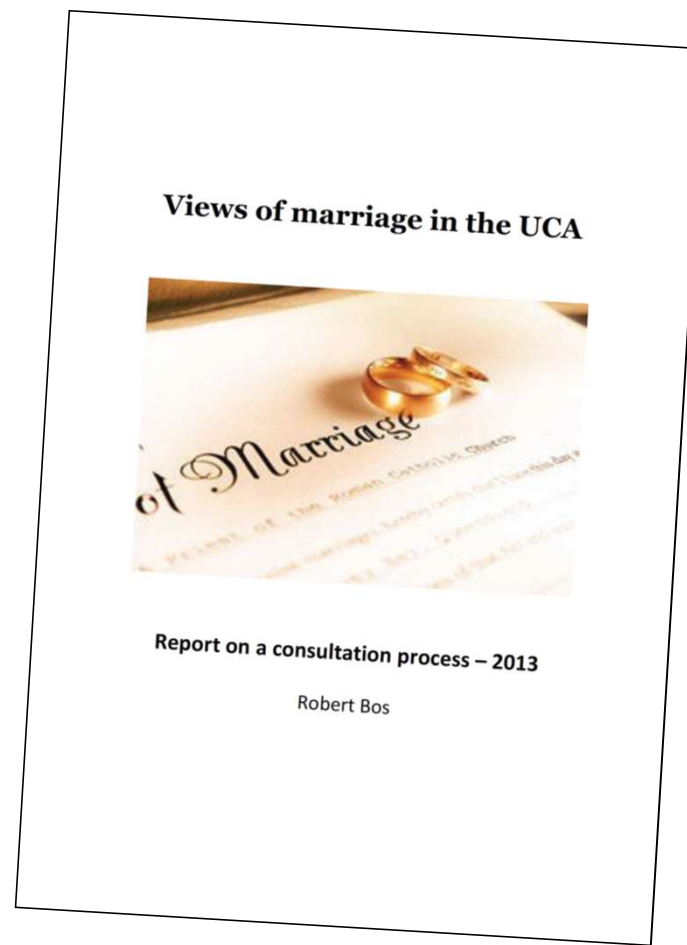
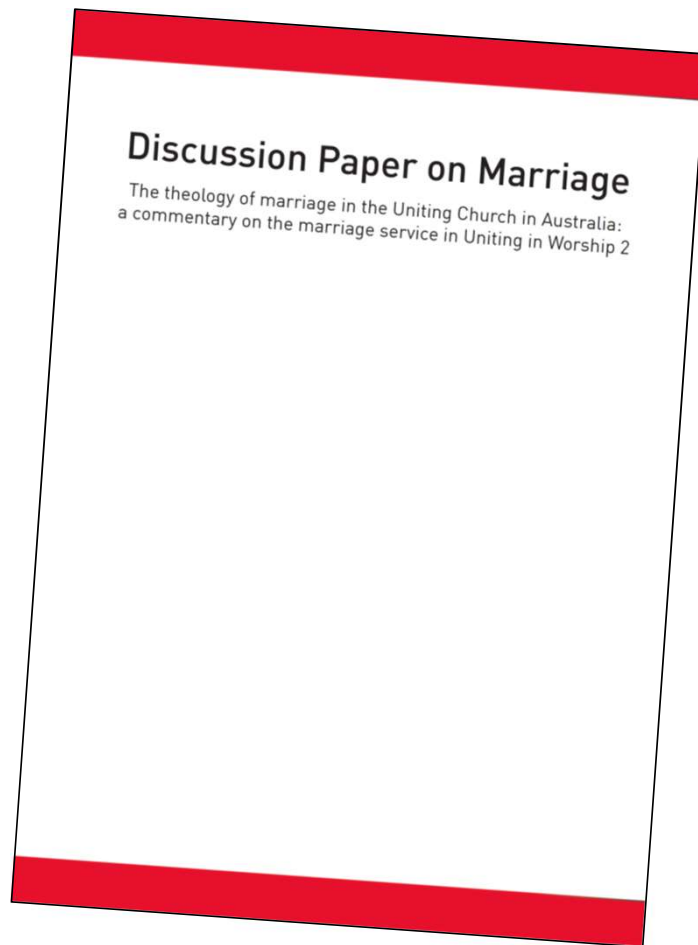
11th ASSEMBLY (2006)

