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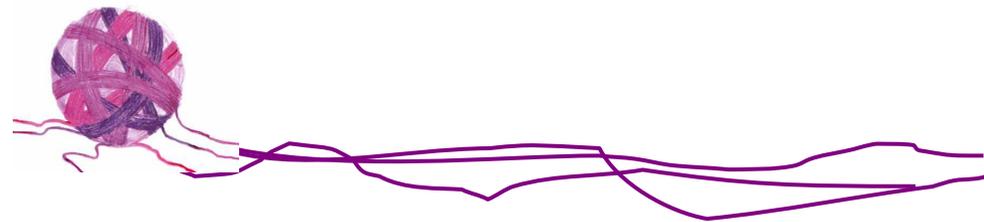
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**Uniting Network Review:**

Uniting Network Review (UNR) is a publication of Uniting Network Australia (UNA). Subscription is via membership of the Network. UNR is edited and produced by UN NSW/ACT, which since 1989, has formally linked and reported to the wider Uniting Church through the NSW Synod Board of Education. *The Christian ministry of the Uniting Network NSW/ACT is education and adult faith development concerning gender identity, sexuality and related matters, expressing pastoral care and respect for the God-given dignity of all people. Membership of the Network is open to all. Our primary purpose is to share the love and grace of God in Her world.*

**Contributions are welcome:**

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## Editorial: Same Love. Same Rites?

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Civil society is moving at a rapid pace of change in regard to legislation for and the regulation of same-sex relationships. This does not require the Church to follow, but does call for discussion, classically posed by Richard Niebuhr as the relationship between Christ and culture. There are two distinct but related movements. A number of jurisdictions (at the time of writing) - Canada, Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, South Africa, and in the USA Connecticut, Ohio, Massachusetts and Vermont have taken the most direct legislative route. They have decreed that marriage shall be the lifelong, faithful union of one person with another person. That is, marriage has been legally declared to be gender neutral and that has been upheld by the higher courts.

A number of other countries and jurisdictions have, for varying reasons, followed a different path. The UK and New Zealand have enacted statutory provisions for civil unions, which provide comparable rights and entitlements for same sex couples with married couples. France has done the same, with the delightful title of "Pacts of Civil Solidarity". Several USA States have followed that path as well. Civil unions for same sex couples (as opposed to "gay marriage") are supported by President Obama. This may seem a mere matter of nomenclature, but it creates space for political and religious progressives, such as Obama, to support lesbian and gay relationships. It undercuts conservatives, to some extent, and its significance as a strategy should be noted.

There are relevant developments in Australia, although same sex marriage or civil unions are not on the mainstream agenda. Tasmania has now legislated for significant personal relationships to be registered with the Registrar of Births, Deaths, Marriages and Significant Relationships. Such relationships may be intergenerational carers, committed friends or same sex couples. The defining point is a significant personal relationship not genital sexual activity. Victoria the ACT, South Australia and the City of Sydney now have registers for same sex couples.

The ACT Parliament enacted civil union legislation but was overruled by the Commonwealth. It is only a matter of time before a State jurisdiction enacts a form of civil union. Most States have now removed egregious forms of

discrimination against same gender partners - e.g. hospital visiting rights and employment. Following a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) report, in late 2008 the Australian Parliament amended nearly one hundred pieces of national legislation which discriminated against same sex couples. This was an essential and valuable practical reform, and undoubtedly lays the ground for increased civil recognition of same sex couples in the future.

This issue of *UNR* is comprised of selections from two current discussion papers. It is strongly recommended that the papers are read in full, as space does not permit them to be printed here. The printed papers also includes references and footnotes. The papers were drafted for quite different contexts and need to be read and evaluated as such. But they both make it clear that the Church's discussion on sexuality is moving in a fundamental sense: it is not *whether* the wider Church will accept LGBTI people as individuals but *the ways in which our relationships and families are recognised and blessed by the Church*.

