

Same Gender Marriage

In deciding to marry same gender couples, how has the Uniting Church remained faithful to the Basis of Union?

The Word of God, Scripture, and Jesus Christ

The Basis of Union calls us to hold to our core convictions with passion and determination. Paragraphs 3 and 4 articulate something of those passionate convictions about God, Jesus, the Spirit, and the Church. Paragraphs 5 and 11 set out the way that we approach and appropriate the Bible. I believe that each of these paragraphs supports the way that the Assembly has made a decision about marrying couples of the same gender.

The end in view for the whole creation

Paragraph 3 states that "God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation." This indicates that the Church is not simply a monolithic structure with a fixed doctrinal belief; rather, we are a fluid and ever-evolving body, engaged in an ongoing process, oriented towards what we hope for in the future.

We seek to be a forward-looking Church; whilst we receive and value traditions of the church (appropriately interpreted for the current context), our major focus is towards the future. (That's what theologians call an eschatological orientation.) Our decisions are oriented towards becoming the church that God calls us to be for the future age. We are "on the way to the promised end" (paragraph 18)

So paragraph 3 ends with the affirmation that we have "the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way", and our processes of decision-making are structured so that we do, indeed, wait

upon the Spirit in a process of communal discernment as we meet in council. This was the process used at the recent Assembly.

Christ is the Word of God

In paragraph 4, we read that "Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of the God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist." This is an important and central claim.

It is Christ who is the Word of God (not the Bible). And the Word of God is present in our midst through the act of preaching; the Word is not a static entity that is just sitting there, but we encounter that Word in the complex dynamic of interaction between scripture, experience, proclamation, hearing, and application.

So our ultimate allegiance is to Christ, the Word, who moves amongst us and is active in our midst as we meet, discern, and decide. We are not bound to "literal readings" of the Bible; rather, the words in scripture provide witness to the living Word, who is Jesus Christ.

Scripture appropriated in the life of the church

Paragraph 5 of the Basis affirms the central importance of scripture. However, it does so in a way which clearly shows that scripture requires interpretation. Merely repeating the precise words of the Bible does not guarantee understanding, or even acceptance, of those words. So, in worship, we not only read scripture passages, but we reflect on them, guided usually by a sermon, and then we are invited to respond to those words, in prayer and in our own lives.



That is acknowledged in paragraph 5, when it declares that "The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church." The process of appropriation is critical. When we read, or hear, scripture, we need to appropriate it — we need to find ways to make it appropriate in our own context, in our own communities, in our own lives.

That process of interpretation is important, and can't be short-circuited. Trying to make an argument that there is a "plain reading" or "unequivocal support" for a position, is simplistic. It is a matter of interpretation, exploration, testing and exploring—not just a matter of stating "unequivocal" truths.

Contemporary insights

Further on, paragraph 11 of the Basis sets out some of the processes by which this appropriation might take place: "contact with contemporary thought", the inheritance of "literary, historical and scientific enquiry", engagement with others within "the worldwide fellowship of churches" as well as with "contemporary society" ... all of which stands in the service of developing "an informed faith".

So the Basis of Union commits us to a process of discovery. Paragraph 11 exhorts us to remain open to new insights which emerge from scientific thinkers, historical researchers, our encounter with other cultural customs, and our engagement with people from societies different from our own.

In the midst of the modern world, questions are raised, discoveries are made, experiments are undertaken, hypotheses are probed, discarded, or confirmed, policies are proposed and legislated, and changes are implemented. That is the very nature of our situation in life for the present age.

And a central theological affirmation, which sweeps up all of these processes of exploration and discovery, is that we hold to an ongoing and ever-present role for the Holy Spirit: the giver of life moves in our midst to encourage us to share together and make new discoveries. So paragraph 11 of the Basis of Union ends with a prayer that,

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Here is a link to the full text of the Basis of Union:

<https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/HistDocs/basisofunion1992.pdf>

as a church, we "may be ready when occasion demands to confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds."

Marrying couples of the same gender

This process of exploration, discovery, listening, re-examining, and discerning, is what has been happening in our times, as a whole range of matters associated with human sexuality have been identified, explored, debated, and discerned. This has been a discussion right across society, which came to a high pitch with the voluntary postal survey undertaken last year, followed by the adoption of new legislation about marriage.

And that is indeed what is happening within the Uniting Church this year (as, indeed, it has been occurring for many years now)—particularly as we wrestle with what it means to be a community of faith which offers space for grace, maintains a passion for justice, continues a commitment to the Gospel, and models faithfulness to the open, all-embracing way of Jesus, in our own time, here in our own place.

There is much more to be said about marrying couples of the same gender, than what certain select texts within the Bible say. Especially so are the contemporary insights of science and medicine, psychology and sociology—as well as the important processes of reading and seeking to understand biblical texts in their literary, historical, cultural, and political contexts.

Considering all of these factors—as enjoined by the Basis of Union—means that it is not possible to reduce our understanding of marriage to a matter of "unequivocal support" or "plain reading" or even (shudder) "absolute truth" in the biblical text. We are not a church of simple slogans, reductionist claims, or one-line propositions.

In engaging with scripture, we are invited into—indeed, expected to participate in—a discussion that is open to a variety of perspectives, considers a range of opinions, engages with a spectrum of possibilities, and develops a multilayered interpretation. That's the living word of God!

