



The Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF NSW AND THE ACT

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Pastoral Letter to Congregations of the Synod of NSW & the ACT

Dear Colleagues

As you may be aware the National Assembly of the Uniting Church meets in Adelaide in July, with many significant proposals to be considered. On behalf of the Synod of NSW/ACT I therefore request that you set aside time within your congregations and in your personal lives to pray for the Assembly and it's members. Please pray that they will fulfill their role and calling to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit for our church as it seeks to be a prophetic voice and serve the community, the nation and the world in which we live. Visit the Assembly website to find out all the news and updates at www.assembly2012.uca.org.au.

In light of our history, I would like to make particular reference to and seek your prayers for the Assembly in its deliberation on a number of proposals relating to Same Gender Marriage. As you know this is a matter that is being widely discussed in our country at this time. Whilst the Uniting Church position clearly states that marriage is between a man and a woman, we are being asked, cognizant of the public debate and our own experience as a church community, to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit as we engage in the public discourse, seek to order our own life and empower the church to fulfill its mission in 21st century Australia.

In this context it is important to be aware that within the polity of the Uniting Church (Basis of Union para.15) the Assembly "...has determining responsibility for matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline, including the promotion of the Church's mission..."

Just as in the New Testament Church (Acts 15) the leaders came together to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit in circumstances where some challenged the status quo and others vigorously supported it, so too we are asking the members of the Assembly to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit in circumstances where there are strongly held and differing views.

A specific proposal for consideration at the Assembly is as follows:

30. DEVELOPING A UCA POSITION ON SAME GENDER MARRIAGE (Presbytery of Port Phillip West)

That the Assembly resolve to request the Doctrine Working Group, in consultation with the Worship Working Group and Uniting Justice, to

1. *prepare a discussion paper on*
 - (a) *the Uniting Church theology of marriage;*
 - (b) *whether this theology enables the celebration and blessing of lifelong, faithful, same-sex relationships as 'marriages', or*
 - (c) *whether the Uniting Church should seek to develop another way of celebrating and blessing life-long, faithful, same-sex relationships.*
2. *bring this paper, with appropriate recommendations, to a 2014 meeting of the Assembly Standing Committee.*

Another proposal from the Presbytery of South Moreton is also on the agenda

43. UNDERSTANDING OF MARRIAGE AND BLESSING SERVICES FOR SAME GENDER RELATIONSHIPS (*Presbytery of South Moreton*)

The Assembly resolves to

1. *reaffirm its current position on marriage as being between a man and a woman as stated at the 8th Assembly [1997 - minute 97. 31.12 (1)];*
2. *reject any liturgies such as being used for same-sex blessing services that seek to mimic, undermine and deconstruct marriage;*
3. *remind Synods and Presbyteries that the discipline of the church be exercised if a minister:*
 - (a) *advocates doctrine contrary to that which the Church has determined as essential to the faith; [2012 UCA Regulations 5.7.2c]*
 - (b) *fails to uphold the theological and the liturgical tradition of the Church [Code of Ethics 3.3 (e)]; and*
4. *participate with our ecumenical partners and other Christian denominations by stating the Uniting Church's view of marriage in the public square.*

Rationale:

- a) *There is developing uncertainty which needs to be clarified around the nature of the ceremony of a same-sex wedding blessing and the liturgy used in mimicking marriage which may undermine and deconstruct what the church has already approved;*
- b) *Given the current stated UCA position on marriage it seems to be presumptuous and not consistent to seek to consider a same-sex union liturgy at the July 2012 National Assembly without seeking due*

consideration and advice from the doctrine working group or worship working group.

- c) The public statement by Uniting Justice to the Federal Government with a rider which is inconsistent with the church's current position on the issue and the fact that the Assembly or its doctrine working group or worship working group have not made a submission has been confusing to many congregations, members and ministers.*
- d) There is sadness and disappointment from our migrant ethnic congregations and their home churches at the direction the church may be taking on its understanding of marriage, through its silence, which does not create a sense of unity or understanding.*
- e) There is a need for pastoral consideration from the whole church that for many of our congregations this issue continues to cause confusion and division.*
- f) Because of the ongoing debate and since the church has not reaffirmed the 1997 position, this has left many of our ministers, congregations and local communities confused regarding the UCA's stance on marriage.*

There are currently no liturgies approved by the Assembly for use as a blessing of same gender couples although some ministers do, from time to time, respond to specific situations in a pastoral way.

We need to be aware that those who attend the Assembly do so not as representatives of specific groups or councils, but as delegates whose primary responsibility is to discern the will of God in the context of the prayers, conversations and debates of the Assembly itself. So may our prayers be that those chosen as members of the Assembly wait upon God's Word, hear Christ speak and obey God's will in response to the Holy Spirit.

Yours in Christ's name

Rev Dr Brian Brown
Moderator



Rev Dr Andrew Williams
Synod General Secretary