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Warren Talbot  
Deputy Editor

## A Gay And Lesbian Basis For Acknowledging And Celebrating Same Gender Relationships

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A Discussion Paper from Uniting Network Australia (UNA)

*Selections from a full report:* Note that this article is comprised of selections from a longer paper which UNA has prepared. It would be best to read the selections in that context. The full article includes all footnotes.

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## Introduction

This paper explores some of the features of same gender relationships from the point of view of gay and lesbian people in an attempt to find a theological basis for establishing such relationships within the Uniting Church. It develops a theology of same-gender relationships based in a theology of friendship. Key to this theology is the pioneering work of lesbian scholars. Building on friendship as the voluntary relationship between all people who are deeply interconnected by the particular nature of their relationships, we see a mystery and an uniqueness about the nature of relationships as a reason for why they happen and why they cease. This mystery is reflected in the uniqueness of the relationship with the Divine and the teaching and example of the person of Jesus. The commitment to love is seen as being sacrificial, seeking the good of the other, even to the point of death. It is characterised by the high view of relationships talked about in I Corinthians 13. Such a concept of love should be available for gay and lesbian people. Same-gender relationships are reinforced by the Biblical model of covenant between two people of the same gender. In the history of the church, stories of same-gender relationships indicate their presence within the traditions of the church.

The paper also briefly explores the importance of sexuality in friendships, the relationship between sexuality and spirituality and the importance of celebrating same-gender relationships in the Uniting Network. In terms of the practicalities of the recognition of same-gender relationships within the church at large, there is a need to acknowledge that there are differences between gay and lesbian people about whether to claim the title gay marriages or call them by some other name such as Holy Unions or Covenant relationships.

Extensive use of quotes from gay and lesbian theologians and biblical scholars and Uniting Church documents are cited.

## A Theology of Friendship

One of the most significant theological contributions, by gay and lesbian theologians, to the understanding of same gender relationships is found in the development of the concept of friendship. A theology of friendship is important, because it is developed on the basis of friendship in a number of key areas: the relationship between people, between people and God, between people living in community and, equally important, between lovers.

## Women's Experience Of Friendship

The key theological work on friendship has been done by lesbian feminist scholars, drawing on their own experience and the pioneering work of the feminist movement. From a lesbian feminist point of view, Elizabeth Stuart defines friendship as:

*a relationship entered into freely by two or more people. It is a relationship based upon the recognition of a fundamental equality between the participants. It is a relationship based on love and acceptance of the participants as they are. Friendship is empowering, affirming and challenging for those involved. Friendship can cut across social barriers. Friendships are therefore inclusive rather than exclusive relationships. Friendship is political when it motivates people to come together to change structures and situations which damage and diminish their friends.*

Reflecting on the quality of friendship, Mary Hunt describes the passion experienced within women's friendship with the words of the title of her book *Fierce Tenderness*:

*I call friendship "fierce" because of the intensity of attention. It can be hard to be known so well, to be understood and transparent to friends who pay attention. Likewise, we all crave the tenderness that only those who love us can offer. Tenderness does not affect the ferocity, but it is the quality of care and nurture that only friends share. Of course a care giver can be tender in touch, but only friends are tender in feelings.*

Joretta Marshall notes from the discipline of objective relations theory that intensity of friendship between women is attributed to women's developmental relationships:

*Men develop identities through their experiencing their difference from mothering figures, usually women. Women on the other hand, develop their identities by being like the persons who mothered them. Hence women tend to relate through their sense of attachment and men often relate through their difference.*

According to Stuart, women have moved beyond the competitive scramble to

get and keep their relationships with men to recognising the importance of sustaining, transforming, liberating and creative friendships with other women.

