

**RESPONSE TO THE FIFTEENTH ASSEMBLY REPORT –  
B23 ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE REPORT ON MARRIAGE AND  
SAME-GENDER RELATIONSHIPS**

By Dr Katherine Abetz (May 2018)

The tenor of this report, with its accompanying proposals and rationale, stems from Western imperialism. The rhetoric is deceptive in this respect: the term ‘diversity’ is a euphemism for relativism which is a product of radical Western subjectivity. This report goes further in recommending an overarching construct which does not respect actual diversity either in content or procedure. Lest I be thought to exaggerate this, I compare the very different procedure recommended for discerning the sovereignty of First Peoples. We of the Uniting Church must discern the spirits in this time and beware of being led astray while pursuing our legitimate concern for social justice. The devil can disguise himself as an angel of light.

The rationale admits that the diverse understandings are mutually exclusive interpretations. It claims that such mutually exclusive interpretations are a gift and sign of health in the Body of Christ. But a mutually exclusive body cannot work together: this is the beginning of an auto-immune disease. The proposals claim to allow freedom of conscience. As such, parts of the body would operate separately from the rest. Whether this is possible is not explored. The affirmation of marriage (5 d) states that marriage is a gift of God and a way of life that all people should honour. The language of ‘two people’ indicates that same-gender ‘marriage’ would be included in this affirmation. Where does this leave diversity and freedom of conscience?

This is an immediate response to the Report and Proposals. The time-frame before the fifteenth Assembly does not permit any depth of consultation. I will consider the Report on its own terms as far as I can but not at the same length. The areas I will cover are the Basis of Union and the substance of the faith, Scripture including ethics, ecumenical consultation, science and justice (including justice for First Peoples).

### **Guided by the Basis of Union**

The Report compares paragraphs 5, 10 and 11 and tries to reconcile these paragraphs on relativist terms.

It states that, in referring to the biblical witnesses, paragraph 5 ‘points to the multiplicity of theological voices in the Bible’ in the sense of ‘dialogue and even dispute with other authors’. In evidence, the Report contrasts ‘the link between obedience and blessing in Deuteronomy’ with Job and Ecclesiastes. It could have added Hebrews 11. Faithful individuals often suffer in the Bible; Deuteronomy is addressed to the nation of Israel. The Report also states that James has a different view of works than Paul. James begins with faith as does Paul (see Ephesians 2: 8-10): works are the product of salvation not the source. The allegation that biblical witnesses are in dispute with each other is said to ‘make doctrinal space for a legitimate consideration of [same-gender marriage]’.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the Report, p. 48.

But this is not the language of the Basis of Union. Paragraph 5 states: ‘When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, her message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses’. Paragraph 6 goes on to state: ‘The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ has commanded his Church to proclaim the Gospel both in words and in two visible acts of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper’. It is not clear how the theological method of ‘making doctrinal space’ is compatible with the completed work of Christ (paragraph 4), nor with the proclamation of the new covenant.

The Report draws attention to scholarly interpreters cited in Paragraph 11 but omits the need for such scholars to be ‘faithful’. It separates scholarship pursued in ‘the world-wide fellowship of churches’ from the work of engaging with ‘contemporary thought’. This is not the language of paragraph 11: ‘[The Uniting Church] lives within a world-wide fellowship of Churches in which she will learn to sharpen her understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought. Within that fellowship she also stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help her to understand her own nature and mission’. The Report states: ‘Our reading of Scripture is not necessarily determined by received interpretations but holds the possibility of “fresh words and deeds”’ (paragraph 11). What the Report does not say is that the purpose of such fresh words and deeds are for the Uniting Church to ‘confess her Lord’.

In citing paragraph 10, the Report appears to envisage ‘the freedom of faith’ as a managing principle ‘even [in] the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture’. This would be a misrepresentation of the Reformed understanding of *semper reformanda* (see paragraph 1: ‘[The uniting churches] remain open to constant reform under [Christ’s] word’). The ‘fresh words and deeds’ referred to in paragraph 11 are to be situated within the Christ-centred focus of the Reformation according to which ‘the congregation of Christ’s people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture’.

The Report states that the Working Group on Doctrine ‘believes that definitions of marriage do not belong to the substance or heart of the Christian faith’<sup>2</sup> since the Basis of Union allows room for ‘difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith’ (paragraph 14). But the Basis of Union, in its original wording, calls the Uniting Church (as part of the universal Church) ‘she’, indicating the Church’s betrothal to Christ. It is not possible to relativise Ephesians 5: 21-33 with its implications for marriage on this basis.

