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My one paragraph response:

The Doctrine Working Group's commentary on UIW2's marriage service is inadequate as a discussion paper on marriage, partly because of its opening assumptions, and largely because of its total failure to engage with the evolution of gender, sex and relationships through the history of life, and thus to enable us to live out of an "informed faith."

Summary of my dissatisfaction:

I have no interest in putting any energy into a church wide discussion on marriage and other sexual relationships if the "Discussion Paper [sic]" is the document around which we gather.

The paper circulated to us is not, despite its title, a discussion paper on marriage. It is, as the subtitle admits, "a commentary on the marriage service in UIW 2." In that very limited role, it may contribute a little to the discussion we need to have, but it is a far cry from the Discussion Paper we need to help us move forward. In many ways Robert Bos' "summary of UCA belief" is a more helpful resource, though it also reveals one significant gap.

Any discussion which does not take seriously the last centuries of research into the evolution of sex, gender, and cooperative parenting strategies, leading eventually to humanity and our many and varied approaches to "marriage" is a waste of time. The majority of our members accept our evolutionary origin, let's start writing discussion papers which grapple with it.

We cannot continue to ground our discussion about human sexuality in Genesis 1 (and an egalitarian misreading of the *Image of God*²). We are meant to be the church which,

"... enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God's ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith... [sharpening] its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought." (Basis of Union para 11)

The Discussion Paper claims that, "The clearest guide to finding out what Christians believe is to observe the way they pray and worship (Doctrine Working Group 2014, 1)." I completely reject that claim, as someone who has both participated in, and lead, worship for many years.

It flies in the face of the conclusion of Bos' "Summary of UCA Belief," document, which also forms part of this process,

"Clearly, *there is no agreed theology of marriage in the Uniting Church...* many demonstrated openness to change and reviewing their position." (Bos 2013, 24)

If there is no agreed theology, how on Earth can reading one worship service from 2005 tell us what Christians believe?

Bos records that, "Many noted that the church is now not where it was in 1997." (Bos 2013, 23) I suspect that is nearly as true of where it was in 2005.

¹ I have also included a one page response on the official questionnaire as an appendix.

² See page 3.

Fuller Response to the Commentary on UIW2

This discussion paper *is not* a discussion paper on Marriage, but, as it says, simply a commentary on a single liturgy, itself closely based on much older liturgies, which are precisely what our current context is calling into question. It may be of some interest as a *resource* for the Discussion Paper on Marriage, but it falls a long way short of being that paper.

What we need is a paper which starts with the section “Changes in marriage” (currently buried on page 12), and proceeds from there. The tiny red breakout boxes should constitute the main text and be greatly expanded upon. The commentary should be relegated to the breakout boxes.

“The first and most obvious thing to say about the marriage service is that it is a service of worship.” An obvious thing to ask, however, is “How many ministers use that service, completely unchanged?” For me it provides the framework for a celebration of marriage, not a literal strait-jacket. We don’t follow a book of common prayer, but craft worship to suit its context, based around an understanding of core components needed in a framework. The diversity of worship in the UCA undermines any attempt to gauge our beliefs by looking at one worship service, even if the premise of the paper was true.

Perhaps the paper would have served us better if it surveyed the way UCA leaders actually *do* conduct weddings, and also how they would change things, if they were legally able to.

An unacknowledged justification for a flexible approach to the wedding service comes much later in the paper,

“Then the two people make their promises to one another. Strictly speaking, *this is all that is required for the validity of a Christian marriage*. ... It is the act of promising – not the minister or a government register or anything else – that creates the married relationship in the sight of God.”(Doctrine Working Group 2014, 15)

As a commentary on the marriage service, I found its reliance on the pattern of Creation, Fall and Redemption unhelpful. As a purported discussion paper on marriage, its reliance on an apparently Genesis 1-3 based reading of these three, completely ignoring recent scientific insights into the evolution and purpose first of sex, then of gender, and finally of cooperative parenting strategies, renders the conclusions irrelevant. See for example the box, “Same gender relationships.”

The starting premise of the Declaration on Intent is, “Marriage is a gift from God”(Doctrine Working Group 2014, 4). This needs to be seriously questioned in the light of both the evolution of gender, sex and relationships, and in the light of Jesus’ and especially Paul’s great ambivalence to the practice.

The commentary admits,

“11. The Declaration goes on to state, using the words of Genesis1, that human beings are created in God’s image as male and female. *Throughout the church’s history, the story of creation in Genesis 1 has been one of the most important sources of the Christian teaching on marriage. It is especially on the basis of this passage that the church believes marriage to be more than a cultural phenomenon or a social construct.*”(Doctrine Working Group 2014, 7)

Nearly three centuries after Darwin and Wallace, this is precisely the problem! Unfortunately, the commentary sees it as a positive. It assumes that we must retain the “deep scriptural norm” of Genesis 1 despite 70% of UCA members now supporting the theory of evolution. We cannot dodge the issue by trying to say that we reject Genesis’ historicity but retain its theology. Genesis and Evolution present two fundamentally different worldviews of the underlying nature of Life.

