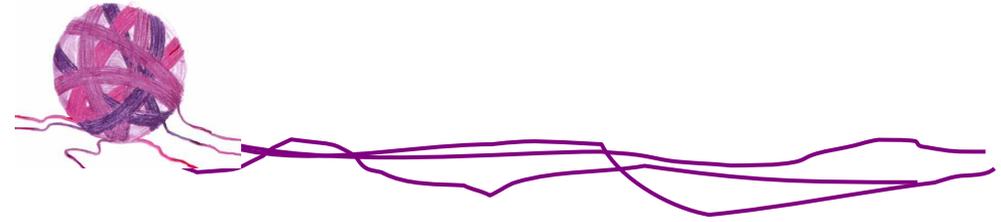




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Sacred Union Ceremony

*towards pastoral and liturgical
recognition for gay and lesbian
couples in the Uniting Church in
Australia*

Compiled by
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September 2010



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Uniting Network Australia is a national network of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, their families and friends, working for safety and equality in the Uniting Church in Australia. We proudly participate in helping the Church wrestle with issues of faith, sexuality, membership and leadership, and work for greater inclusivity within the Church.

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UNA Policy on pastoral support and liturgical recognition for gay and lesbian couples

Introduction - Blessing all of God's people

At the 2008 Daring Conference held in Adelaide, members of Uniting Network Australia (UNA) agreed that the development of liturgies which recognise gay and lesbian couples be a high priority. This booklet, containing options for a Sacred Union Ceremony, is one outcome of that decision. We are pleased to present it both as an impetus for wider discussion and for local pastoral use as appropriate.

UNA's first concern in preparing this booklet of resources is to encourage appropriate pastoral care for gay and lesbian couples through pastoral and liturgical recognition. As a second stage in this overall approach we are hopeful that the UCA's National Assembly will commence a discussion of the matters raised, by means of a referral to Assembly working groups on Doctrine and Liturgy. Whether that happens sooner or later, we believe that a careful re-consideration of the doctrine of marriage, and its liturgical expression, is required.

The proposed Ceremony of Sacred Union is an act of Christian worship, whereby the community of the faithful bears witness to God's love for all of God's people - beyond human distinctions and barriers such as sexuality and gender identity. In turn, we are both invited and called to respond to God's grace in all areas of our personal relationships and community life. As such we are guided by the major themes in the Christian Scriptures and Tradition such as grace, self-giving love, forgiveness and acceptance.

The current Uniting Church understanding of marriage is:

“Marriage for Christians is the freely given consent and commitment in public 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 a 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.” (Eighth Assembly, 1997)

In 1992 the Assembly Standing Committee resolved to advise ministers and Councils of Elders that recognising same-sex relationships in any service which resembles the marriage service is not appropriate (Minute 92.31)

The proposed Sacred Union Ceremony is not intended to be and should not be presented as a Marriage Service. Beyond the Sacred Union Ceremony as a local pastoral service, in putting this material together we hope to respectfully encourage a re-consideration of the current policy of the Assembly concerning marriage. The third option in the booklet is a de-gendering rendering of the marriage service. We note this is the approach of our partner churches the United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ (USA). We include this as an option that is theologically supported by the definition of the Roman Catholic moral theologian Daniel Maguire:

“Marriage is the highest form of interpersonal commitment and friendship achievable between sexually attracted persons”.¹

This definition requires neither heterosexual coupling nor procreative possibilities.

It is a matter for the Assembly of the UCA to determine whether and in what manner a re-consideration of marriage might take place. UNA would be willing to participate in such a re-consideration, sharing the experience of our members who are involved in a committed relationship. Our conviction is that, for the Church to *not* offer pastoral care, including prayers and blessings for those whom God has called to be together in a relationship of mutual love and unity, is a serious dereliction in the Church's call to worship, witness and serve all people in the name of the One who died for all.