9. to request the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine to engage in further work that assists the Church in our ongoing consideration of the theological diversity of the Church on this issue and to authorise the Assembly Standing Committee to determine the terms of reference for such work.
10. to acknowledge:
 - a) that the Uniting Church is committed “to bear witness to that unity which is both Christ’s gift and will for the Church”; andand to call the Uniting Church to re-commit itself to its primary purpose of “worship, witness and service”

13th ASSEMBLY (2012)

- Acknowledged the 8th Assembly (1997) statement on marriage (traditional view);
- Noting the desire for respectful conversation within the diverse community of the church and the current public debate about same gender marriage, asked the Working Group on Doctrine, 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 to bring a report with any recommendations to the ASC and through them to the 14th Assembly.

AFTER THE 13th ASSEMBLY (2012)



REPORT TO 14th ASSEMBLY (2015)

What the church believes about marriage has always been shaped by the interaction between scripture, tradition and culture. Therefore, the Working Group believes that consideration of any change to the existing doctrine of marriage needs to engage a theological approach that holds together scripture, tradition, and culture. It is through this process that the church develops its doctrines.

It is true that the various Christian views on marriage have consistently assumed that marriage is a lifelong, faithful, male-female union; beyond that the church's teaching about the status and purposes of marriage has changed across time, place and cultures. The presenting issue is whether one of those three constants in the Christian doctrine of marriage, namely it is a male-female union, should be maintained; or whether it can be changed to embrace same-gender unions.

REPORT TO 14th ASSEMBLY (2015)

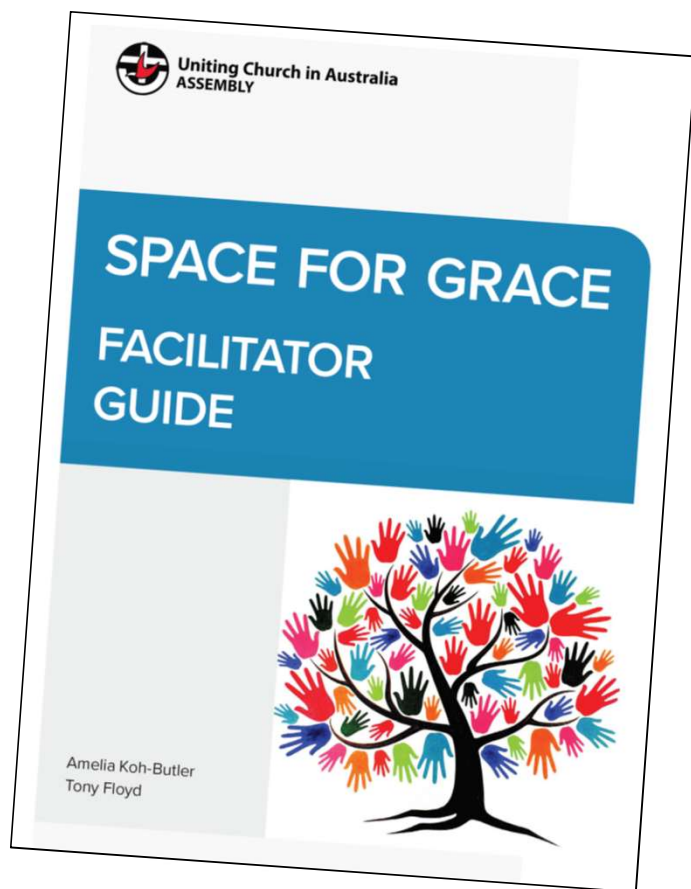
To explore this possibility in a manner consistent with the process of theological discernment outlined above, further attention needs to be given to the doctrine of scripture, the doctrine of creation, and the doctrine of the new creation in Christ.