Genesis teaches that gender is fixed, and precedes sex, and many interpret it to say that human sexuality is the way it has been since the dawn of time. We know instead that sexual reproduction evolved after hundreds of millions of years of life (largely to give a survival advantage against parasites and disease.). Gender evolved later, maximizing reproductive efficiency amongst other things, and some species have several genders, not just two. Other organisms change gender throughout their life. By the time humans evolved, there were a vast array of cooperative parenting styles in operation, and many did and do exist in parallel to the one we now know as western monogamy. On balance, research suggests to me that serial monogamy, including concurrent casual sexual interactions, is most likely to be the earliest human partnering style, reflected in our significant but not overwhelming physical differences between men and women of the same “race,” the size of the human penis and testes relative to the gorilla and chimpanzee, and the possibility of multiple orgasms and post coital libido in some women.

Let’s digest the implications of these new elements of our “creation story” before we talk about God “giving” us marriage.

The commentary goes on to make a near ubiquitous exegetical error, claiming that “Genesis 1 emphasises the equal status of male and female as God’s image.”

Apparently unconscious of the irony, the commentary then goes on to use the patriarchal imagery of Ephesians as support for equality between men (compared to Christ) and women (the church).

Much as we like to say that the image in Genesis 1 refers to men and women, in the actual passage it is men only who are created in the image of God. “In the image of God he created *him*... Male and female he created *them*.” This understanding is clearly reflected in 1 Cor 11:7, “For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man (NRSV).”

Over 1000 years of church tradition concurred, as reluctantly documented by the feminist scholar, Rosemary Radford-Ruether(Radford-Ruether 1995).

If our understanding of marriage is grounded in Genesis 1, it is grounded in male superiority. If we reject it’s patriarchal assumptions, we cannot simply cling to other statements about humanity, even if we reject our evolutionary origins.

The commentary briefly canvasses the issue of divorce. The assumption that marriages which end early are “failed” and cause suffering, whilst sometimes true, is perhaps not always true. The paper is begging an important question. There is no discussion in the tiny breakout-box of whether perhaps it is not the *relationship* which failed, but the *church* which failed by insisting that all sexual relationships must be enshrined in marriage to be legitimate, and therefore setting couples up to have to break vows and fail, rather than just move on.

If a young couple grow up in a church culture which demonises extra-marital sex and relationships, and so marry young rather than “burn with passion,” then I’d argue that it is the faith community’s narrow view of sexual relationships, not the couple or the marriage which has “failed” if it subsequently ends.

I am glad that the UCA at least accepts that divorce can be a life giving option, I have barely been able to believe the testimony I’ve heard from divorcees in other denominations about the treatment they have received from their pastors and peers. You would think Jesus said it was harder for a divorcee, not a rich man, to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

The commentary claims that, “...when the Declaration of Purpose speaks of the ‘full expression of physical love’ between the married partners, it should not be taken as a condemnation of all other forms of sexual life.” Yet clearly that wording *does* imply that marriage is superior. It allows for *the* (not *a*) full expression of physical love.

As an aside, the Same-Gender marriage breakout box claims that, “Marriage has been understood to be between a man and a woman.” Elsewhere on polygamy, it is clear that Judeo-Christian tradition has understood marriage as being between a man and *at least* one woman.

The commentary states confidently that,

“Culturally, polygamy is unnecessary in Australia, since social welfare allows Australian women to survive without the kind of family support that polygamy provides.”(Doctrine Working Group 2014, 17)

It would be good to see some actual data to support the claim that all women are able to survive on social welfare. If welfare is adequate, why some many prostitutes? Is prostitution a preferable option to polygamy³? As an aside, will we ever discuss prostitution in our discussions on sexuality? Will we reopen polygamy depending on future trends in the level of social welfare being offered?

“God has recognized the mutual promises, *and has mysteriously joined the two people together.*” (Doctrine Working Group 2014, 17)

Did marriage become a sacrament after all then? What does this mean?

We are still waiting for what Robert Bos called for,

“A resource document on the theology of marriage which thoughtfully and fairly considered the issues, rather than seeking to persuade people to a particular point of view, would be well received.”(Bos 2013, 24)

Additional comments on “Views of Marriage in the UCA”

As a member of the thirteenth Assembly I remember a strong mood, especially from younger delegates, for a discussion and theology of marriage which addressed the very *wide* range of issues of sex and relationships, not simply a statement on the validity or otherwise of gay marriage. It was good to see a range of issues canvassed in the “Views of Marriage” paper. However, the “context” section (Bos 2013, 1) only mentions gay marriage, and not *de facto* relationships or serial monogamy. This makes me worry that through this process we will return to the mistakes of earlier Assemblies, and allow a potentially fruitful discussion of “right relationships” devolve into a debate about gay relationships. Again.