+ +

The Working Group appointed by the UNA National Executive to prepare this booklet was conscious of various trends in our partner churches in the reformed and evangelical traditions. There are two main trends:

1. Where civil society has extended the legal definition of marriage to permit same-gender couples, some of our partner churches (for example, the United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ USA) have been able to authorise clergy to perform inclusive Marriage Services. That is,

marriage may be between same-gender or other-gender couples. That is not the situation in Australia and it is likely to be for some years before the national Parliament amends the Australian Marriage Act to permit same-gender marriage.

2. Where civil society has adopted Civil Unions as a legal way of complimenting marriage and recognising same-gender unions, some of our partner churches (for example the Methodist Church in Aotearoa/New Zealand) have authorised clergy to liturgically preside at such a union ceremony.² Australian States, Territories and major municipal governments are edging their way to this approach, including official Registers for same-gender couples, for example in South Australia only a civil celebrant can conduct a union ceremony which will be registered at the department of Births, Death n& Marriages. (The Methodist Church in Aotearoa/New Zealand has also included reference to Civil Unions in their code of conduct for clergy, though that is a separate matter which will also require consideration by the UCA in due course.)

Aside from changes in civil society, and the many ways in which our partner churches are responding to them, are concerns arising from (a) biblical and theological issues, and (b) pastoral concerns. Regarding the latter we are aware of numbers of UCA clergy who already receive requests for some type of blessing service by same-gender couples. Clergy respond on an individual basis, with due concern for pastoral care of the couple, faithfulness to the Gospel of Christ Jesus and awareness of the teachings of the Church.

The three clergy members of the UNA Working Group have all received such requests and have conducted services for same-gender couples and will continue to do so, as will other ordained ministers in the UCA. The Assembly will inevitably have to engage in this discussion as ecclesial and social practices evolve into new and renewed understandings of marriage and committed relationships.

This booklet contains a range of options at key points in the liturgy for a Sacred Union Ceremony (Greeting, Prayers, Readings, Declaration of Intent, etc). We have not set out to write a new order of service but to make available, in one place, a selection of existing resources from around the world that are already available. We have done this in a conscious way for three reasons:

1. In terms of pastoral care, many clergy already adapt the current Marriage Service found in *Uniting in Worship*, with due and careful regard for the printed rubrics, to suit the pastoral circumstances and wishes of the presenting couple. This is commonly done for opposite-gender couples.
2. Within UNA there are a range of views concerning the most appropriate service, and thus we have not sought to develop or impose a single model or option.
3. There are differing biblical and theological frameworks available to consider the Church's blessing of couples, whether same or opposite gender. These are most evident in the Declaration of Intent and may be summarised as follows:

Biblical covenant: using the rich biblical metaphors of God's covenant with God's people as the framework model for a Sacred Union Ceremony. In the text we have used and adapted materials from the Diocese of New Westminster in the Anglican Church in Canada and elsewhere.³

Commitment to love: using the many themes in the Scriptures which enjoin us to loving relationships in all areas of life. In this we have used the work of the Uniting Church's Rev Dr Dorothy McRae-McMahon.⁴

Inclusive Marriage: using and adapting the existing Marriage Service in *Uniting in Worship 2* to make it inclusive by removing references to specific genders.

It is not our intention here to argue one approach over the other but to encourage discussion. Our first priority, however, is pastoral and liturgical recognition within existing policies. It will be evident that the three approaches are not mutually exclusive: committed love is a mutual requirement in the biblical covenant and essential to the current ceremony and practice of marriage. Framed slightly differently, marriage can be seen as a covenant of love. Nonetheless, different emphases can be seen in the various options, extending to the selection of vows, prayers, Scripture texts, etc.

It is noted that it will be pastorally appropriate for the presiding minister to adapt the ceremony options for the particular couple. For example this might

include couples who wish to make a re-commitment. This would require some amendment to the words suggested in the booklet.

We approach with considerable caution doctrinal claims that an institution emerging from particular cultural contexts (heterosexual marriage) is “ordained by God”. Marriage has changed and evolved (from being an institution that was both patriarchal and polygamous). There is no reason why it should not continue to evolve as other patterns for human relating emerge and gain liturgical recognition.