If the Report were to be ‘guided by the Basis of Union’ it would include in the proposals the provision of paragraph 15 (e): ‘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’.

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<sup>2</sup> See the Report, p. 8.

## Interpreting and appealing to Scripture

The appeal to the Basis of Union would have been welcome, had the Assembly included it in the process of ‘consulting together in the light of the Word of God’ (see pp. 21-22). The Report states the Uniting Church is ‘not a democracy’. The Basis of Union paragraph 15 states: ‘The Uniting Church ... so organises her life that locally, regionally and nationally government will be entrusted to representatives, men and women, bearing the gifts and graces upon which God has endowed them for the building up of his Church. The Uniting Church is governed by a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation both to the Church and the world. The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ alone is supreme in his Church, and that he may speak to her through any of her councils’. The acknowledged supremacy of Christ along with the inter-related nature of councils in the government of the Uniting Church tempers democracy or autocracy for that matter. The councils of the Uniting Church have yet to be consulted on the issue of same-gender marriage in the light of the Basis of Union.

The Report states: ‘The church is often called to decide between competing interpretations of Scripture, each of which can be defended and between which the church must make a choice’.<sup>3</sup> In spite of this diversity, the Report presents a defence of only one view of Scripture. In order to address it, I will begin with the affirmation regarding marriage in proposal (d 1) and work backwards.

### 1. Marriage

Marriage is a gift of God at the heart of human society and culture

In the life-long union of marriage people can know the joy of God in whose image we are made, male and female. In giving themselves to each other in love, two people reflect the love of Christ for his Church.

In marriage, two people are called to live together faithfully, and to love each other with respect, tenderness and delight. They share the life of a wider family and community and may be entrusted with the gift and care of children. They help shape a society in which human dignity and happiness may flourish and abound.

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

This affirmation does not say what marriage is. It says what marriage does. As I indicated above, we begin with the faith about who are: any works on our part are built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ in relation to the universal Church (see paragraphs 2 and 3). This affirmation of marriage potentially endorses a doctrine of salvation by works.

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<sup>3</sup> See the Report, p. 32.

In the proposed affirmation I discern three key biblical references: Genesis 1: 26-27; Ephesians 5: 21-33; Hebrews 13:4. I will take them in turn.

### Genesis 1:26-27

The proposal states who we are as created beings but does not link the image of God with 'the life-long union of marriage'.

### Ephesians 5:21-33

The proposal changes the picture presented from an ontological description of marriage to a functional one. It omits the relationship between husband and wife in parallel with the relationship between Christ and the Church along with the allusion to Genesis 2:24.

### Hebrews 13:4

The biblical exhortation that marriage should be held in honour by all people is accompanied by a warning against dishonourable relationships.<sup>4</sup> The proposal omits this warning. (In terms of ethics, the Report relativises Levitical boundaries by painting Jesus as a revolutionary who 'broke the tradition of the elders and redefined what it is that defiles' and had the 'different emphases: 'love of God and neighbour'.<sup>5</sup> This is to overlook Leviticus 19:17-18 and Deuteronomy 6:4-5. The Report states: 'The overarching vision in Leviticus is of God's holiness and a community shaping itself to reflect God's holiness. This coheres with the ministry of Jesus but not because he took the Levitical code and its punishments at face value. Boundaries, particularly as they make a fence around ritual purity, no longer have the same role to play'. The Report does not give the context for these distinctions in the change of covenant described at length in Hebrews.)

The Report states that creation and redemption 'do not depend on the human male-female relationship'.<sup>6</sup> But it fails to affirm the opposite: that the human male-female relationship, highlighted in the life-long union of marriage, reflects who we are as created and redeemed beings in the image of God. At one point the Report argues against the understanding that 'that marriage itself belongs to the image of God' on the grounds that 'all people regardless of their particular relationship status bear the image of God'.<sup>7</sup> This is a Western dichotomy. The deep communal connections surrounding marriage in non-Western cultures are reflected elsewhere in the Report. Further argument posits a dichotomy between being created in God's image and the New Testament calling to be conformed to God's image as exemplified by Christ (e.g. Rom 8:29; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). The New Testament calls us to enter into (or 'put on') our baptismal unity in Christ (Col 3:9-11; Gal 3:27-28).<sup>8</sup> The New Testament does not nullify our diversity as created beings (see 1 Corinthians 11:1-16; Rev 21:24). The 'one flesh' nature of marriage reflects our human unity-in-diversity which parallels the relationship between Christ and the Church and also the Trinitarian unity-in-diversity.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Romans 1:26-27.