A built in limitation of the process which Assembly set up is apparent in the list of special interest groups which the Assembly particularly wanted to consult with,

“UAICC National Committee, synods, Chairpersons of National Conferences, presbyteries, UAICC Regions, Uniting Network, The Assembly of Confessing Congregations, congregations, agencies and institutions of the Uniting Church...” (Resolution 12.31)

Whilst each of these groups will certainly have *opinions* on the matter, those opinions represent only a limited pool of data. Expert anthropologists could give us a broader summary of the ever changing nature of marriage through human history, and the diversity of its expression around the world. There are some encouraging first steps conveyed by those

³ I know not all prostitutes work out of a desperate need for money, but I’m equally sure some do.

attending the various consultations, and Robert Bos includes a helpful aside that polygamy is an example of marriage adapting to its context. Expanding on this point would be very fruitful.

However, evolution is ignored, which is a fundamental flaw as discussed in my response to the commentary above. A sole passing mention of biology relates to what I believe is a simplistic view of homosexuality as biologically determined: instantly falling back on a Genesis 1 derived idea of the good creation/fall,

“Many groups stated that, as same gender attraction was biological and/or genetic and not a choice; same gender sexual expression should not be regarded as sinful. Some see it as part of God’s good creation while others see it as an expression of the “fall.” One group noted that there is a spectrum of biology.” (Bos 2013, 21)

We have, then, a summary of what UCA members think about marriage, but no information about what sex, reproduction and marriage actually are, and have been, throughout human history and across cultures in the present. All we have are scripture, tradition, and a narrow range of experience. Where is scholarly informed reason?

It is curious that in the list of bible references, although Matt 19:5 is mentioned, the rest of the passage, where Jesus implores those who can accept the teaching not to marry, to do so, is ignored. So is Paul’s desire that people not marry if at all possible.

The ensuing discussion (3.2) does a good job of revealing the diversity of marriage and sex in the bible, concluding, “It is dishonest to say the Bible supports marriage as we understand it,” but this would be strengthened by explicitly adding that Jesus and Paul do not unambiguously support marriage at all (finally hinted at in 3.4, but worthy of fuller exploration). Our current marriage service gives no hint of this.

Bos’ paper raises some great questions about the Declaration of Intent, to which I would add the observation that although marriage may help stabilize society, we claim to be followers of the one who did anything but that! What is so good about a stable society, built as ours is on dispossession and an ongoing widening of the gap between rich and poor?

For this reason, in weddings I base my version of the Declaration of Intent on the Red Book, but don’t use it literally.

The discussion paper mentions that some were totally opposed to changing our view of marriage, and others were open to it but cautious of ecumenical concerns. Were none in favour of moving full steam ahead? This seems unlikely. We ordain woman, and allow divorce, which shows ecumenical concerns have not slowed us down in the past.

References

Bos, R. (2013). Views of marriage in the UCA, Uniting Church in Australia.

Doctrine Working Group (2014). 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, Uniting Church in Australia.

Radford-Ruether, R. (1995). Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics. Image of God and Gender Models: Gender Models in Judaeo Christian Tradition. K. Borresen. Minneapolis, Fortress.

Appendix: Official Response Form

Response from Individual. Rev Dr Jason John

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

None. It was old ground.

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

None. More important questions for me are, "What do we do to support couples who are sexually involved and choose not to marry: either de facto or serially monogamous?" What is a post-Darwinian Christian sexual ethic?

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

- pastorally for its members and the wider community? Remind them Jesus was emphatic that our relationship with wealth was a vitally important part of discipleship, and didn't bother to talk about homosexuality (except maybe positively- the eunuchs by birth)

- in the church's practices concerning Christian marriage? Leave it up to each minister to make a decision about whether it's appropriate to marry the couple coming to them, as we do now.

- in relation to the government and the church's role in conducting marriages? Makes no difference to me.

- in any celebration or blessing of same-gender relationships? This is just part of discussion of how to celebrate (and critique if needed) all relationships.

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

Yes. It is grounded in Genesis 1-3 not the last 250 years of discoveries about sex, gender and partnering. It emerged in a patriarchal culture, later co-opted into being part of maintaining the status quo in society, regardless of whether that society was just. Jesus disrupted society, he didn't bless institutions which propped it up.

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

See my longer response. Presumes ending a marriage is a failure, not pressuring people into marriage in the first place, by saying marriage is the only basis for a sexual relationship.

6. Are there particular questions or insights into these issues that you want to share from your ethno-cultural community? I'd like to see the scientific community included.