Moving beyond the immediate question of a pastoral response such as a Sacred Union Ceremony, the Church catholic has never stipulated (heterosexual) marriage as a requirement for faithful Christian discipleship. In this sense we are reminded of our common co-humanity, as women and men, to serve God and respect each other in all our relations. This should be the underlying concern, even though expressed in various forms in different cultures and historical periods.

Our hope is that the resources compiled in this booklet may assist individuals and couples, congregations and the wider Church, as we seek to be faithful to the Gospel of Christ Jesus by the recognition of same-gender loving, committed, sacred and life-long relationships.

.....
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Pentecost 2010 (September)

Sacred Union Ceremony for the Uniting Church in Australia

As described in the Introduction, it will be a matter for the presiding Minister and couple to make decisions concerning the Greeting, Prayer, Declaration, etc. In doing so, the Sacred Union Ceremony options seek to respect the essential components of Christian marriage. Source A is predominantly from the Rev Dorothy McRae-McMahon; Source B is predominantly from a Blessing Service authorised by Diocese of New Westminster (Anglican Church of Canada); Source C is an adaptation of the Uniting Church in Australia Marriage liturgy from Uniting in Worship 2 with the inclusion of words used by the editors.

Greeting

- A. We are gathered in celebration to honour a love which has now led to commitment, and which calls for recognition.

We are gathered for a moment of joy and hope to acknowledge the depth of relationship which is possible between two people.

We are gathered, before God, to celebrate the love between N and N and their commitment to each other.

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- B. On behalf of N and N, I welcome you to this celebration of their commitment to each other.

We are here to affirm intimate relationship in its many and varied forms: the love of family, the support of friends.

We are here to witness the making of a covenant expressed in solemn vows and promises.

- C. Friends, we have been invited here today to share with N and N a very important moment in their lives.

In the time they have been together their love and understanding of each other has grown and matured and now they have decided to live their lives together as lifelong partners

Scripture Sentences

This is the day which God has made;
Let us rejoice and be glad in it Psalm 118:24

God is love,
And those who live in love live in God,
And God lives in them. 1 John 4:16

Beloved, let us love one another;
for love is from God.
And everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
The one who does not love
does not know God, for God is love 1 John 4:7-8

Hymn / Song

Prayer

- A. God, whose name is love,
we pray for all those who dare to commit themselves to each other,
those who have faith that love can last.
We pray for the world which longs for the lifting up of love,
for an expanding life of compassion and justice
for all people and for the earth itself.

May all we do here today add to the renewing of good
and the creation of a greater hope.

Amen.

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- B. Eternal God, Creator of all things,
Source of every good and perfect gift,
you made us and you sustain us;
we depend on you.
We praise you for the gift of life;
we thank you for making us able to think
about life's meaning and purposes;
and most especially do we glorify you
for the love you have created in us.

We also give you thanks, dear God,
for calling N and N to be joined to one another in love.

May your holy spirit empower them
to perform and keep the solemn covenant they are about to make,
and keep them ever growing in love for one another and for You.

This we ask in the name of Jesus, the Christ
who taught us the true meaning of love.
Amen

- C. Gracious God,
your generous love surrounds us,
and everything we enjoy comes from you.

In your great love
you have given us the gift of Sacred Union.

Bless N and N as they pledge their lives to each other;
that their love may continue to grow
and be a reflection of your love for us.
Amen

Declaration of Purpose

The person presiding invites the couple to stand in the full view of the gathered community and addresses the couple in these or similar words. Three different approaches are offered here.

1. Using a biblical covenant approach

A covenant is an ancient form of promise, a public declaration of commitment that binds people in an enduring relationship. The Bible tells the stories of God's covenant with human beings.

God's covenant with Israel was the basis of the people's liberation from slavery and exile. God's covenant with the followers of Jesus brings us into a new community where there is no male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, but one people united in Christ.

All our covenants with family and friends are signs of God's faithfulness and love. They are living expressions of God's promises to us and sources of hope to others.