Hunt has developed a theological understanding of friendship that she defines as “those voluntary human relationships that are entered into by people who intend one another’s well-being and who intend that their love relationship is part of a justice seeking community”. On the basis of her theological reflection on the nature of friendship, as revealed in women’s experience, Hunt has developed a theological model based on the interconnectedness of four generative themes: love, power, embodiment and spirituality. These are interrelated in a model of right relationships where the four elements are maintained in balance. Hunt describes love between women as:

*an orientation toward the world as if my friend and I were more united than separated, more at one among many than separate and alone. Love is the intention to recognise this drive towards unity and to make it increasingly so over time. Love is the commitment to deepen in unity without losing the uniqueness of the individuals at hand. It is the force of attraction that generates something new out of a unity that is somehow separate from and beyond the two.*

Allied to this is the concept of power that is “the ability to make choices for ourselves, for our dependent children, and with our community”. Embodiment is important because it “refers to the fact that virtually everything we do and who we are is mediated by our bodies”. Spirituality as the fourth component “means making choices about the quality of life for oneself and for one’s community”. For Hunt this spirituality is an intentional, accountable process in which “people recall their faith history, bury their dead, and make religiously based social change”. Summing up, Hunt points out that her model of friendship gives three insights. Friendship is potentially available for everyone and not just those who are married. Friendship is a dynamic process, and at the same time it can be an ambiguous and fluid process. Because quality is important, the usual commitment to longevity, though a desirable end, is not to be seen as a way to measure a relationship’s success.

Part of the dynamics of friendship is the reality that friendships end, and people must grieve and move on as they process their loss. Hunt pursues the importance of this as part of her theological model. Death and loss of friendship are an important part of life. Loss is generally due to a change in

the dynamics of the balance of the four elements of love, power, embodiment and spirituality. While “power differences are the most prevalent reason for the break up of friendships” a second significant reason is the differences that arise over embodiment or sexual intimacy. Sometimes loss of love is the reason. In all of these there is “almost a mystery - as to why a certain friendship will not work”.

This mystery has a divine dimension in that the loss of friendship is a careful and painful reminder that each person is radically alone. This is why befriending ourselves is an important way of surviving loss and so “come to a deeper appreciation for the divine nexus of all creation, that through which all that is, is connected”. The changing nature of relationships and the possibility of the absence of friendship is a hallmark of life’s experience and of the divine:

*This dimension of friendship provides a hint about the divine, that God is not changeless, the still point of an ever dynamic universe. Rather the divine is mutable, affected by us as we by the divine. Our losses count in the scope of things. ... No one knows why a person finds another and becomes friends, why some are at the right place at the right time to meet people and others miss the chance. I like to think that this is what the Christian tradition has meant by the presence of the Spirit – a force of unity, a movement towards wholeness.*

Stuart develops her theology of friendship through reflection on the nature of friendship as expressed in the Scriptures. From the oldest creation story she observes God as creating humankind for friendship (Gen 2:18). “Sin corrupts that relationship into enmity and unequal power relationships between the sexes (Gen 3:15).” Reflecting on the other creation story, where humankind is created in the image of God, Stuart observes that this indicates humankind is created to be in right relationship with each other, God and the whole of creation (Gen 1:27):

*That friendship includes awe and respect for God and each other. In neither of these accounts of creation are sexuality or sexual intercourse associated with sin or corruption. It is assumed that friendship between men and women may include sexual relations. Passion and sexual love are not necessarily antithetical to friendship. Of course, as the oldest creation account acknowledges, we are all prone to sin. It is easy for passion to become corrupted by self-centredness, and for jealousy and possessiveness to distort*

*the underlying friendship. But when these emotions are overcome passionate friendship between human beings is a reflection of the passionate friendship of God for humanity.*

Through the prophets, God's love is depicted in a number of ways. Hosea sees God's love as a passionate desire for a right relationship, with an intensity that could only be compared to a lover. Isaiah affirms that God would not divorce God's people (Is 50:1) but, like a lover, God's passion is embodied in the demand for right relationship through working for justice and peace.