DECISION OF 14th ASSEMBLY (2015)

- b) request the Standing Committee, in consultation with the UAICC and Multicultural and Cross-cultural Ministry, to explore how the Uniting Church can engage in further discussions about marriage and same-gender relationships in culturally appropriate ways; and

- c) request the Standing Committee to address immediately, through appropriate mechanisms, the following work:
 - (i) to engage with the continuing work of the Doctrine Working Group as outlined in its report to the Fourteenth Assembly;
 - (ii) to engage with the members of the LGBTIQ community and the wider Church in discussions about marriage and same-gender relationships;
 - (iii) in consultation with the relevant Assembly working groups, to prepare a report to the Fifteenth Assembly with appropriate recommendations, as well as supporting theological, liturgical, pastoral and educational resources; and
 - (iv) in consultation with our ecumenical partners, where appropriate, to investigate the implications of changing the Church's current relationship with the Commonwealth Government with respect to the conduct of marriages.

BETWEEN 2015-2018



Space for Grace process commended to the church for conversations

2 marriage conversations using Space for Grace each involving about 25 people.

Consultation with UAICC and multicultural groups.

Discussed at every Synod in 2017 (except 1).

DOCTRINE WORKING GROUP REPORT to 15th ASSEMBLY

It is important to acknowledge that the Eighth, Tenth and Eleventh Assemblies have recognised an enduring disagreement between members of the church on a range of questions concerning human sexuality. The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Assemblies have engaged the church in a process of respectful conversation on same-gender relationships and marriage.

DOCTRINE WORKING GROUP REPORT to 15th ASSEMBLY

Among other important findings, the process of consultation and study reflected in the Working Group on Doctrine Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships has confirmed that

- The diverse understandings identified by previous Assemblies are all able to be justified biblically and theologically – even though they are mutually exclusive interpretations;
- That diversity of understanding is itself explicable in biblical and theological terms, and can be recognised as a gift and a sign of health in the Body of Christ;
- The diversity in the understanding of marriage is in fact greater than can be imagined in the dominant culture when the witness of Indigenous and non-Western cultures is listened to. In many cultures marriage is primarily a community arrangement and fundamental to social and cultural structures and understanding, and only in a secondary sense about the love between two people.

8 PROPOSALS AT ASSEMBLY

We do not underestimate the significance of this change. To make a change such as this is a serious matter. We make the suggestion to a Church which we know is far from a common mind on the issue. We believe, however, that the arguments we have presented as a result of our enquiries and discernment are sufficiently strong for them to be ready to be tested by the Assembly.

8 PROPOSALS AT ASSEMBLY

- Four supported making provision for same gender marriage;
- Two called for retaining the 1997 statement (man and woman)
- One called for deferral and more work, with the matter to come to the 16th Assembly;
- One proposed that any change to the UCA understanding of marriage should be referred to other councils as it is a matter of vital importance to the life of the church.

THE ASSEMBLY'S DECISION

(a) To acknowledge:

- (i) that within the Uniting Church there is a diversity of religious beliefs and ethical understandings, developed through continuing faithful discernment and held with integrity on matters relating to sexuality and marriage; and
- (ii) that marriage is a gift God has given to humankind for the well-being of the whole human family.

(b) To determine that the Church is able to accept this diversity within its life and make the decisions necessary to enable its ministry and members to act with integrity in accordance with their beliefs.

THE ASSEMBLY'S DECISION

(c) To vary its policy on marriage by recognising two statements of belief:

(i) the belief expressed in the 1997 statement on marriage as follows:

This is the 1997 statement on marriage

(ii) the belief expressed in the following statement on marriage:

This is the 1997 statement on marriage, but with 'man and woman'; replaced with 'two people'/'couple'.

THE ASSEMBLY'S DECISION

(d) To affirm that Ministers and celebrants authorised by the Uniting Church in Australia may exercise freedom to decide whether the minister's or celebrant's religious beliefs allow the minister or celebrant to accept requests to celebrate marriages, as authorised under the Marriage Act and according to the rites of the Uniting Church in Australia.

(e) To request the Assembly Officers to arrange for the preparation of an additional authorised marriage liturgy which reflects the understanding of marriage as outlined in the marriage statement contained in (c)(ii) above for approval by the Standing Committee at its August 2018 meeting, for use according to the rites of the Uniting Church in Australia.

