

HopeNET



Response to Marriage Consultation: Golden Grove

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The Church Council of Golden Grove Uniting Church convened a special meeting open to all who attend our worship services. The meeting attracted 35 attendees (average weekly worship is 80). It included table discussions (six tables), a forum for asking questions, and the collection of 29 response papers (some couples jointly completed one form). This paper reflects those response papers.

It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of the 35 people present were of one mind on this issue, with the exception of two voices whose views are also reflected in this paper.

Comments were received from many of our members prior to the meeting regarding the papers presented by Assembly. These comments can be grouped into three areas:

1. that the Assembly papers were slanted to generate a preferred response, pushing towards changing the definition of marriage;
2. that the Assembly papers were seen as opening up areas of potential theological difficulty on the basis of changing culture/social attitudes, rather than on the basis of scripture; and
3. that the Assembly papers failed to adequately consider the impact on children, in particular the right for a child to be raised by their biological mother and father which is affirmed by the United Nations statement on the rights of a child.

The written responses we received to the Discussion Paper included a wide range of comments:

1. Identify any challenges or new insights raised for members of the group by the commentary on the theological dimensions of the marriage service.

The first response listed here was by far the biggest response to the first question.

1. There should be no change to the definition of marriage.
2. Marriage between a man and a woman is ordained by God regardless of the law of the land and that any other form of marriage is not approved by God.
3. The idea of ranking the importance in marriage of mutual support, sex and children is a flawed approach. One is not less important than another.
4. The church should tighten its attitude towards divorce.

Challenges that respondents identified in this section included:

1. the potential for legal action or discrimination against the church if it holds a definition of marriage which is different to the definition in society; and
2. the negative impact on children.

The overwhelming majority of the responses to this question, although expressed in many ways, indicated that people have not been convinced by the arguments presented to date and cannot justify a change to our inherited theology of marriage.

There was one dissenting response which said: *“How upset some people are by the thought of [same-sex marriage] is sad for the church.”*

Perhaps the most insightful response to this question was: *“How do we show love and respect while remaining comfortable with our [traditional] position [on marriage] and not cause hurt or divisiveness.”*

This is what the church should be spending its energies on, resourcing congregations to welcome same-sex attracted people well, while holding firm to the tenets of our faith.

2. If the government were to legislate to enable same-gender couples to marry, what issues or questions would this raise for you?

In descending order, the three most numerous responses were:

1. the question of legal implications and the need for exemptions for the church and individuals as they stand firm on their definition of marriage;
2. the issue of the negative impact on children by removing their right to a mother and father and by the normalising of homosexual activity; and
3. that the government shouldn't be allowed to make such a change.

There was one dissenting comment which said that they "welcomed" government legislation.

One comment of significant concern was:

"If the UCA goes on individual conscience, how can those with strong views either way remain?"

This related to the possibility that the UCA might take no definitive position on same-sex marriage, but leave it open to individual Presbyteries, Congregations and Ministers to decide for themselves, leaving the church irreparably divided

3. What would you see as appropriate responses by the Uniting Church?

– pastorally for its members and the wider community?

The three largest responses to this question were:

1. to continue to welcome, love and respect same-sex attracted people, and to pray;
2. to support ministers and congregations in not performing same-sex marriage ceremonies; and
3. that there should be no same-sex marriages in the church.

There were two comments that indicated openness to civil unions, while another asserted that practicing homosexuals should not be allowed in leadership in the church.

Perhaps the best of the comments was:

"All people, no matter what their sexual orientation or practice, are God's children and are to be cared for by the congregation."

– in the church’s practices concerning Christian marriage?

Of the 29 response sheets 18 responded to this question with the word ‘No’ (or something similar).

Dissenting voices were:

1. three responses indicating limited acceptance of same-sex relationship commitments on the basis that it wasn’t called marriage, and/or that congregations and ministers would be able to opt out;
2. one response was ‘Yes’.

There were also two responses indicating that the church should offer education about sexuality. The implication being that society doesn’t understand why those who hold a traditional scriptural view of sexuality believe what they do.

