

# Uniting Church 41<sup>st</sup> Anniversary

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 24 June 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Bruce Irvine, Suzanne Leal  
and Sheila Walkerden

Psalm 133; Mark 3: 35-41

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

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## Introduction – Margaret Mayman

Today, our time of reflection is going to be focused on three of the issues that will be addressed at the church's Assembly when it meets in Melbourne from the 8th to the 14th July. I'm not going to assume that everybody knows what the Assembly is and does – and how the Uniting Church works, so I just want to tell you briefly that the Uniting Church is an "inter-conciliar" church. So we have a number of different Councils. When I first came into the Uniting Church, I assumed that they were a hierarchy – that there would be the Assembly at the top, and then the Synod and then the Presbytery and then the Church Council of each Congregation.

But, when I did Uniting Church Studies, I learned that they are councils that are all on the same level – and that they have different roles and tasks and responsibilities. So, the Assembly of the church, which meets every three years, has particular things that it pays attention to in the national life of our church.

There are quite a number of them, but they include things like worship, like the book *Uniting in Worship 2*, that sometimes elements of our liturgy, particularly our Communion liturgy, are drawn from. Also matters of doctrine, relating to things that we believe as Uniting Church people at the realm of the Assembly's deliberation.

Also the policy ideas that we might have about how we participate in public life. So some of the issues that we're going to hear about this morning from the three people who are going to reflect on them relates to how the church is in relation to the world. Assembly is also where our relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress takes place at the highest – not that we are hierarchical – but at that national level of our church.

There are other issues, but today we're going to hear about Marriage and Same Gender relationships, the response to the Royal Commission on Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the Recognition of Sovereignty.

But there are other issues that will be facing the church in terms of our public life, including care of creation and considerations about domestic violence and voluntary assisted dying. So, there's a very interesting forum for engagement with ethical issues.

Today we are grateful for three Pitt St people who have read the papers of the Assembly relating to their topic who are going to share a little bit about what they've reflected on – and then lead us in a brief prayer – to which we have a response and then a candle will be lit for each one of those.

## Marriage and same gender relationships – Bruce Irvine

The report on Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships acknowledges that:

*There is a diversity of opinion in our Uniting Church community on the issue of marriage and same-gender marriage. As the Church, we have always tried to maintain a respectful conversation on this subject between the Councils and members of our Church.*

It also states that:

- *The diverse understandings identified are all able to be justified biblically and theologically – even though they are mutually exclusive interpretations;*

and optimistically reassures us that

- *That diversity of understanding is itself explicable in biblical and theological terms, and can be recognised as a gift and a sign of health in the Body of Christ;*

Then, in a colossal understatement, the report says that: *the Uniting Church has for some time been conducting its own discernment on marriage.*

I recall heated discussion in the Central West Presbytery as far back as 1981.

The 1997 Assembly addressed a major report on human sexuality, which had been the subject of wide ranging consultation across the church. I remember it well because I happened to chair the Business Committee that year and we were the ones who designed and “managed” the process.

That Assembly reformed official church policy on issues such as divorce and remarriage and adolescent sexuality and took some very limited steps towards inclusion of LGBTIQ people.

But after 6 days, we were unable to make a decision on 2 issues – marriage equality within the church - and LGBTIQ leadership in the church. 21 years later, neither has yet been satisfactorily resolved.

The report offers four options to the Assembly for consideration:

**Option 1** is the status quo:

*To offer the rites of marriage only to opposite-gender relationships, while allowing Ministers and Uniting Church authorised celebrants to conduct, or to decline to conduct, “blessings” of same-gender relationships as long as such ceremonies “do not resemble marriage” without any officially approved rites for such services.*

That’s the position now.

**Option 2** is almost the same, except that it proposes to institute *officially approved rites for “blessings” of same-gender, covenantal relationships.*

It is not clear to me if this means only the official rites could be used – or whether other rites could be used. That could be an issue for some people.

**Option 3** is the doozy - it *offers the rites of marriage only to opposite-gender relationships, and forbids Ministers and Uniting Church authorised celebrants to conduct blessings of same-gender covenantal relationships.*

This, of course, is a step backwards which ignores the new civil laws - and the will of a majority of Australians.

But **Option 4** *offers the rites of marriage to opposite-gender and same-gender couples, while allowing Ministers and Uniting Church Celebrants freedom of conscience to perform or to decline to perform same gender marriages.*

As a straight white male with rainbow connections, Option 4 seemed to me to be a good step forward. How could anyone complain that their religious freedom is infringed if each Minister or Celebrant has the freedom of conscience to conduct - or not to conduct - such a marriage? Religious freedom, I think, is only infringed when one person or group is allowed to deny the freedom of another.