*Humanity is created to be in relationship with God. This is a relationship based not on domination, control or fear but upon mutual respect, concern, love, justice, forgiveness and interdependence. Humanity needs God in order to be truly human and God has chosen to entrust the world to humanity. Sin, the failure to exist in right relation, disturbs and damages the friendship between humans and also the friendship between God and humanity, but God forgives and starts again and encourages us to do the same.*

This same emphasis on friendship is seen in the person of Jesus. From John's gospel the command to love one another in the way in which Jesus has loved us is followed by the strong statement about laying down one's life for one's friends:

*"You are my friends if you do what I have commanded you. I do not call you servants any longer ... I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (Jn 15:12-15)*

This same model of friendship is emphasised by Paul who also affirms that:

*From now on, therefore, we regard no-one from a human point of view. ... So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! All this is from God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends, and gave us the task of making others God's friends. (2 Cor 5:17-19)*

The good news of Jesus Christ is the way that Jesus announced God's reign on earth in the form of the Kingdom of God. This kingdom according to Stuart

"will be characterised by right relations between human beings" in a way that will:

*convince the powerless, the non-person, the poor, the women, the children, the sinners, the unclean, the sick, that God was their friend and on their side. ... He treated them as persons made in the image of God. It was among these people that the reign of God began because they acknowledged their need for friendship and their dependence upon God and each other".*

*Power is usually gained and sustained by dividing people against each other, creating castes and subcastes, clean and unclean, men and women, righteous and sinners and so on. Friendship undermines all that. It acknowledges no barriers and locates the dignity of each person in their being, not in their status and for who they are, not what they are. Jesus dies for his friends and for God's friendship with humanity. It is a passionate act. It seems that power has defeated friendship, but God vindicates Jesus and raises him to new life. His spirit continues to bind together in right relation unlikely friends. And the powerful still find it threatening.*

We enjoy and celebrate this friendship with the Christ to the extent that we are able to reject the overpowering condemnation by society and the church and claim our place as Christ's friends. For at least one gay theologian there is a need to reject the models of an authoritarian Christ as master and embrace Jesus as friend because:

*it shatters the master-slave relationship into one of friendship, and not a sentimental friendship of holding on and dependence, but a friendship of challenge, letting go, and affirming independence.*

Such a model is important because we "have learned that we need to love one another" as a basic relational way of being....

## Conclusion

The development of a theology of friendship has been important in the development of a theology of same-gender relationships. Such a response is greatly helped by the considerable theological reflection undertaken by gay and lesbian theologians who have developed a strong theology of friendship with God and between people. Our theology reflects a gospel understanding of the importance of friendship and right relationships between people and within

the Christian community. This same theology is also taken up in the report *Uniting Sexuality and Faith* accepted by the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in 1997 in the development of the concept of 'right relationships'. The movement towards intimate, one-to-one relationships takes place within an ethical context that recognises the importance of embodiment and sexual expression as part of same-gender relationships for gay and lesbian people. The movement towards celebrating our relationships within the faith community is an important step in the affirmation of our experience of loving relationships. It also signals a movement to give gay and lesbian people the same emotional, spiritual and physical support that we give those who are heterosexual within the church.

Although it is mainly women who have developed a theology of friendship, it is gay men who have argued for the same rights and privileges for same-gender couples as those given by the community to heterosexual couples. Intimate monogamous, loving relationships should be available to all people irrespective of whether it is associated with the reproduction of children or not. Such a recognition would put gay and lesbian people on the same basis as those who can't or don't want to have children, and give them the same access to the social supports currently available to other families. In this the church is far less supportive than present day Australian society.

## **"One Body in Christ: daring to embrace diversity"**

*Daring Statement*, Sydney, 14 June 2004

As the people of the Uniting Network - the lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and gay people of the Uniting Church, with our families and friends - we gathered in Sydney in June 2004. Our theme was "One Body in Christ: daring to embrace diversity".

We dare to believe in a grander God whose creation shines forth with a diversity far beyond our imagining.  
We dare to embrace this diversity in faith, even as we confront our own struggles to make this real among ourselves and in the life of the wider Church.

We dare to face our pain, to stay with the hard questions and to travel together towards the promised goal.

We dare to confidently claim our place as daughters and sons, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, nieces and nephews - people born into the beauty of human families.

We dare to be quiet, to listen, to wait.

We dare to live abundantly, to have the "courage to be" (Paul Tillich).

We dare to call the church to relationships of mutual respect, honesty and integrity as we tread this road together towards equality and justice.