<sup>5</sup> See the Report, p.27.

<sup>6</sup> See the Report, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> See the Report, pp. 25-26.

<sup>8</sup> See also the Basis of Union, paragraphs 2 & 7.

The Report itself points out that human diversity in the image of God can be traced (along with relational unity) in the inner life of the Trinity.<sup>9</sup> The passage in Corinthians 11 offers a three-way comparison (at the Trinitarian, divine-human and human levels, see v.3). The issue here is male and female church leadership, not marriage; nevertheless the generic male-female relationship is still in view. *Why does the Uniting Church in Australia Ordain Women to the Ministry of the Word?* states: ‘Whatever the occasion of the discussion may have been, Paul’s primary concern seems clear. It is not whether women should pray or prophesy in public ... Rather, the issue is that whenever they do pray or prophesy in public they should do so appearing as women and not as pseudo men. It may also be right ... to read beneath the surface of Paul’s expostulations here a rejection of anything moving even slightly in the direction of homosexuality’.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these observations, the Report appears to cast doubt on the central symbolic meaning of marriage and omits the symbolic aspect of marriage from the affirmation. At one point marriage is reduced to companionship in order to ‘make doctrinal space’ for other forms of companionship apart from the male-female union.<sup>11</sup> The theological method of ‘making doctrinal space’ is built on speculation about cultural causes for the biblical prohibition regarding same-gender unions.

The Report casts further doubt on Ephesians 5:21-33 due to a misreading of male ‘headship’ leading to an alleged justification for domestic violence, even though the affirmation asserts the love of Christ for his Church. At one point the Report queries the analogy with marriage on the grounds that this would be to ‘project gender onto God’. The Report goes so far as to state: ‘Christianity has problematised the “two sexes, two genders” model from the very beginning’.<sup>12</sup> The associated quotation is worth citing in full:

From the author of Ephesians 5 who constructs the male Christ with a female body – the Church – so that men who belong to the body of Christ are part of the female body and yet the Church as a whole is called to be Christ to the world, therefore requiring women to be part of a male persona, again and again in Christian writings is played out and broken open in order to better reveal the nature of the redeemed, ecclesial person.<sup>13</sup>

It is not clear why this flexibility on the part of gender is considered to ‘problematised [a] “two sexes, two genders model”’. The difficulty may arise from taking the metaphor of head and body literally, as in [a projection of] an actual physical body.

### **Ecumenical consultation and science**

As noted above, the Report separates the contact with contemporary thought from ecumenical consultation, contrary to the procedure outlined in the Basis of Union, paragraph 11. The Uniting Church has not engaged in an ecumenical enquiry into sexuality and marriage, from a scientific or any other angle.

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<sup>9</sup> See the Report, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> See *Why does the Uniting Church in Australia Ordain Women to the Ministry of the Word?*, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> See the Report pp. 32; 42.

<sup>12</sup> See the Report, pp. 31; 36.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 111.

## Justice

The process of considering sexuality and marriage in the Uniting Church has been a markedly different one to the process recommended in the paper ‘Sovereignty and Treaty: A brief discussion guide for Uniting Church members’ by Rev Dr Chris Budden, about the empowerment of First Peoples. For ease of comparison, I will place the procedure for marriage in italics. My comments appear in bold.

*In the recent sharing of personal views on the nature of marriage under the Acronym RESPECT participants have been urged to ‘trust ambiguity’ in the various and sometimes conflicting individual opinions in this matter.*

Dr Budden writes: ‘The claim to continuing Indigenous sovereignty questions the stories we tell about ourselves – i.e. the way we see ourselves as a nation’ and ‘We need to own up to the story of our nation’.

**Apparently our opinions (the stories we tell ourselves in this matter) are not satisfactory. What is needed is ‘the [real] story of our nation’. What about the real story of the faith?**

*The recommendations on marriage to the fifteenth Assembly purport to allow freedom of conscience which would mean ministers and/or congregations would operate independently in this matter.*

Sovereignty, says Dr Budden, ‘is about honouring those who were here first, and starting to negotiate a new way for us to occupy this land together’. He writes: ‘While there is not one First People’s view about sovereignty, the common concern is to assert an inherent right as a community – and not just individuals – to negotiate their place within the nation’.