Today we gather to witness and to bless the public commitment of N and N to such a covenant.

(Based on the diocese of New Westminster, Anglican Church of Canada)

*

The Bible gives us specific example of loving relationships of persons of the same gender. This is seen in the loving relationship between the young shepherd David and the young prince Jonathan of whom it is written that:

“the soul of Jonathan was bound into the soul of David
and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” 1 Sam 18:1

and when Jonathan died David lamented:
“I am distressed for you my brother Jonathan;
greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful
passing the love of women.” 2 Sam 1:26

In a similar way Ruth made her commitment to Naomi with the covenant words:

“Do not press me to leave you
or turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die -
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you.” Ruth 1:16-17

In Christian history similar stories abound of saints who have been united in covenant bonds of faith and spirit such as the holy apostles Philip and Bartholomew and the martyrs Serge and Bacchus.

(Material provided by Robert Stringer)

*

God is calling the Church and society to a new place in all relationships - we need to celebrate and support love and commitment wherever it finds expression.

The blessing of covenants and commitments is a clear symbol the Church can offer God's children of God's acceptance into the life of the Church - and the world. The honouring of love is the foundation for all family values.

By this act of blessing the Church takes seriously the power of healing that such acts of blessing offer. Our thoughtful presence today says: we see goodness in you and your love for each other, we recognise your intention to share that love for a lifetime; we want to bless you on your journey; we cheer you on your way and hope for your success; and shall rejoice in your victories and weep for your failures.

(From Blessing ceremonies Resources for Same-gender services of Commitment by United Church Coalition for Lesbian & Gay Concerns, amended.)

2. Using a commitment to love approach

- A. Love is the beauty which surrounds us each day,
a safe place for the daring of truth
and a wind which spreads the sails
when we think we cannot move.

Love is a steadying hand
when the ground trembles under our feet
and a laugh in the midst of our earnestness.

Love is a song in the face of our despair
and a face before us when we believe we are alone,
a touch which comes from the heart when we are untouchable.
Love is day after day as the years unroll
and is not defeated by that ordinariness and responsibilities.

Love is a flame of passionate life which takes many forms,
a walking with each other,
a holding of each other
a faithfulness to each other
which weathers the journeying,
common life enhanced and enjoyed,
and difference brought into respectful embrace.
Love defies the challenges,
and defines belonging.

To enter a covenant relationship in love
is an act of recognition and determination,
a commitment to live on
in a rich and vivid tapestry of life together
and to claim the blessing of God.

© Dorothy McRae-McMahon

- B. This a timeless moment, a moment of hope and expectation, when
standing before God and among you, their friends, N and N pledge
themselves to each other in the covenant of Sacred Union What N and
N mean to each other is obvious in their lives, but it is not easily

expressed in the language of a ceremony. The union it symbolizes can
be the most intriguing of human experiences, for in any accounting,
love in its infinite manifestations is what life is all about. To share their
lives, to encourage creativity, to inspire each other to reach beyond
the limits of the ordinary . . . not at the expense of each partner's
individuality, but rather by the strength of the common bond, this is
the hope in which N and N come to be united.

Through this rite of passage, two persons declare publicly their intent
to enter into an intimate relationship of enduring love. This occasion is
not a spectacle, but a sacred moment; it is not a mere formality. We
are witness to the making of a covenant. This is a celebration of the
highest we know in love, the pledging of the deepest fidelity and trust,
the expression of the highest aspiration.

It is our hope that those of you who live in an intimate and loving
relationship will take this occasion to renew your own vows and that all
of you will share in this celebration by offering your prayerful thoughts
for N and N as they begin a united life together.

3. The non-gender approach to the UCA marriage service statement of purpose⁵

Please note: as indicated in the Introduction section, the Uniting Church in Australia understands marriage to be a union of one male and one female person. The Assembly Standing Committee has advised clergy and congregations that services shall not be conducted which resemble the marriage service.

Marriage is a gift of God
and a means of grace.
In the life-long union of marriage
we can know the joy of God,
in whose image we are made.