We long to be a Church which dares to live the fullness of the Gospel, moving to new adventures of faith, and holding open to new truth in Scriptures, in our shared life and in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

We commit ourselves to work with others in our church, even those who might reject us, as servants of the living God. In this we call our leaders to ensure the good order of the Church, by the creation of a safe place where we are protected from lies, abuse and vilification.

We pray that the church will indeed know the great hope to which it is called in Jesus Christ and that it will hold open to Christ's power to reconcile us to each other and to God.

## Towards the liturgical recognition of lesbian and gay couples: thoughts for discussion

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by Warren Talbot

*Selections from a full report:* Note that this article is comprised of selections from a longer paper which Warren prepared for the Worship Committee of the Pitt Street Congregation of the Uniting Church. It would be best to read the selections in that context. *It is not a policy position paper from the Congregation*, but an individual contribution to discussion. Interested readers are invited to contact Warren for the full paper [wrtalbot@gmail.com](mailto:wrtalbot@gmail.com). The full article includes all footnotes. For a tabular comparison of the Uniting Church Marriage Service, the Canadian Anglican Blessing Service for gay and lesbian couples, and a proposed Commitment Ceremony see *Uniting Network Review*, November 2008.

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This section looks at the policies of some of the immediate partner churches of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) in the English-speaking world. Naturally, denominational decisions reflect theology and, to some extent, vice versa. There are numerous typologies being used by different writers. Any such labelling is a simplification, and the differences may be observed *within* denominations and much as *between* denominations.

**Equality** - seen clearly in the United Church of Christ USA and the United Church of Canada. Both have ordained openly lesbian and gay clergy, the former since 1972 and the latter since 1985. In both, qualified individuals may not be excluded solely on the grounds of sexual orientation or involvement in a same sex relationship. Both denominations have authorised clergy to perform same sex marriages, as these are legal in Canada and in a small number of USA states. In Australia, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Unitarians, the Metropolitan Community Church and progressive Jewish Synagogues have performed public blessings for same sex couples.

**Diversity** - the UCA is perhaps the best example of this national policy, where the congregation and the episcopal council (the Presbytery) make decisions concerning ordination in individual cases. There is no binding or guiding

national doctrine. UCA polity is discussed below. The 2006 Assembly reached a settlement which most could live with but is not a final conclusion. It would seem counter-intuitive, however, for the Assembly to permit diversity in the placement of lesbian and gay clergy, including those in committed relationships, but to deny an opportunity for the Church to bless or recognise committed same sex relationships.

**Conditional** - gay and lesbian persons are welcome, as members and ordained persons, provided that they adhere to the standard of “celibacy in singleness and fidelity in (heterosexual) marriage”. This is the national policy of the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Methodist Church USA, though at the local and regional levels there is considerable dispute and variable practice. One vexing issue has been what to do with lesbian and gay individuals who come out after they have been ordained. Even though not a “sacrament” in the Reformed tradition, ordination is a solemn rite, and Reformed churches have been reluctant to de-frock clergy.

**Moratorium** - after an initial position of diversity, the United Reformed Church in the UK adopted a seven year moratorium on any decisions concerning ordination. A similar proposal presented to the UCA’s 2000 Assembly did not proceed.

**Separatism** - the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) was established as a separate denomination in 1968 to respond to the needs of lesbian and gay people (and others) who believe they can no longer remain in their own denomination. Since inception MCCs have offered “Holy Unions” for same sex couples. Liturgically, this is frequently comparable to a Marriage Service except for the gender of those being joined together.

It is clear that our response to the general question of liturgical recognition of same sex relationships will be shaped by an overall theological assessment of homosexuality, whether same gender love is a sin, second best in a broken world or a good part of God’s diverse creation. Building on the pioneering work of feminist theologians, the latter view upholds friendship and/or right relations as the paradigm for human relating and as such dislodges heterosexual marriage as the fundamental, determining or exclusive paradigm for human relationships.

