

PRESENTATION ON SAME GENDER MARRIAGE AS IT HAS PROCEEDED THROUGH THE ASSEMBLY

SLIDE #	TEXT
1	(Title slide)
2	The Assembly has been addressing issues of sexuality since 1982, when a Presbytery asked if sexual orientation was, in itself, a barrier to a person being ordained. The full history of the Assembly's deliberations on these matters, from then until 2009, is told in a 10-page document, <i>Sexuality and Leadership: Documenting the History</i> , available online.
3	The first major work leading up to the present situation was in the 6 th Assembly (1991), which commissioned a task group on sexuality to undertake wide-ranging consultation and research into human sexuality and the Christian faith, to report to the 8 th Assembly in 1997.
4	The 8 th Assembly received the report, <i>Uniting Sexuality and Faith</i> , and commended it to the church for discussion. It also recognised the diversity of views held by UCA members on issues of sexuality.
5	That Assembly approved a statement on marriage, which has become known as the 1997 statement. This statement forms the basis of the Statement of Purpose in the UCA's marriage liturgy. (You may wish to read the statement ... it continues on the next slide)
6	(Marriage statement continued)
7	The Assembly also adopted a companion statement on separation, divorce and re-marriage, which said that, in some circumstances, divorce may be the only creative and life-giving direction to take, and that the grace and healing of God are available to people who are divorced, which may free them to marry again.
8	While affirming its statement on marriage, the Assembly recognised the need for further work exploring issues of sexuality, gender and biblical and theological understandings, so it authorised continuing work. It acknowledged the pain of people who were seeking more clarity from the Assembly, and committed the church to ongoing dialogue.
9	In 2000, the 9 th Assembly made no decision on sexuality but adopted a statement on unity and diversity. This statement acknowledged shared belief in the authority of scripture but different methods of interpretation, yet despite the diversity within its membership the church remained united in Jesus Christ.
10	The statement also recognised that issues of sexuality remained unresolved, and this was a cause of pain for some people and leading to tensions within the church. The 9 th Assembly also received a report from a task group on <i>The Understanding and Use of the</i>

	<i>Bible</i> , and this was commended to the church for study. (It was published in 2000 as a book, called <i>Unique, prophetic and apostolic: six studies on using the Bible</i> .)
11	This statement on unity and diversity was referenced at the 10 th Assembly in 2003, when it acknowledged the people within the church continue to hold mutually exclusive positions on issues of sexuality. It recognised that while some hold to “celibacy in singleness, faithful in marriage ...”
12	... others hold a view about “right relationships” expressed in the 1997 report, <i>Uniting faith and Sexuality</i> . It affirmed that sexuality was not a barrier to membership (and therefore need not be a barrier to ordination or leadership), and appealed to the church to live in peace notwithstanding differences of belief and practice on this issue.
13	And the Assembly reminded Presbyteries that consideration of ministry agents for ordination or placement needed to be on a case-by-case basis, although sexuality may be a relevant consideration in such discernment conversations.
14	There was significant opposition to this resolution across the church. People claimed the Assembly had endorsed ‘right relationships’ as a framework for Christian relationships outside marriage. The Standing Committee clarified the resolution.
15	The Standing Committee also indicated that Congregations can adopt different views on sexuality and leadership, provided there is respect for those which adopt other positions and there is capacity for genuine discernment apart from issues of sexuality.
16	The 11 th Assembly (2006) adopted a statement on Sexuality and Leadership which lamented the fallout and loss of ministers and members over Resolution 84. It declared that sexuality and leadership is at heart a matter of faith and concerns our humanity in Christ. The Assembly recognised – again – the opposing views held across the church, and resolved it would not make further decisions at this time.
17	Even so, the 11 th Assembly appealed to Congregations to allow for diversity within their membership and ensure that they were safe places for all people.
18	The Assembly set the Doctrine Working Group to engage further in this work, and appealed for unity, and to keep the broader purposes of the church in mind and not allow this matter to consume inordinate energy or time.
19	No decision was taken at the 12 th Assembly in 2009. The 13 th Assembly in 2012 passed a 2-part resolution on marriage: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It affirmed the 8th Assembly (1997) statement on marriage (traditional view); • noting the desire for respectful conversation within the diverse community of the church and the current public debate about same gender marriage to ask the Working Group on Doctrine, after appropriate consultation across the Church and with ongoing liaison with the Standing Committee, to prepare a Discussion Paper on the theology of marriage within the Uniting Church, and explore its implications for public covenants for same-gender relationships; to circulate the