Marriage is founded in God's loving nature,
and in the covenant of love made with us in Christ.
Two partners,

in giving themselves to each other in love,
reflect the love of Christ for his Church.

In Christian marriage,
each person is called
to live together faithfully,
and to love the other with respect,
tenderness and delight.
The companionship and comfort of marriage
enables the full expression
of physical love between the two partners.

They share the life of a home
and may be entrusted
with the gift and care of children.
They help to shape a society
in which human dignity and happiness
may flourish and abound.

Marriage is a way of life that all people should honour;
it is not to be entered into lightly or selfishly,
but responsibly and in the love of God.

N and N are now to begin this way of life
that God has created and Christ has blessed.
Therefore, on this their wedding day,
we pray that they may fulfil God's purpose
for the whole of their lives.

The two covenanters and their attendants may sit.

Scripture Readings

Genesis 2:15, 18-24	Not good to be alone
Ruth 1:1-8, 14-17	Where you go, I will go
1 Samuel 18:1b, 3, 20:16-17, 42a	Jonathan makes a covenant with David
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12a	Two are better than one
Song of Solomon 1:15-2:4	You are beautiful, my love
Song of Solomon 2:8-13	Love is strong as death

Song of Solomon 8:6-7
Sirach 6:6-10, 14-16
John 13:34-35
1 Corinthians 13:4-8a
Galatians 5:1, 13, 14, 22-25
Ephesians 3:14-21
Ephesians 5:1-2, 8-14
Colossians 3:1-4, 12, 17
1 John 3:18-24
1 John 4:7-12

A seal upon your heart
True friends
A new commandment
The gift of love
Fruits of the Spirit
Rooted and grounded in love
Live in love
Clothe yourselves with compassion
Love, not in word, but in action
Love one another

Witness / Sermon

Hymn / Song

Declaration of Intent

The person presiding invites the couple to stand together.

- A. Come, N and N
We, your friends and family invite you
to stand on the ground of your life together.
We have already seen its colour and its beauty,
its grandeur and its many-varied flow.
Tell us now why you are ready to make this commitment to each other.

The person presiding invites the couple to share their reasons.

We celebrate this moment with you
and invite you to make that commitment now.

N and N say, either separately or together:
Before God and all present,
I now place my life in your hands for your cherishing.
I invite you to call me on
into deeper life and deeper love into the future.
I commit myself to hold your life tenderly
and to receive it into my hands,
and into my heart,

with respect and with awe, with wonder and joy
as we travel the years together,
whatever they may hold.
I belong to you and you belong to me
in mutual love and freedom.

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- B. N and N, the covenant you are about to make with one another is intended to join you together in a relationship so intimate and personal that it profoundly affects your whole being. It offers you the hope and the promise of a love that is true and mature. But to attain such a love, you will have to commit yourselves to each other freely, without reserve, and gladly for the sake of a richer and deeper love together.

To attain such a love you must each respect the freedom, individually and dignity of the other, not seeking to change or reshape the other into your own image and likeness, but rather each of you seeking to change and re-shape your own self in order to give that self more completely to the other in authentic love. And most importantly, to attain to such a love, you must each give yourself in faith and obedience to God who is the source and nurturer of all love.

Do you understand this commitment to each other?

Response "We do".

Then trusting in the Holy Spirit to sustain you, make the commitment to which God has called you.

N and N you are here before us, your family and friends, to affirm your choice that you have made of each other as a life's mate. By standing here before us, you affirm that it is your intention to establish a home and create a new family on the foundation of your love. Out of a tangled world, you have been drawn together. I ask you now to declare your intention."

Are you willing to love N in his/her unique fullness and to take the risk and to accept the vulnerability of that love again and again and again?

Response "I do".

- C. N and N, do you believe that God has blessed and guided you, and today calls you into union?

Response "I do".

N, will you give yourself to N to be her partner, to live together in the covenant of union?
Will you love her/him, comfort her/him, honour and protect her/him, and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her/him, as long as you both shall live

Response "I will".