**The question about sovereignty by First Peoples is a matter for the nation. The question about marriage is a very topical matter for our church. We may contrast the two different processes in the following table:**

	<b>CHURCH</b>	<b>NATION</b>
<b>NARRATIVE</b>	<b>‘trust the ambiguity’</b>	<b>‘own up to the story of our nation’</b>
<b>COMMUNITY</b>	<b>individual opinion</b>	<b>‘negotiate a new way for us to occupy this land together’</b>

**If in nothing else, the differing processes of the Uniting Church in national and ecclesiological matters lend themselves to a sociological critique. We could not, for instance, encourage our ecumenical partners to undergo a process about sovereignty for First Peoples when the governing principles of our own church in issues of justice are so inconsistent.**

## Conclusion

In the critique of our forbears, Dr Budden writes: '[The church's narrative] offered a gospel that was individualistic and spiritualised' and 'It confused citizenship and discipleship, so that "Christian values were really Western values"'. What if we were to apply a similar critique to the current practice of the Uniting Church with regard to the marriage question which is also based on the assumption that Christian spirituality is individualistic? Dr Budden remarks: 'The church acted as if European culture was the height of human achievement'. Doesn't a similar assumption underpin our postmodern Western relativism?

Dr Budden urges us to 'own up to the story of our nation'. Can we also own up to the story of our Uniting Church? If we do, I suggest that we will come face to face with a loss of relationship at multiple levels:

- A loss of ecumenical unity contrary to a key governing principle in the choice of the name Uniting Church and in the unfinished circle of the Uniting Church logo.
- A loss of unity within the Uniting Church in the 'mutually exclusive' doctrines and practices regarding sexuality and marriage.
- A loss of the inter-related nature of government by Uniting Church councils, exemplified in the Assembly's failure to seek the concurrence of other councils in this matter.
- A loss of symbolic meaning reflecting the relationship between Christ and the Church. Without such a relationship, what becomes of the Assembly's celebration of 'abundant grace and liberating hope'?

*Dr Katherine Abetz, May 2018*

## **And Further Comment: May 2018**

### Issues relating to the ASC Report to the Fifteenth Assembly and proposal/s for a change in the definition of marriage

General method: a relativist frame of reference under an umbrella of uniformity ‘freedom of conscience’ for ‘ministers and celebrants authorised by the Uniting Church in Australia’ operates under the umbrella that ‘marriage [including ‘same-sex marriage’] is ... a way of life that all people should honour.’ Consequently, ‘freedom of conscience’ is relativised. In practice it will apply to the conducting of marriage ceremonies but not to the recognition of ‘same-sex marriage’.

Theologically, the method is expressed as making ‘doctrinal space for a legitimate consideration of [same-gender marriage]’ (see p. 48).

Appeals to the Basis of Union: The method finds diversity in (i.e. relativises):

- ‘the wide diversity of the Christian church across time and place ( re paragraph 2, p. 11);
- ‘the multiplicity of theological voices in the Bible’ (re paragraph 5, p. 22);
- ‘received interpretations’ in relation to the ‘freedom of faith’ to engage in ‘fresh words and deeds’ (re paragraphs 10 and 11, pp. 23-24);

The method promotes uniformity in placing the affirmation:

‘The Uniting Church “lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church”’ [from paragraph 2]

under the umbrella that the faith and unity of the church is ‘built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ’:

‘The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified one and confesses him as Lord to the glory of [God] the Father. In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). In love for the world God gave the Son to take away the world’s sin.’ [from paragraph 3]

interpreted in terms of reconciliation at the human level (pp. 11-13).

The method omits the need to understand the will and purpose of God regarding contemporary thought ‘within a world-wide fellowship of Churches’ (contra paragraph 11), hence the questions of marriage and scientific enquiry about sexuality have not been referred for ecumenical discussion. The Assembly has consistently declined to seek the concurrence of other councils of the UCA in these matters (contra paragraph 15 (e)).

The symbolic meaning of marriage is relativised by a misreading of Ephesians 5:21-33 in which male ‘headship’ is associated with domestic violence. The ontological definition (based on what marriage is) is replaced by a functional definition (what marriage is supposed to do), potentially leading to a theology based on works.

### Conclusion

The Assembly Standing Committee is operating outside the Constitution Clause 2:

*The [Uniting] Church, affirming that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end, lives and works within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, guided by its Basis of Union.*