– in relation to the government and the church’s role in conducting marriages?

Most responses worked on the basis that for the sake of this question they were to assume that the government has changed the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples.

There were six responses that fitted more than one category and were counted in both. The full list of responses was as follows:

1. there should be no change by the government 10
2. the church should refuse a government role 7
3. a congregation or minister should be able to opt out 6
4. the government should have no say over the church 5
5. the government should not call it marriage 4
6. ‘Yes’ 2
7. ****sheet left blank**** 1

– in any celebration or blessing of same-gender relationships?

This question was considered to be one of the most leading questions in the response paper. Many people interpreted it as asking them to start from a place of assuming that the Uniting Church had accepted the legitimacy of such ceremonies and was asking how they should happen.

Despite the vagueness, by far the biggest response was a simple ‘No’ (14 responses). Four responses stated that any such ceremony anywhere in the church should not be called marriage. Three indicated that any such ceremony should only be in the context of ‘friendship’.

There were three dissenting responses indicating ‘Yes’ or a variation thereon.

**4. Should the Uniting Church reconsider its understanding of marriage at this time?
Why or why not?**

This should have been the very first question as it gives the clearest indication of people’s sense of what is right and true. Many of our members considered that to place it so far into the response paper was manipulative.

The responses to the simple question were:

1. No	23	
2. Blank	3	
3. Make no decision now, but continue Holy Spirit discerning		2
4. Yes	1	

There were limited responses to the second question: that nothing has changed except society’s values (3 responses); that it can be helpful to consider what is good about marriage (3 responses); that we need an improved understanding of the existing definition of marriage; that marriage as it is now can be strengthened; that we are losing sight of scripture; and finally, that doing so devalues marriage.

There was one dissenting voice which stated that, *"it's only a matter of time before it happens"* and the Uniting Church can *"lead the way"*.

One comment is perhaps worth highlighting in an attempt to see how some good might come out of this process:

"No!

But I think it is a very healthy thing for the church as a whole to have to re-look at our understanding of marriage, to recognise why it is important to God and to us."

It would be wonderful if out of this process the church became better able to articulate all that is good about marriage as God's gift to us.

5. What other issues are important to you in relation to these matters?

The two most frequent responses to this section were:

1. The challenge of continuing to uphold moral standards in the face of secular society;
2. That this issue impacts on children who ideally need a mother and a father, and that it's not just about the feelings of adults.

Other matters that were mentioned included: the need for pastoral sensitivity in order to avoid causing hurt; the danger of divisiveness within the UCA and ecumenically; that we should seek God's will as revealed in scripture even when that is uncomfortable; and that financial equality for same-sex couples is important.

There was one dissenting voice which commented: *"they love one another"*.

6. Are there particular questions or insights into these issues that you want to share from your ethno-cultural community?

Our congregation is largely Anglo-Australian and the respondents struggled to identify themselves as having a particular ethno-cultural contribution to make. This is reflected in 17 blank response sheets and another four that simply responded 'No'. The reality is that the Anglo-Australian Christian cultural perspective is the one which has shaped our country over the past 200 years and remains the dominant cultural perspective in Australia today. As such it does have something to say on this issue.

The responses received included:

1. the negative impact on children in same-sex couple families;
2. that same-sex marriage doesn't (cannot) make a family and home;
3. a distinction between legal status and spiritual status;
4. don't change because of a small minority;
5. the inability to consummate the marriage;
6. the danger of being known as "the gay church"; and
7. that this is a sign of the end times and the church should stand firm and resist the Evil One;

This paper has been prepared by a task group of three individuals who were present at the meeting and is affirmed by the Church Council as truly representing the views of all of those present.

Church Council Response

The Church Council wholeheartedly affirms the overwhelming majority view expressed by the Congregation that, whether the government were to change the legal definition of marriage or not:

1. scripture clearly rejects same-sex sexual activity;
2. the UCA should not recognise same-sex marriages; and
3. the UCA should not allow the celebration of same-sex sexual relationships, by the name marriage or any other name.

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