Affirmation of family and friends

This question can be directed at the parents, or immediate family or any individuals or groups which the couple wish to include.

It is wonderful that you have all gathered here to celebrate this Sacred Union between N and N.
I have asked them some important questions and now it is your turn.
Your response is (I Hope) "We do".

Will you the family and friends of N and N
Give your blessing to this Sacred Union
And do you promise to uphold them in their journey together?

All: We do

Promises and Vows

The word "partner" may be replaced with wife, husband, spouse or any other appropriate term. The couple may choose to write or find their own vows but the vows must include the promise that this is a lifelong commitment i.e. "as long as we both shall live" or "until death parts us".

OPTION 1

I, N, take you, N, to be my partner.
All that I am I give to you,
And all that I have I share with you.
Whatever the future holds,
for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health
I will love you and stand by you
as long as we both shall live.

OPTION 2

I, N, take you, N, to be my partner.
All that I am I give to you,
and all that I have I share with you.
Whatever the future holds,
whether sickness or health,
poverty or prosperity,
conflict or harmony,
I will love you and stand by you
as long as we both shall live.
This is my solemn promise.

OPTION 3

I, N, offer myself to you, N,
to be your friend, your lover,
your life long companion;
to share my life with yours;
to build our dreams together;
to support you through times of trouble,
and rejoice with you in times of happiness.
I promise to treat you with respect, love and loyalty
through all the trials and triumphs
of our lives together.
This commitment is made in love,
kept in faith, lived in hope
and eternally made new.

OPTION 4

I, N, take you N
To be my partner in life and my one true love.
I will cherish our sacred union
and love you more each day
than I did the day before.
I will trust you and respect you,
laugh with you and cry with you;
loving you faithfully
through good times and bad,
regardless of the obstacles
we may face together.
I give you my hand, and my love
from this day forward
for as long as we both shall live.

OPTION 5

I, N take you N to be my partner.
Today I promise that I will seek to be there for you
and for us, always:
to create, to live life fully,
to encourage and to share.
I promise that I will work with you for common goals,
to walk hand in hand along the paths life will unfold for us,
to create a relationship that
will weather any storms that may come our way,
to communicate openly and honestly, and
to love you faithfully,
as long as we both shall live.
This is my solemn vow.

OPTION 6

I take you, N, to be my partner
to laugh with you in joy;
to grieve with you in sorrow;
to grow with you in love;
serving humankind in peace and hope;
as long as we both shall live.

OPTION 7

From this day forward, I choose you, N,
to be my wife/husband in life;
to live with you and laugh with you,
to stand by your side and sleep in your arms;
to be joy to your heart and food to your soul;
to bring out the best in you always;
and for you, to be the most that I can.
To laugh with you in the good times;
to struggle with you in the bad;
to solace you when you are downhearted;
to share with you all my riches and honours;
to play with you even as we grow old.
I make these promises to you in love,
and until death parts us.

OPTION 8

I, N, take you, N, to be my partner
And these things I promise you:
I will be faithful to you with my whole life,
I will be honest with you,
I will respect, trust, help and care for you,
I will share my life with you,
I will forgive and strengthen you,
and I will grow, with you,
so that we may better to understand ourselves,
each other and the world.
Through the best and worst of what is to come...
I make these promises to you, now, and for all our lives.

Exchange of rings

- A. I now hold these rings,
inviting the blessing of God
which encircles all human love.
As you offer them to each other,
may you see the joining of your own love
in a joyful circle of celebration.

Each places the ring on the hand of the other with the words:

This ring is the sign of my love for you
and of the promises which we have made to each other this day.

- B. The Minister takes the rings from the couple/witnesses and holding them for those gathered to see, says:

These rings mark the beginning of a life journey together, a journey filled with wonder, surprise, laughter, tears, celebration, sorrow and joy. These rings are circles, symbolic of that which is without beginning or end. May these rings be to each of you a sign and a seal of the promises you have made to each other today. Whenever you see this sign of your partner's love, know that love is precious and fragile, yet strong. Whenever you see these rings, remember all that you have pledged to each other today.

