

Another Step Forward - Our journey to inclusive marriage in the UCA

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 3 March 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Hannah Reeve

Epiphany 8C – Mardi Gras

1 Corinthians 12; 1-11; John 2: 1-11;

Song: “*I will choose to love*” by Ray Boltz, sung by Rachel Collis

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SkPzRMsBfA>

Good Morning Pitt St. Thank you for inviting me to come and speak to you on this lovely Sunday morning.

As Margaret said, my name is Hannah Reeve. I am a member at North Ryde Uniting Church in northern Sydney. I’ve been part of the Uniting Church my whole life and I’m a minister’s kid. I am also one of the National Co-convenors of Uniting Network, our Uniting Church LGBTIQ and ally network and was a member of the UCA National Assembly in July last year. Today, at the end of this Mardi Gras season, I’m going to share a reflection on the Uniting Church’s journey towards marriage equality from my unique perspective.

Seven months ago, I stood up in front 300 people at the Assembly down in Melbourne to put a case for why the Uniting Church should extend its definition of marriage to include all couples. Myself and Rev Ben Gilmour, with the help of many members of Uniting Network wrote a proposal to ensure that inclusive marriage was on the agenda.

To me, advocating for an inclusive definition of marriage in our civil law and within our church was something I had to do. It was personal. My partner Cate and I wanted to get married and knew it was the right thing to do. I had never dreamed of the big white wedding as a kid but I had valued marriage as this important covenant between two people and God, as a commitment and as one of life’s milestones.

This morning we heard the reading about the Wedding at Cana from John’s gospel. Jesus, as a respected rabbi, and some of his disciples get invited to this wedding as an important gathering of the community - that could continue for multiple days. Jesus, in the end, saves the party from disaster and an early end when the wine runs out.

This to me, this wedding, 2000 years ago, as a central ritual in the society of the time and a community celebration, reminds me that, even as marriage has changed over time, from an inter-family arrangement to a commitment of two equal and loving partners, there’s a special place for it in our culture and within our church community – and that has not changed. Marriage equality, for my relationship and for others like mine was something worth fighting for.

The Uniting Church has been discussing sexuality for decades and many of you here would know that history better than I do. I have been a member of the last four Assemblies so have been part of some of those discussions over the years. At the 2012 Assembly, a decision was made to specifically talk about marriage. And then, in 2015, Assembly re-focused this consultation and resourcing onto 'same-gender' marriage (was the term used) with the hope of bring proposals back to the 2018 meeting.

Consultation continued (which is very Uniting Church) and then in March last year the final proposal came out from the Assembly and there was a final round of consultation. This proposal was talked about in presbyteries – and some of you may have been involved in that in your presbytery or here in your congregation. This proposal was similar to the one that Ben and I had put forward and had an inclusive definition of marriage. This sparked a range of passionate responses around the church in the lead up to the Assembly.

An Assembly is an intense setting. You meet for 7 days straight with mostly 9am until 9pm. You worship and participate in bible studies. You meet in the afternoon in smaller groups to discuss the key agenda items and give feedback. Then a facilitation group collects and synthesises all the responses and helps shape new proposals. It is a business meeting but there is a sense of community and of discernment.

It was the 2nd night of that meeting that I had my chance to present our proposal along with all seven proposals on marriage. It was important to have a proposal by two 'out' Assembly members and to remind everyone present that this was not some abstract issue that we were discussing but about real people in our church, in our families and people who were in that meeting.

I want to share a couple of words that I said on that night:

There's a space now for leadership. There's a space to use our voice as a church to call out to those who have been hurt and marginalised in our name. To be radical and inclusive, as Jesus was. To welcome into the same place of worship those with whom we don't necessarily agree.

On a personal note, there are many people in congregations waiting and praying during these discussions. A couple, who would rather be married by a minister than by a civil celebrant, in a church rather than a park or function centre. Or a minister, who cares for a couple and supports the couple and would choose to marry them if they could. Or a child, who wonders if their parents will get married one day.