Existing UCA decisions on sexuality may be summarised as follows:

- Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) 1982 - sexual orientation not relevant to ordination but appropriate sexual expression is.
- ASC 1985 - all baptised persons welcome at Holy Communion regardless of sexual orientation.
- ASC 1991 - Ministers to not perform ceremonies resembling the marriage service.
- Assembly 1997 - upholds the heterosexual nature of marriage.
- Assembly 2006 - supports diversity with congregations and Presbyteries to make decisions concerning ordination and placement.

Following six years of work by the Assembly Sexuality Task Group, the 1997 (Perth) Assembly resolved its support for marriage, with the following four structural components, comparable to the Declaration of Purpose in *Uniting In Worship (UIW)*.

- one male and one female person;
- lifelong;
- mutually faithful; and
- possibility of having children.

The rubric concerning the Declaration of Purpose for Marriage is specific:

*The Declaration of Purpose should not be altered by the minister in any way or for any reason. The fact that the bride or bridegroom have been previously married, that they are beyond child bearing age, or that they do not intend to have children is not sufficient reason for amendment.*

Following a blessing ceremony for a same sex couple at the Pitt Street UCA in 1990, the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) ruled that clergy shall not perform ceremonies which “resemble” the marriage service. In order to understand that decision, it is necessary to be clear about the structural components of a marriage service in the UCA as stated above. The word “resemble” has never been defined or clarified in this context. A number of clergy do perform blessing services for same sex couples, but that is currently done on a private and quiet basis and has not provoked controversy as a result. One way forward, in a pastorally and educationally sensitive manner, is to propose complementary pastoral liturgies, in the same way the Church already

does in response to specific pastoral circumstances. Prayers and blessings for a same sex couple would be one application of a pastoral liturgy. Indeed, in the reformed and evangelical traditions, marriage itself is a pastoral service and not a sacramental service in the strict sense. *UNR* November 2008 printed a comparison of three services. It is worth stressing that the Canadian Anglican Blessing Service which has attracted much controversy is not based on the Marriage Service.

A liturgy which, for example, 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.

One alternative is to develop “A Pastoral Service of Commitment and Love”, applicable to persons in different life circumstances, with some discretion for the clergy and congregation to adapt as required. From a Uniting Church polity perspective, there is nothing to prohibit clergy, elders and congregations from:

- welcoming;
- offering pastoral care;
- praying;
- pronouncing God’s blessing;
- singing hymns;
- reading the Scriptures;
- listening to witnesses;
- confessions; or
- sharing Holy Communion with LGBTI individuals, or gay and lesbian couples.

There is a lot of scope here for liturgical movement. The specific issue being the *content* of prayers and blessings for a same sex couple.

There are many creative liturgists in the church who could develop such a service, using the liturgical structure of call, adoration, confession, word, response, prayer and blessings. It should be modelled on the Service of Word

and Sacrament, but could be re-titled “A Service of Word, Sacrament and Blessing”, “A Service of Love and Commitment” or “A Service of Prayers and Blessings”.

The rubrics for such a “Pastoral Service of Commitment and Love” could be something like the following:

*“This pastoral liturgy has been developed to recognise people in a range of life circumstances. These include:*

- *intergenerational carers*
- *committed friendships*
- *lesbian and gay couples*
- *persons committed to intentional faith communities*
- *blended families*
- *extended families*

*This is not a Marriage Service, and is not intended to resemble a Marriage Service. Certain words phrases and Scripture passages must be avoided – marriage, wedding, bride, groom, husband, wife, or spouse, etc. “Partner” or “Life Friend” are permissible – they are not in the UCA Marriage Service or the rubric for that Service and do not make any specific imputation concerning sexuality.*

*The Declaration of Purpose of Marriage in UIW should never be used or referred to in any way. There should be no vows, to the extent that any such vows resemble marriage vows, but there can be public statements of commitment and love. Two friends may wish to state a desire to “grow old together”. There should be no nuptial blessing.”*

**A downside of such a Service is that lesbian and gay couples presenting and seeking a blessing ceremony might believe they are being treated as a second class couple. They would be partially correct in having that reaction...**