N, you will now place this ring on N's left hand and holding the ring there, please say after me:

"With this ring, I offer you my love, I offer my strength, I offer my support, I offer my loyalty, I offer my faith, I offer my hope . . . that in all the changing circumstances of life, we shall always live together in love."

"Receive and wear this ring as a sign of the covenant we have made here today in the sight of God and in the presence of our friends."

- C. Prayer over the rings
God of steadfast love by your blessing,
Let these rings be to N and N a symbol of the vows
That they have made today. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen
- N, I give you this ring
As a sign of our Sacred Union
And of the vows which we have made today

N, I give you this ring
As a sign of our Sacred Union
And of the vows which we have made today.

Proclamation

The couple join hands and the person presiding asks the people to stand and says:

OPTION 1

Our Saviour Christ Jesus said:
“...let your light shine before others,
so that they may see your good works
and give glory to our God in heaven”.

Matt 5:16, alt, NRSV

OPTION 2

The Epistle to the Colossians says:
“Above all,
clothe yourselves in love,
which binds everything together
in perfect harmony”.

Col 3: 14, NRSV

OPTION 1

Before the God who is Love,
and in the presence of us all:
N and N have made their solemn vows.

They have confirmed their union of covenantal love
by the joining of hands
and in the giving and receiving of rings.

In the name of the triune [One] God
who created all in God’s image
redeems us in Christ Jesus
and sustains us in the Holy Spirit.

OPTION 2

In the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit:

I therefore proclaim N and N
To be partners in Sacred Union.

Kiss

Signing of Register

Pastoral Prayers

1. In peace let us lift up our hearts to God:

Grace comes from you, O God.
Bless your servants N and N
that they may faithfully live together
in covenantal love.

Loving God, hear us.
Loving God, hear our prayer.

Community comes from you, O God.
Bless the family members and friends who have gathered today
that they may find their lives and witness
to your justice and peace for all to be strengthened.

Loving God, hear us.
Loving God, hear our prayer.

Compassion comes from you, O God.
Bless all who are suffering from neglect or exclusion
on grounds such as race, gender or sexuality.
that they may know your generous welcome.

Loving God, hear us.
Loving God, hear our prayer.

Healing comes from you, O God.
Bless all your peoples and our planet
that we may know and care for your creation with integrity and justice.

Loving God, hear us.
Loving God, hear our prayer.

(Warren Talbot)

THE PRAYER OUR SAVIOUR GAVE US

2. God in your love, hear our prayer
Bless N and N as they begin a new way of life together as a committed couple in sacred union.
May they be patient and gentle with each other
And ready to face together the challenge of the future
Be with them in their happiness
And strength in their time of trouble
Give N and N grace, when they hurt each other
To acknowledge their fault
To ask each others forgiveness
And to know your love and grace.

May your peace dwell in their home.

[If appropriate] May they enjoy the gift of children and may they be wise and loving parents.

Bless the parents and families of N and N that they may be united in love and friendship.

May all who have witnessed these vows today
Find their lives strengthen
And their relationships renewed.

May each of us be strengthened in our commitment
to care for each other with warmth and love,
to care for those in need with justice and equity,

to care for our planet with integrity and vision.

God in your love
Hear our prayer.
Amen.

Blessing

- A. Let us go in hope to bring this new and committed love into many places for the greater life of the world.
And may the love of God surround us all,
the life of Christ be in our midst
and the joy of the Spirit dance free before us.
Amen.
- © Dorothy McRae-McMahon
- B. N and N, you have made a covenant in that you have committed yourselves to love each other. Explore this love well with deep reverence. Explore it with joy and hope and perseverance. And as you journey together, may the companionship of love and peace be yours in the name of the Creator, the Christ and the Comforter.
Amen.
- C. The riches of God's grace be upon you,
That you may live together in faith and love
And receive the blessings of eternal life.
May almighty God,
Who creates you, redeems you and guides you,
Bless you now and always.
Amen.