After the feedback session the following day, it was clear there was no consensus by Assembly members on any of the proposals and more discussion was needed. And from that, the 'two-definition' proposal came out of the processes. And although initially I was frustrated that we couldn't keep pushing for full inclusive, I knew some sort of compromise was the only way forward.

Hours of debate, tears, worry, not enough sleep, continued for four more days until finally – after a series of votes – the proposal was passed and the Uniting Church finally had a definition of marriage that was between two people.

My wife, Cate, and I had planned a wedding for September last year. We'd made the decision it was the right time for us, no matter what the church said. We'd had a relationship blessing in 2011 at Gordon Uniting, which was the congregation we met at as youth leaders (on the North Shore of Sydney). We were blessed to be in a congregation where our relationship was supported, where we had continued to be in leadership for many years.

So, when this proposal passed, we were overjoyed that we could have our Uniting Church wedding and that my Mum, who is a Uniting Church Minister, could perform it and it could happen in the church where we met. That Friday evening, on 21st September, I walked down the aisle, hand-in-hand with Cate, with tears of joy that this our special day, our 'real' wedding, could finally take place. It was the moment I had been working for and it was amazing.

Unfortunately, in October, things got messy again when correspondence went out to Uniting Church ministers that a mechanism to halt the Assembly decision (Clause 39b, you might have heard that term) could be invoked if more than 50% of the Synods (State bodies) or 50% of our regional bodies, our Presbyteries had voted to do this. This had already occurred, by that stage, in a few presbyteries and ministers were being told to be prepared for this scenario.

That period was an incredibly hard time for many. It's a different feeling to potentially have a right taken away than not having it at all. There had been a cumulative impact from the postal survey, pre-Assembly discussions, Assembly itself - and now this new hurdle - and many were feeling tired and broken.

I had friends with weddings planned in November and December living in a sense of uncertainty and there was nothing I could do except support them and try to get as much information out of Assembly leaders as I could through my role in Uniting Network. I felt a bit guilty - how did we get our wedding at the right time - when others might have the hard choice to use a civil celebrant or postponing their ceremony until after more consultation in the church.

When only one more Synod was needed to get that stop across the line, it was essentially down to South Australia. They met in November and didn't make a decision and then met again in January. This waiting over the Christmas period weighed on many but at least some weddings could continue happening in that time. When South Australia decided not to invoke this clause, there was a great sense of relief. Our inclusive definition would stand. I could breathe again.

So, why put yourself through this, some may ask. Why go to numerous church meetings and invest time and emotional energy into things when there is a likelihood of failure and a definite personal cost?

Well our reading from 1 Corinthians today reminds us that the spirit of God works within all of us. We are all affirmed and we are all gifted in some way. We must listen to the call of God working in our lives.

For me, I see the spirit of God working within me in the journey I took for those six years, through various meetings and through the church processes, giving me strength and resilience to keep advocating for change. And I believe it was the spirit working in that Assembly meeting in July last year that helped us discern the decision we made.

We all have God working in us, gifts to bring and a part to play. We all are passionate about something and can speak up for justice or support those who do. There's normally a cost to pay and there will be hurdles along the way. But it's worth it. I have great respect for a lot of you here at Pitt St who have led the way in terms of inclusion and continue to speak out against injustice. I thank you for your advocacy.

Last night, the Uniting Network contingent declared that 'Love Wins' and marched in Mardi Gras under the theme 'Fearless, Fabulous Weddings'. Following our marriage decision, we have the opportunity, as the Uniting Church, to connect with the community and show them that we are all welcome and that we are all loved by God - in a way most other denominations can't. We can be the voice of hope when many other Christian voices are voices of judgement and shame.

The Uniting Church took another step forward. It might not be full inclusion and there still might be more to go. But it is another step. May we continue stepping forward together.