THE ASSEMBLY'S DECISION

(f) To note that Church Councils:

- (i) have the authority under Regulation 4.4.1 to permit or refuse the use of any property held for the use of the Congregation for the celebration of marriages, as authorised under the Marriage Act and according to the rites of the Uniting Church in Australia.
- (ii) do not have the authority to require a Minister in placement in their Congregation or to prevent a Minister in their Congregation from celebrating marriages as authorised under the Marriage Act and according to the rites of the Uniting Church in Australia.

(g) To request the Standing Committee, taking account of advice from the Assembly Legal Reference Committee, to consider and take such action as it considers appropriate, including (if necessary) the making of additional Regulations, to enable Church Councils acting under Regulation 4.4.1 to make decisions regarding use of property for celebrating marriages, in conformity with one of the statements of belief mentioned in (c)(i) and (ii).

BASIS OF THE ASSEMBLY DECISION

1. That marriage is a gift from God, and should be affirmed by the church as a high calling and sacred expression of covenantal love between a couple, reflecting the covenantal love between God and Creation and each of us.
2. That both views of marriage can be justified biblically and theologically, and faithfully held.

BASIS OF THE ASSEMBLY DECISION

3. That marriage is not of the substance of the faith, and so the UCA can allow diversity. (BOU #15: “... the phrase ‘adhere to the Basis of Union’ is understood as willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in this Basis. Such adherence allows for difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith.”)

BASIS OF THE ASSEMBLY DECISION

4. That there are no other provisions in the BOU that would prevent the church from adopting a dual-statement position.
5. That there had been sufficient consultation across the church that would inform its discernment in making this decision.
6. The decision not to seek concurrence of other councils indicates Assembly did not believe that this issue is of vital importance to the life of the church (BOU #15: “It is obligatory for [the Assembly] to seek the concurrence of other councils, and on occasion of the congregations of the Church, on matters of vital importance to the life of the Church.”).

WHAT'S HAPPENED SINCE?

Reaction across UCA has been mixed.

Some people and Congregations have welcomed the decision.

Some networks have been galvanising opposition to the decision, and some new alignments are being formed.

Congregations and Church Councils are meeting to determine their policy on use of their buildings for same gender marriages. (There is a Journey article, Sept 2018, on practical tips for holding a Congregation meeting on this question.)

WHAT'S HAPPENED SINCE?

Ministry agents are considering their position, and discussing this with their Church Councils.

Synods and Presbyteries have the right to seek to suspend the decision for further consultation (Const. 39b). 3 of 8 Presbyteries in Qld have voted for this. This window closes in mid-January 2019. There will not be a special Qld Synod meeting to discuss this issue.

A new UCA marriage liturgy (for same gender weddings) has been published and available from September 21. The previous liturgy ('man and woman') remains valid. We now have 2 marriage rites.

WHAT'S HAPPENED SINCE?

Some legal questions have been asked and are being addressed.

Ecumenical implications – some turning against UCA in local ministry groups or inter-church activities; some denominations are watching our developments very closely. Views of other churches are mixed.

ON WHAT BASIS WAS THE DECISION MADE?

Human sexuality has been a major theme of academic Christian research and debate for past 30 years.

- What does Bible say? How do we understand that for today?
- Key theological concepts – include creation (purpose, order/disorder), ‘image of God,’ theological anthropology and sexuality, sin, grace, redemption, new creation and new humanity in Christ, purpose of marriage, covenant and new covenant, marriage as theological metaphor, Christian ethics, love.
- Discernment: Scripture, tradition, reason, experience.
- How are we to be the church? Our nature, mission, witness?

ON WHAT BASIS WAS THE DECISION MADE?