Announcement of the Union

The person presiding asks people to stand and says:

And, now I invite all of you to be among the first to welcome N and N as Partners in Life and Love through this Sacred Union.

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Endnotes

¹ Daniel Maguire in *The morality of Homosexual Marriage in Same Sex Marriage: The Moral and Legal Debate*, ed Robert M. Baird and Stuart E. Rosenbaum, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books 1997) p.62.

² See http://www.methodist.org.nz/faith_and_order/civil_unions___june_2005, and various related material.

³ Diocese of New Westminster, Anglican Church of Canada, "A Rite for the Celebration of Gay and Lesbian Covenants" issued by Bishop Michael Ingham, including guidelines for admission. (Note: this and other documents are copyrighted by the Diocese of New Westminster). www.samesexblessing.info (This is an official diocesan website regarding all aspects of the new Rite.)

⁴ Dorothy McRae-McMahon, *Rituals for Life, Love & Loss*, Edgecliff, Jane Curry Publishing 2003.

⁵ We take this step using the definition given in the Introduction where marriage is described as "the highest form of interpersonal commitment and

friendship achievable between sexually attracted persons”. We believe that this requires careful consideration and wider discussion. Some points to consider are:

“A liturgy which simply de-gendered the current *Marriage Service* might be in breach of Assembly policy; could provoke a negative response in the wider Church; could give homophobic elements a new cause to rally around; and could even result in disciplinary action against clergy. It might be argued, however, that amending the *Marriage Service* is the principled way to proceed if we are genuinely committed to the equality of lesbian and gay people with heterosexual people in all areas of church and society.” Warren Talbot “Liturgical recognition of gay and lesbian couples”, discussion paper for the Elders Committee, Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sydney, November 2009.

UNA Policy on pastoral support and liturgical recognition for gay and lesbian couples

1. Uniting Network Australia (UNA) is the national network for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, their families, friends and allies within the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA). We proudly participate in helping the Church wrestle with issues of faith, sexuality and membership and work for greater inclusivity within the Church.
2. UNA believes that gay and lesbian individuals and couples need to receive pastoral care and recognition in the same way that all members of the Church expect and to receive sensitive care and support.
3. UNA affirms that many gay and lesbian people wish to express their sexuality within the context of a mutually loving, faithful and committed relationship, and that the Church needs to find appropriate ways to recognise that. We believe that decisions concerning such pastoral care are best made in the context of the local congregation by the minister(s)-in-placement, Elders and Church Councillors.
4. UNA recognises the current policy of the Church concerning marriage (Assembly 1997) and guidance from the Assembly Standing Committee

(1991/92). We believe that, whether sooner or later, the Church will need to undertake a serious re-consideration of the doctrine of marriage as an institution restricted to heterosexual couples. We recognise that this is not a matter for UNA to change, but would participate (along with other Church members) in such a careful re-consideration. We recognise that it is a matter for the Assembly to decide whether and when such a re-consideration takes place.

5. UNA believes that, until such a study is conducted, the Church needs to allow pastoral and liturgical recognition in local congregations provided that such actions do not falsely present themselves to be a marriage service, do not undermine the essential features of marriage (“mutually faithful lifelong union”), or present as a service which has received wider UCA endorsement.
6. UNA members are willing to meet with Church representatives (and nominees from the Assembly of Confessing Congregations) in order to share our concerns and to ensure that whatever actions are taken respect Assembly policy and doctrine. We believe that there are many elements in A Service of Word and Sacrament which nourish and support gay and lesbian individuals and couples. For example, prayers of intercession and thanksgiving which explicitly support gay and lesbian couples are not designed to resemble the marriage service but may be of considerable pastoral significance for those affected. We see substantial scope in the Church’s current liturgies for this support to take place.
7. UNA is open to consider the appropriate terminology to refer to such pastoral and liturgical support.
8. UNA will continue to support changes in the wider Australian society to amend legislation to permit the recognition and/or marriage of same-sex couples.

(Approved, UNA Executive, 12 August 2010)