Then I discovered that some LGBTIQ members of the Assembly are proposing an amendment to the definition of marriage in option 4. You will recall that the Civil Marriage Equality legislation speaks of “two people”. Yet Option 4 mentions only *opposite-gender and same-gender couples!*

I had idly wondered why this quaint language is used (and I still don't know why). But I hadn't bothered to question it. The amendment identifies that "Same gender" marriage might exclude some Trans and intersex people from marriage. Why would we want to do that! I'm all for maximum inclusion - and language consistent with the civil legislation.

There is another proposal going before the Assembly that is of interest to this congregation – though it's not strictly about marriage. It requests the Assembly to begin a process towards a National Apology to LGBTIQ Australians for the Church's role in the silence, rejection, discrimination and stereotyping of LGBTIQ people.

The proposal points out that there is more to LGBTIQ equality than just marriage - and asks questions such as:

- Why are the LGBTIQ suicide rates not going down? How is the Church positively welcoming rainbow families?

In my prayer, I borrow the words of the Chairperson of the Assembly Working Group (in the report):

**Let us pray:** Gracious God, my hope and prayer is that the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Uniting Church will find respectful ways to not only accept our diversity, but to celebrate it! That the Assembly will risk finding a way to grant religious freedom across that diversity by finally resolving the issue of marriage equality.

***Through the experience of God's abundant grace, may liberating hope be found in our church and in the world.***

## Response to the Royal Commission – Suzanne Leal

The sexual abuse of children is a shocking thing. That it has happened within the umbrella of the church, including the Uniting Church, is distressing and difficult to comprehend. For those here today who have been abused as children, or for those of us who have relatives, friends, colleagues who have been, I'm so sorry for what was done and for the damage it has caused.

The question for all of us is this: how are we to respond to the overwhelming revelations of child abuse?

A National Task Group was set up by the Uniting Church to respond to findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and in particular those findings that relate to the Uniting Church.

The Royal Commission was established in 2013 and has recently released its final report, which contains 17 volumes of material, including a list of 409 recommendations.

The Royal Commission sought to work out how children can be better protected against sexual abuse, how child sexual abuse can be better reported and investigated and what might be done to address the impact of abuse by means of redress and by referral to the relevant bodies, whether this be for investigation or prosecution or support services.

There were six commissioners appointed to head the Royal Commission. They held public hearings that were televised, private sessions to talk to people who had been sexually abused; they considered case studies, they commissioned research and they held round table discussions with relevant experts. 8013 private sessions were held, 57 public hearings, 2575 matters were referred to the police; and a total of 409 recommendations were made.

The Uniting Church was involved in 5 public hearings. These dealt with five discrete areas.

Firstly, allegations of sexual abuse perpetrated on former students of the Uniting Church school, Knox Grammar, by former teachers of the school;

Secondly, allegations of child abuse occurring in out-of-home care centres run by Wesley Mission.

Thirdly, allegations of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour of children in schools, including the Uniting Church's Shalom Christian College.

Fourthly, civil litigation and redress to victims of sexual abuse; and

Fifthly, an institutional review of the Uniting Church itself.

In its work with the Royal Commission the Uniting Church had been guided by the belief that God has given us the gift of the Spirit to '*constantly correct that which is erroneous*' in our life. It has also been mindful of the teaching of the Apostle Paul that we should be guided by '*whatever is beautiful, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable.*'

There have been 430 allegations of child sexual abuse made to the Uniting Church. Of these, 102 have resulted in claims by people seeking some form of redress. Of those 102 people, 83 received a settlement. The total amount of settlement monies paid was over \$12 million. Overall, the highest payment made was over two million dollars; the lowest payment made was \$110; and the average payment made was a little under \$150,000.

There is a Task Force that has been set up to deal with this within the Uniting Church. This Task Force has highlighted how important it is for people who have been abused to be given access to their historical records. It has also emphasized the need for consistency in the way information about child abuse is compiled, including the way allegations are recorded and reported and acted on. It recommends aligning policy, processes and definitions in relation to child safety and is looking carefully at the education and training provided by the Uniting Church for those people working with children in the church.

As a result of the Royal Commission, the Uniting Church regulations have been changed to state that the recognition of a Minister shall be automatically withdrawn if the Minister is convicted of a criminal offence of a sexual nature in relation to a minor. The Task Force has also recommended the establishment of a set of professional standards for Ministers of the Uniting Church as well as the creation of a Safe Church Unit.

One of the considerations of the Royal Commission was how to make amends for what happened. To do this, the Royal Commission has recommended the creation of a National Redress Scheme to acknowledge the hurt caused to survivors of child sexual abuse and to offer support in the future. The National Redress Scheme would be co-ordinated by the Commonwealth Government but funded by the institution in which the abuse occurred. In support of this recommendation, the Uniting Church has implemented an Interim Redress Framework.

In its report to be put before the Assembly, the Uniting Church Task Force describes the challenges faced by the Uniting Church in the wake of the findings of the Royal Commission:

As a community with the unique character of being shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ, called to tell the story of Jesus Christ, we are currently faced with a challenge. How do we tell that story if people cannot hear or will not hear, because they cannot trust?