The Doctrine Working Group report considers these themes:

1. Basis of Union
2. Biblical witness
3. Church history and tradition
4. Changes in scientific understandings
5. Contemporary society (practice of marriage; multicultural; legal)
6. Justice and inclusion
7. Gifts and graces – ‘the lived experience’ of same-gender relationships and Christian discipleship in the church

BASIS OF UNION

UCA Basis of Union:

- Within the faith and unity of the one holy and catholic apostolic church built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ;
- sole loyalty to Christ the living Head of the Church;
- remain open to constant reform under his Word;
- The coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation: the Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation;
- Christ rules and renews the church;

BASIS OF UNION

- the Old and New Testaments ... in which it hears the Word of God ... enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry of recent centuries ... the knowledge of God's ways with humanity are open to an informed faith.
- UCA lives within a world-wide fellowship of Churches in which it will learn to sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought. Within that fellowship ... also stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help it to understand its own nature and mission.

SCRIPTURE

Biblical basis:

1. interpreting the Bible as Christians;
2. the body in the Bible;
3. sin, boundaries and ethics;
4. Jesus' vision of the body, marriage and celibacy;
5. same-gender sexual acts in the New Testament;
6. marriage, celibacy and the body in the New Testament letters; and
7. using and appealing to Scripture.

SCRIPTURE

1. Where are there specific references to homosexuality, and what was the context and purpose of those references?
2. How do those references fit within the broader/deeper biblical witness about the body, sexuality, creation/order, sin, redemption, grace?
3. How did Jesus use the scriptures, and how does Christ as Living Word become our interpretive lens for the written word?
4. How was marriage understood and practised in the Bible, how did it change, and what are the overarching principles?
5. What might all of this mean for us in our context today?

SCIENCE

‘Scientific evidence supports the view that a small percentage of people are homosexual for so-far-unspecified reasons of nature rather than simply social nurture. That is, same-gender sexual attraction is not a choice. For some Christians this is simply one example of the way in which the world as it currently exists is not the world as God intends it to be. For them, marriage between a man and a woman remains God’s intention for humanity and those people who cannot enter such a marriage are called to live celibate lives. For other Christians, that some people are born intersex, gender diverse or same-gender attracted is a reason to modify the church’s traditional understandings of marriage to enable those people to share in its gifts and responsibilities.’

RIGHTS, JUSTICE, LAW

‘... discrimination on the grounds of sexual/gender orientation and the associated stigmatisation of same-gender couples bears a direct causal relationship to the higher rates of psychological morbidity and health inequities experienced by members of the LGBTI community.’

GIFTS AND GRACES

We learn from Scripture that the Spirit's gifting is not in our control. A number of UCA congregations include Christian same-gender couples, and find their presence and their gifts contribute to the building up of the Church and serving the community in Christ's name. Through same-gender couples who are either members or ministers, the Church has seen lives which are indistinguishable from others in terms of faith and discipleship. They are people who love God, pray and worship, and contribute to the building up of the church and its mission. This particular witness invites a response from the rest of the church ...

GIFTS AND GRACES

Can the existence of committed faithful relationships between two Christians of the same gender be a prompt to the church to consider that such relationships are participating in the goodness of God's creation, as much as those relationships between a man and a woman which have been traditionally recognised as marriage?

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

When we ask ourselves how to order the life of the church today, the fundamental question for us is therefore not, “What did the New Testament writers think about this?” nor “How did the New Testament Church order its life?” although of course there is much to be learned from that. The fundamental question for us today, and for every period of history is rather, **“What is the gospel of Jesus Christ?”** This is then followed by **“What does the gospel imply for the ordering of the church?”** In the issue of same-gender marriage the Uniting Church is again asked to decide if the application of the gospel criterion leads us to depart from church tradition; and to ask whether endorsement of same-gender marriage is an implication of or, at least, consistent with the gospel.

AN ANGLICAN CONCLUSION

We argue that the church should marry same-gender couples because it requires their testimony to the love of Christ and the church, and because it recognizes that same-gender couples stand in need of sanctification no less than opposite-gender couples do. In grafting same-gender marriage onto the domestic rite, the church follows the pattern of God's grafting Gentile olive-branches onto the domesticated olive tree of Israel (Rom 11:24). The church does so because same-gender couples need the sanctification that marriage teaches, and the church needs the marital virtues that same gender couples are already receiving. ... This vision of marriage is offered not in arrogance, naiveté, or spiritual enthusiasm, but in trust and with hope, as our witness to the mission of Christ.

