

## **NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into the Reproductive Health Care Reform Bill 2019 Opening Statement**

The decision of the Parliament of NSW to table and debate the decriminalisation of abortion is a critical one, affecting people across our community.

One of the significant advantages the Uniting Church brings to this debate is that we have had women in leadership since our inception, offering theological, moral, pastoral and personal insight and challenge to our church, the wider church and the community beyond. This inclusion is inherent to our understanding of the gospel, and to our identity as a community of faith. Rev. Dr Margaret Mayman is one example of that leadership.

The Uniting Church has been engaged in this debate for at least three decades, with a series of significant decisions dating back to the early 1990s. These decisions uniformly affirm that human life is God-given from the beginning. We believe that all human beings are made in the image of God and that we are called to respect the sacredness of life.

We also believe Christians are called to respond to life with compassion and generosity.

When abortion is practised indiscriminately it damages respect for human life. However, we live in a broken world where people face difficult decisions. Respect for the sacredness of life means advocating for the needs of women as well as every unborn child.

We reject two extreme positions: that abortion should never be available; and that abortion should be regarded as simply another medical procedure. It is not possible to hold one position that can be applied in every case because people's circumstances will always be unique.

We believe that abortion should not be a criminal matter, but that it is of vital moral, social and health significance. The parliament resolving that this is not a criminal matter would open the health community – and the wider community – to better care, better support and better options for women and unborn children.

It is important that women have the space they need to make this difficult decision after careful consideration and that they should have access to high quality counselling, pastoral care and medical services.

Women must be free to discuss their situation before they make a decision. The Church needs to be a place where such discussion can happen. We can offer spiritual, moral and pastoral support, without judgement, to a woman at this time.

Whilst we encourage our Ministers to remind people of the sacredness of life, the Church's role should be to offer care and support leading up to and following a decision, not stand in judgement.

Our Church is also committed to support women who continue their pregnancy, and help them within the community.

The Uniting Church is disturbed that recent comments could imply that women make the decision to have an abortion without proper consideration. Most women who have

abortions do so only after a great deal of searching and anguish. There are a range of well-informed spiritual, medical and emotional support services available to women and it is offensive to imply that these decisions are made lightly or without access to suitable consultation.

The decision to have an abortion is not just a moral issue but a social one. While some aspects of the current debate attempt to pass moral judgement on the act itself, it ignores the many emotional, physical, financial and social issues that often create a situation where a woman is forced to consider an abortion.

The Uniting Church asserts that abortion is a health and social issue and should not be a criminal issue.

We are aware that not every member of the Uniting Church agrees with the Church's formal position on reproductive health care. That is true of every church and faith tradition. I have had letters and emails from members of the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Pentecostal churches in the last two weeks, thanking me and the Uniting Church for our statements. Similarly, I have had communication from members of the Uniting Church, criticising, thanking and questioning me.

The Uniting Church hopes that those engaged in this debate do not seek to further polarise what is a community concern about how we care for others in particular need, how we trust women and trust our doctors, and how what is a health and moral issue is not continued as a criminal one.

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