The challenge now for the Uniting Church is to identify how we might express our commitment to being a safe place for all and how we might structure our ongoing response to ensure this work is continually grounded in our life.

It's a difficult time and a difficult subject! My thoughts and prayers are with the Task Force as they continue their difficult, valuable and absolutely fundamental work.

**Let us pray:** in a world where life is not easy, where there has been distress and trauma and horror that will always fade, may our church be a safe place for all. May it be a place for you, God; a place of love, a place of hope. And may those chosen to make decisions on our behalf be given the energy, the insight, the power and the love of the Spirit.

***Through the experience of God's abundant grace, may liberating hope be found in our church and in the world.***

## Recognition of Sovereignty – Sheila Walkerden

My words are about the church's response to the First Peoples of this country and the recognition of Sovereignty, which is what they are asking for.

To the First Peoples, the word 'sovereign' is a spiritual term. In the way they use it, it means '*traditional owners and custodians*'.

According to the 2017 Uluru Statement of the Heart, it is seen as a way of addressing what they call '*the torment of our powerlessness*', in the face of the removal of their children, the incarceration of their youth, and the massacres, some of which happened in the lifetime of some of us present.

I am not qualified to talk about political and legal implications of sovereignty, but I can speak on human and environmental matters. Chris Budden has written a discussion guide "Sovereignty and Treaty" for Uniting Church members, and it is available on the internet.

In my twenty-five years as a bush regenerator I used to ponder, as I worked away at the weeds, on what the bush was like before European settlement. The first notion was that the land looked after itself.

Wrong, so wrong. Then came the idea that the First Peoples managed the land. Now there is much clear evidence that the whole continent, every part of it, was deeply known to, and managed by, the First Peoples - based on their 60 000, and counting, years of occupation.

Of historians from both the Second Peoples and the First Peoples, two I have relied on are Bill Gammage and Bruce Pascoe.

They have both made outstanding contributions to the flood of new scholarship on our shared history. Early settlers and explorers wonderingly described the land they saw as "*the Biggest Estate on Earth*". This is the title of Gammage's book, meaning 'estate' in terms of the great landholders of England, whose land was designed and tended, fine parks with scattered trees, stands of timber, and lakes and streams full of life. Gammage shows how this was lost, sometimes within twenty years of European settlement. We know now that it was because of our land use, the change in fire regime, and the hard-hoofed animals, the sheep and cattle and horses that came with us.

Bruce Pascoe is an indigenous historian, whose sources are the journals of notable explorers and surveyors, and he quotes them verbatim. He shows that the culture of the First Peoples has been ignored and misread. He writes in his book "Dark Emu" about their careful use of fire to maintain fresh pick ie young new grass, for game: the grains and tubers they cultivated, harvested, stored and baked; the villages – yes, villages - and dams and wells they constructed; the highly developed aquaculture practised in rivers and ocean. Abundance was normal.

Women and men contributed equally, and women and men, all, were respected. Conflict was carefully controlled. Wildfires did not happen. Country and Spirit were central, because Country and Spirit were inseparable. Their religion, the Dreamtime, by oral history, songlines and art, was an imperative to care for the land, the whole continent. People belonged to the land.

We have made progress. I grew up being taught at primary school "*Oh, they're dying out, isn't it a pity*" with the racist subtext barely concealed.

But the First Peoples have proved themselves again and again, to be resilient, resourceful, peaceful, with enormous inherited knowledge, and even more, showing great generosity to us, the Second People.

And they have never, never ceded the land. There has been no Treaty. No consent. No compensation.

This last week, Victoria has moved towards a treaty. We have been so slow, because of the relics of colonialism, feudalism, and religious, cultural and racial biases. These have no place in our relationship with the First Peoples.

We have an opportunity now for a further step in the healing process.

Assembly will have before it, a resolution proposed by outgoing President, Stuart MacMillan and seconded by General Secretary Colleen Geyer, in these terms:

*'To affirm that the First Peoples of Australia, the Aboriginal and Islander people, are sovereign people in this land.'*

Recognition of this is lacking in the Uniting Church Constitution, the Preamble to our Constitution, and our various apologies.

It is a matter of justice that this should be resolved.

And in acknowledging and affirming this, that the First Peoples are sovereign (that is, traditional owners and custodians of the land) the Fifteenth Assembly can give moral leadership to our nation.

**Let us pray:** loving God, we give thanks for the beauty and the bounty of the land in which we live. We thank you for your abundant grace that makes us yearn for justice – and feel grief at injustice. We pray for a fair and truthful relationship among all Australians – and for the First Peoples to have a recognised and rightful place in this land.

***Through the experience of God's abundant grace, may liberating hope be found in our church and in the world.***