	<p>paper widely ...; and to bring a report with any recommendations to the ASC and through them to the 14th Assembly.</p>
20	<p>As a result of that resolution, a Task Group on the Theology of Marriage and Public Covenants for Same-Gender Relationships within the Uniting Church was formed. It released a Discussion Paper on Marriage which was widely circulated across Presbyteries and Congregations. based on the Uniting Church's approved liturgical resource, The Marriage Service in <i>Uniting in Worship 2</i>, which was considered to be as close to a formally agreed theology of marriage that we have.</p> <p>Additionally, Rev. Dr Robert Bos conducted discussions across the church, especially but not only with multicultural communities, and provided a separate report, Views of marriage in the UCA.</p>
21	<p>The 14th Assembly (2015) received Robert Bos' paper and also a report on responses to the marriage discussion paper, and further reflections from the Doctrine Working Group. That report concluded, "What the church believes about marriage has always been shaped by the interaction between scripture, tradition and culture. Therefore, the Working Group believes that consideration of any change to the existing doctrine of marriage needs to engage a theological approach that holds together scripture, tradition, and culture. It is through this process that the church develops its doctrines.</p> <p>"It is true that the various Christian views on marriage have consistently assumed that marriage is a lifelong, faithful, male-female union; beyond that the church's teaching about the status and purposes of marriage has changed across time, place and cultures. The presenting issue is whether one of those three constants in the Christian doctrine of marriage, namely it is a male-female union, should be maintained; or whether it can be changed to embrace same-gender unions.</p>
22	<p>"To explore this possibility in a manner consistent with the process of theological discernment outlined above, further attention needs to be given to the doctrine of scripture, the doctrine of creation, and the doctrine of the new creation in Christ."</p>
23	<p>The 14th Assembly agreed that further work needed to be done, and specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • request the Standing Committee, in consultation with the UAICC and Multicultural and Cross-cultural Ministry, to explore how the Uniting Church can engage in further discussions about marriage and same-gender relationships in culturally appropriate ways; • request the Standing Committee to address immediately, through appropriate mechanisms, the following work: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (i) to engage with the continuing work of the Doctrine Working Group as outlined in its report to the Fourteenth Assembly; • (ii) to engage with the members of the LGBTIQ community and the wider Church in discussions about marriage and same-gender relationships;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (iii) in consultation with the relevant Assembly working groups, to prepare a report to the Fifteenth Assembly with appropriate recommendations, as well as supporting theological, liturgical, pastoral and educational resources; and • (iv) in consultation with our ecumenical partners, where appropriate, to investigate the implications of changing the Church's current relationship with the Commonwealth Government with respect to the conduct of marriages.
24	<p>The work done between 2015 and the Assembly this year included the Space for Grace process commended to the church for conversations; 2 marriage conversations using Space for Grace each involving about 25 people; consultation with UAICC; and discussion at cultural groups' National Conferences. But it would be fair to say that the expectations of many people of the way the Assembly would guide and resource ongoing discussions in Presbyteries and Congregations in these 3 years were not met. Despite the long history of the UCA dealing with these matters, and the discussions arising from the 2012 paper on marriage, when the Assembly Standing Committee report on Marriage and Same Gender Relationships was published six weeks before the 15th Assembly, many people felt it caught them unawares.</p>
25	<p>The Standing Committee's report on Marriage and Same Gender Relationships included the report of the Doctrine Working Group (DWG) on this question. That report concluded with these comments.</p> <p>(read from PPT screen about statements in the report)</p>
26	<p>Arising from that report was Proposal 8 from the ASC, which began by noting that the Working Group on Doctrine Report documents a continuing and faithful struggle on matters relating to sexuality and marriage spanning several decades in the Uniting Church; and that the issue of same-gender marriage is one about which many Uniting Church people faithfully hold strong and at times mutually exclusive convictions.</p>
27	<p>Proposal 8 then went on to offer a new policy statement on marriage, which was a succinct rewriting of the principles in the 1997 statement on marriage, but which was gender neutral.</p>
28	<p>It proposed that, under that one statement, ministers and Church Councils could choose whether or not to celebrate same gender marriages.</p>
29	<p>That proposal and the report from the Standing Committee were published on April 30, available for the whole church to read and respond to. By the time Assembly began on July 8, there were 8 proposals on marriage. Broadly speaking:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four supported making provision for same gender marriage, while allowing ministers/celebrants and churches freedom of choice; • Two called for retaining the 1997 statement (man and woman); • One called for deferral and more work, with the matter to come to the 16th Assembly;

- One proposed that any change to the UCA understanding of marriage should be referred to other councils as it is a matter of vital importance to the life of the church.

HOW WAS THE ISSUE PRESENTED?

The Assembly Standing Committee report was presented on first morning of business. The President made it clear this consideration of the ASC Report would not include Report B23, the ASC report on Marriage and Same Gender Relationships but that that discussion would occur in the SGM discussion that afternoon.

In the afternoon, time was given for each of the 8 proposals to be presented by their mover/seconder.

The presentation of the 8 proposals was the precursor to a 2-hour Working Group session that afternoon, where Assembly members discussed all the proposals in groups of 10-12. Feedback was requested on four baseline questions:

- Should the UCA retain its current definition of marriage?
- should the UCA change its definition of marriage to include SGM?
- should UCA ministers/celebrants be given freedom of conscience on conducting SGM?, and
- should Church Councils have freedom to decide on the use of church property for SGM?

