

MARRIAGE

Peter Bentley: Marriage in the UCA

Firstly I want to consider some of the changes in Australian Society with regard to marriage over the last 30-40 years. The central features of a (Christian) marriage continue to be challenged, including the public commitment; the appropriate place for sexual union; and “for life”.

People generally now marry later in life (exceptions for Christians are members of more conservative churches which still maintain a belief that sex is reserved for marriage), and have children later, and fewer children.

Rates of cohabitation have increased significantly. Overall there is such a growing acceptance of defacto relationships that most people simply live together before marriage (if they do actually marry). According to the ABS 76.1% of people marrying in 2006 indicated that they had cohabited prior to registering their marriage, compared with approximately 15% in the 1970s.

One of the most significant impacts on religious marriage celebration has come about by the introduction of the broader civil celebrant programme in 1973. In that year 83.6% of marriages were undertaken by religious celebrants, but by 2008 this percentage had fallen to 35%. This change cannot be under-estimated as fewer people now have an opportunity to hear the Christian purpose of marriage declared, and for those marrying, undertake pre-marriage education courses that outline the Christian understanding of marriage.

Secondly while the nature of marriage was confirmed in legislation, there have been significant developments within Christian Denominations. In 2004 marriage was defined in terms of the Marriage Amendment Act as being “the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life”.

In fact the legislation also states that “Certain unions are not marriages: A union solemnised in a foreign country between: (a) a man and another man; or (b) a woman and another woman; must not be recognised as a marriage in Australia”.

This debate about the nature of marriage occurred after a period of pressure by certain sections of the church for recognition of same-sex unions and blessing ceremonies. This push has continued with an example being the ceremony held to join two men according to the marriage rites of the Religious Society of Friends (*The Religion Report*: 23 May 2007). While of course not officially recognised in Australia, the two men are recognised as married by Quakers around the world.

The UCA at present certainly confirms the Christian understanding of marriage and has excellent statements, including the declaration of purpose in the Marriage Service, the decisions of the 1997 Assembly, and agreed statements from our ecumenical dialogues. A helpful succinct statement on marriage can be found in the series produced by the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine.

However there are some issues. The following statement was included in the 1999 Agreed Declaration of Mutual Recognition by The Uniting Church in Australia and The Lutheran Church of Australia:

3.9 Marriage: We believe that marriage is instituted by God and is intended as a relationship of mutual companionship in which husband and wife complement and serve each other. We hold that the strength and stability of marriage and family life is the expression of God's purpose for the well-being of the wider society. It is the God-given institution for the expression of sexual intimacy. (See Pastoral Statement on Marriage).

It is worth noting that in adopting the whole statement at the 9th Assembly (2000), a significant clause was added with clear implications for this section: “(d) to note that this approval is without prejudice to ongoing discussions on sexuality”; and this section was not included in the revised and adopted version of the mutual declaration (2009-10).

I have also become aware of unofficial questioning of “For life”, and suggesting set terms for marriages (similar in a way to placements for ministers), but the major issue for the UCA is the general acceptance of practising homosexual relationships, and of course the necessary corollary of condoning sexual relations outside of marriage.

The church is caught in a Catch 22 position with wider ramifications. If practising homosexual relationships are now allowed, why cannot ministers be in de facto relationships? Certainly, the UCA is seen as the most likely major church to change its position on marriage because it has already adopted such liberal policies.

A letter to the editor of *Crosslight* (VicTas Synod) in May 2010 headed “Support needed for gay marriage” concluded “The Uniting Church is at the forefront of progressive change. Society will commend us if we have the courage to institute equality and allow gay people to marry”.

The UCA will be increasingly caught between different groups. There are some liberal ministers who see marriage as an outdated, patriarchal institution which has to be abandoned in favour of something else still to be defined. Others wish to change the church's position on marriage to include people of the same sex. Still others believe the concept of “right relationships”, which in some places operates as the de facto basis for sexual ethics in the church should become the official policy. There are also liberal ministers who affirm the present understanding of the church's teaching on marriage, and are concerned about our ecumenical relationships.

Given there is a solid record of doctrine in this area it will take some significant number-crunching at the Assembly to introduce change, but

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This is an edited summary of Peter's presentation at the 2010 ACC Conference and also part of his increasing work in progress on the topic of Marriage in Australia.