

# The 2018 Standing Committee Report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships or The Interim Report on Sexuality - Mark II?

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It is no surprise to see this Report from the Assembly Standing Committee. It is simply keeping up the liberal agenda and owes a considerable debt to the semi-failed 1996 Interim Report on Sexuality (IRS), that was presented to the 1997 Assembly. It is similar in ethos to the IRS, and like that report, is simply put out for assent and adoption. There is no thought of even paying lip service to a diverse approach. The message is clear – ‘we have been trying to convince you and we will try again and again until you get it’. The liberal agenda is designed to wear people down, and while it must be very disappointing to the liberal proponents who know that most of the church is still opposed, they know they are still in the positions of power and able to continue to promote their agenda.

This Report stands in the tradition of the ‘new tolerance’ where involvement of those opposing the hierarchy’s agenda is limited to that of a statue in a silent movie. If members make too much noise opposing the agenda, then they are regarded as not being able to keep their place, and the only solution is to be excised from the production.

The report process has been very well-managed, much like the general reviews and discussions about sexuality has been for over 20 years. One of the ironies is that even though the idea that ‘the Uniting Church is a diverse church’ has never been officially agreed (it is a defacto understanding from liberals who use the concept for their own agenda), diversity is not even taken seriously by the liberal group as they do not take the opinions and views of evangelicals seriously. This is not a report putting forward different positions and providing equal opportunity for critique and review and recommendation. The analysis and judgements are meant to implicitly condemn those who hold an orthodox and traditional view of sexuality. Twice the ACC Declaration on Marriage and the Family is referenced and dismissed. These are just some aspects that need a fuller critique, but the question remains, why in a supposedly diverse church are there not coherent expressions of other theological views?

I need to say that it should not be expected that there would be an attempt to ground argument in biblical theology, The Basis of Union and the heritage of the Uniting Church. After all, there are no biblical and theological foundations for revising marriage so there is little need to try to make it look like there are such foundations. The one-sided scientific material and especially the method of biblical reflection, for example, the side-stepping, if not dismissal of the foundational Genesis passage is breathtaking, especially when this context was noted as significant in the 2013 Discussion Paper on Marriage: The theology of marriage in the Uniting Church in Australia: a commentary on the marriage service in Uniting in Worship 2.

The report is consistent with a narrative theological approach that links to the two main arguments that have been consistently put forward by speakers at recent Assembly meetings:

- I want to be able to marry my partner
- I want to be able to undertake the marriages of my friends/and or people in society

While the context is marriage, my reading is that the focus is on the individual and this also makes for a confused ecclesiology where there is no distinction between the church and the world, thus negating the gospel and becoming a good works-based religion.

The aim seems to be to make the Uniting Church like the local village church where people can come and get what they want. I think some leaders are not aware that this approach will not even merit many new members as most people can get what they want outside the church, and if it is social justice they are after, there are more than enough groups to join. Other leaders are quite aware that new members will not result, as for them this is irrelevant because everyone is already in the church even if they do not know it.

Ministers of evangelical, orthodox and reformed foundation should be especially alarmed by these proposals as they can only be understood as another step on the way to requiring full involvement in the liberal agenda, or an encouragement to leave. It is not even clear to me whether ministers will need to at least affirm the new (proposed) basis for marriage and not speak against it, even if they do not undertake any marriages using the new affirmation.

May these weeks bring forth many critiques and detailed responses, perhaps even from some liberal theologians. At least in 1996 there were some liberal

theologians brave enough to critique the IRS for its theological failures and worldly context. May there be an abundance of material provided that aboundingly illustrates that not everyone acquiesced, rolled-over and played dead. Hopefully, the voice of the whole church will be truly heard at the Assembly in July and the more moderate members will realise the deep seriousness of the whole situation.

In a nutshell, my view is that the adoption of the proposals would make the Uniting Church cease to be the Uniting Church as we know it, even it still has the legal name. It would be more something like the ‘Church of a section of liberal middle-class Australia’. The grand experiment of ‘Uniting’ that was begun in 1977 as a church movement that was not “its own denomination”, but part of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church would simply be no more.



[from pg13]

## The Church & Managerialism



councils is seriously imperilled. Second, when councils (presbyteries and synods) are merged, it is almost impossible for the larger of the councils not simply in effect to take over the responsibilities of both. Third, when conciliar responsibilities are taken over by executive officers, however well-meaning, again the conciliar responsibility of councils is diminished. Moreover, this thrust towards managerialism is stimulated by western cultural anxiety that conciliar responsibility is disorderly and uncontrollable.

Here is a real issue of theological existence today. The understanding of the gospel underlying the Uniting Church’s Basis of Union stressed the need to wait upon the will and purpose of God as it comes to the church. How are Christians, then, to listen to the voice of God? It is not their task as Christians primarily to invoke God for their particular view of the world, but rather, in humility, to listen as that divine voice comes to them. Therefore, they need to take up this task of listening theologically, while also being very conscious of the need to discriminate between the voice of God on the one hand and their cultural and psychological impulses on the other. Thus the church has stressed the varying roles of scripture, tradition, experience of the Holy Spirit, and, specifically for the Uniting Church, deliberations and decisions of assemblies, synods, presbyteries and congregations as ways in which the voice of God can be heard and confirmed. This is to guard against the danger of individual or small group projection believing that they alone are able to express the will of God. The Basis of Union and the Constitution seek to protect the church from individuals or small groups projecting on to God their individual aspirations, hopes or even self-interest. It is intended to protect the church from self-delusion, which is most likely to occur at a time of individual or communal anxiety. Thus the Uniting Church’s foundational documents are counter-cultural, in that they call for a real wrestling with the managerial cultural norms of the dominant western society.

The Uniting Church is very aware of this necessity to wrestle. It employs the ‘consensus method’ of decision-making in its councils. There are legitimate reservations about its use. Nevertheless it is true, that if the method is used with sincerity, and not manipulated, this method is strongly counter-cultural. If the Uniting Church is wedded to the counter-cultural consensus methodology, it will also want to be highly dubious of any attempts at centralised managerialism. Primarily the Uniting Church will do so simply ad maiorem Dei gloriam (to the greater glory of God).

*Note: Permission has been granted from the publisher (Morning Star Publishing, Melbourne), the book author (Rev Dr John Michael Owen) and the Preface author (Rev Professor James Haire AC) to reprint the substance of Professor Haire’s Preface to the book, Property and Progress for a Pilgrim People: How much has the Uniting Church now lost the way?*