The Facilitation Team reported back on Tuesday. Broadly speaking, there was strong support for changing the definition of marriage to include same gender relationships, though we couldn't gauge numbers as the feedback was on the basis of consensus or agreement in each group, not actual numbers of individuals voting each way.

Two themes identified through the various group responses seemed to foreshadow where the Assembly eventually would land on this. One was, can we develop a position where we could recognise both the current policy and a changed policy as faithful responses? The other was, what is the theological basis for holding 2 distinct positions?

The Facilitation Team returned on Wednesday with a new proposal (61), which allowed for two statements about marriage – the 1997 one, and the other statement offered in Proposal 8. When this was reintroduced on Friday, an amendment came that both statements should be identical in every respect except for the references to gender. In this way, the UCA would maintain a common understanding of the gift, purpose and obligations of marriage to the fullest extent it could.

This matter continued through three plenary sessions on the Friday. To make the decision, the Assembly resolved that it should receive a minimum two-thirds support to pass, and the vote should be by secret ballot.

The ballot was held just before dinner on Friday evening, with the result announced on resumption after dinner.

When the meeting reconvened, the President indicated it had passed by significantly more than the two-thirds required.

	<p>The room did not erupt into cheering or other response – the President had advised people not to do so, but there was a genuine sense that the decision, while strongly affirmed, would cause great pain for many in the church, including a considerable number in the Assembly meeting.</p> <p>After that, the two proposals about retaining the 1997 definition were dropped. A vote was then taken about concurrence – this was also by secret ballot, and constitutionally needed a two-thirds majority to pass. It did not receive that.</p> <p>It should be said that there were several points of frustration with the process used as this matter was navigated through the Assembly.</p> <p>Perhaps the main one was that no time was given to specifically discuss the Doctrine Working Group report. When challenged about this, the President ruled that the Doctrine Working Group report had already been received by the Standing Committee and did not need to be received separately by the Assembly. It was being offered as an information resource for the Assembly to inform discussion of Proposal 8 and did not need to be formally discussed or received separate from that Proposal.</p> <p>This was a cause of continuing frustration for many people (including, it should be said, members of the Doctrine Working Group who would have welcomed opportunity to respond in plenary session to challenges being made to their report).</p> <p>As it turned out, questions about the report were made in discussion about the proposals and Doctrine Working Group members did respond to them.</p>
30	<p>So, where are we now? This is the decision that's been made:</p> <p>(Read from slide)</p>
31	<p>There are now two statements about marriage – the 1997 one continues unchanged, and the other is identical to it except without reference to the gender of the two people.</p>
32	<p>(Read from PPT)</p>
33	<p>(Read from PPT)</p>
34	<p>So, where are we now?</p> <p>Clearly, the decision is trying to hold together a church where people can hold different views about marriage. This has been the UCA's challenge and plea for over 30 years of discussions on sexuality. The decision <u>seeks to claim common ground on an understanding of marriage</u>, apart from gender, <u>and allow freedom of choice</u> for ministers/celebrants and Congregations as to which position on marriage they hold.</p> <p>This decision stands on certain claims or assumptions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That both views of marriage can be justified biblically and theologically, and faithfully held. 2. That marriage is not of the substance of the faith, and so the UCA can allow diversity. (BOU #15: "... the phrase 'adhere to the Basis of Union' is understood as willingness to live and work within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as that way is described in this Basis. Such adherence allows

	for difference of opinion in matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith.”)
35	<p>3. That there are no other provisions in the BOU that would prevent the church from adopting a dual-statement position. (Some were raised in the debate – does this violate the BOU’s commitment to ecumenical relationships, or our place in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church? The Assembly clearly felt it did not.)</p> <p>4. That there had been sufficient consultation across the church that would inform its discernment in making this decision, and the Assembly was ready to make this decision.</p> <p>5. That in deciding not to seek the concurrence of other councils, the Assembly indicated it did not believe that this issue is ‘of vital importance to the life of the church’ (BOU #15: “It is obligatory for [the Assembly] to seek the concurrence of other councils, and on occasion of the congregations of the Church, on matters of vital importance to the life of the Church.”).</p> <p>Each of these claims or assumptions are variously being contested by those disappointed or grieved by the decision.</p> <p>But those claims or assumptions are endorsed by others, who have received the decision with affirmation, even thanksgiving. And it should be said, there is sadness that we did not go to one, comprehensive, non-gender specific position for the whole church, which was the purpose of the original proposal. The holding of two positions – even while seeking to make space for polarities – is challenging to some people’s notions of coherence and unity within the church.</p>
36	<p>More broadly, there are other consequential matters flowing from the decision:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal validity, which will secure the rights of celebrants/churches. • Ecumenical implications. • Potential conflicts between ministry agents and their Congregations. • An authorised UCA rite for same gender marriage is planned to be available by September 29. <p>The Assembly is producing some further resources, including an FAQ, to cover these and other issues, which will be available perhaps next week. Further theological and biblical resources are also to be produced.</p>