

## **UC conservatives and others made Guilty by Association**

The Uniting Church's Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) released its *Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships* including recommendations to change the church's definition of marriage, at the end of April 2018, allowing just over two months of consideration before the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly in July. That there is a proposal to change the definition of marriage to recognise same-sex marriage is no surprise. In spite of repeated denials by liberals over three decades, this is the end game that conservative Christians within the church have been expecting all along.

This one-sided report does affirm that there are strongly held opinions. However it always affirms one side as those who can do no wrong while constantly belittling or misrepresenting the other. One belittling example is the simplistically worded section on domestic violence which casts aspersions on conservative members of the Uniting Church implying that they somehow support domestic violence. The implication is so broad that it could be taken to include all conservative Christians in other denominations, many of whom are ecumenical partners.

### **Who is Unsafe in the Uniting Church?**

What has been missed by this committee of the church is that there has been a fundamental change in Australian society. The Assembly Standing Committee *Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships* makes conservative Christians feel unsafe. Outside the councils of the church, the amended Marriage Act actually makes lay people vulnerable in expressing or attempting to act on conservative beliefs.

We conservative Christians are not made to feel safe in Australia. This is evidenced in the court of public opinion by a recent television news report in Far North Queensland. The report criticised a young Christian footballer for saying in public media that sinners will go to hell. I do not want to defend his expression of a traditional faith view in a tactless manner. The point is that he was treated with far less grace than two other disgraced high profile footballers mentioned almost in the same breath. The report included blurred images of their violence and obscenity while arguing for their return to grace and the playing field. This is a bizarre situation where a Christian is considered to be the most evil of the three by far.

### **The Root of all evil argument**

ASC and the Working Group on Doctrine (WGD) use the same style of argument of that well-known opponent of religion Richard Dawkins in *Root of all Evil*. If there are some in a religion who are evil, then the whole religion must be evil because they allowed them to develop. ASC and WGD's version is because some perpetrators of domestic violence misuse a conservative theological argument to justify themselves, then all theologically conservative people are bad. The report attempts to defame conservative Christians (and most churches) by guilt by association by implying that we personally support domestic violence.

This is extremely offensive and verbally, psychologically and spiritually abusive. There is no doubt that the GLBTIQ community has been terribly abused in the past. The comments on domestic violence in para 4.3.1.6 of the report are however simplistic, offensive and dangerous. They cheapen the church's official response to this serious and complex issue which involves physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, psychological, financial and spiritual abuse. Domestic violence is a scourge to be eliminated, not a tool to be used to beat up your spiritual partners in the church.

What the report says is so simplistic that it is dangerous. It does not help us to identify the real problems in churches. Domestic violence is real. It is in our churches and it can and does involve church leaders. It is never acceptable or trivial. Latest research shows, ironically, that church life does help victims survive. Sadly the research shows that much domestic violence is not challenged because either victims are not believed, or most significantly for this discussion because church leaders do not recognise it for what it is.

I have been genuinely surprised at the strength of my emotional reaction to this report. Surprised? Certainly not by the recommendation. It has been fully expected. No, the strength of my emotional reaction has been the realisation that I am no longer safe within my church and that the beliefs that I share with many friends and colleagues have never ever been shown respect or accurately summarised in any official Assembly report in all of the debates over the years.

The ASC's offensive report is however in the public domain, and so requires public comment.

### **How to respond?**

There has to be an acknowledgement by the ASC in order to move forward.

The manipulating and belittling of conservative beliefs has to cease.

I believe that all discussion on this report should cease until the following happens.

- The report and the recommendations are withdrawn.
- The report is repudiated and conservative Christians (in the Uniting Church and wider) given a substantial public apology.
- The ASC as part of its restitution action must produce a statement clearly articulating one or more conservative understandings of sexuality and marriage without belittling or correction to demonstrate to us as the aggrieved party that they truly understand us.
- The Assembly Standing Committee and the Working Group on Doctrine need to be immediately, seriously and independently reviewed to determine what in their structure, processes or culture could allow them to publically make such egregiously offensive remarks without anyone questioning that decision.

The Church is called to do better. The faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church is worth fighting for, even if this peak body within the church holds the beliefs of many of its members and much of the rest of the church in contempt and seeks to exclude us from it.

### **Postscript**

At the time of publication no apology or excuse has been offered publically for the offensive comments in the *ASC Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships*.

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