

## Marriage laws in Australia

The Federal Parliament determined on Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> December 2017 that marriage under the law of Australia would be ‘the union of 2 people to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life’ (a change from the previous law that said “a man and a woman”).

The Uniting Church’s present understanding of marriage is that it is between a man and a woman. This means that at present Uniting Church Ministers cannot marry people, and will not be able to do so unless the church also changes its definition of marriage.

The Assembly will have to decide how the Uniting Church should respond to this change. Congress National Executive is suggesting that the best thing that National Conference can do is help people understand the issues and options. There will be a panel discussion during Conference where questions can be asked and the options discussed. Congress does not need to have a position, but can encourage all members to have their own view and to speak at Assembly if they are there.

Given the change that the Government has made to the law, here are some options that the church might need/want to consider:

- i. The church could maintain its present understanding that marriage can only occur between a man and a woman, and forbid ministers to conduct blessings of same-gender covenantal relationships.
- ii. The church could maintain its present understanding that marriage can only occur between a man and a woman, while allowing Ministers to conduct ‘blessings’ of same-gender relationships without approving a blessing service.
- iii. The third option would be the same as the second, except that the church could provide officially approved blessing services that affirm faithful, life-long, same-gendered relationships.
- iv. The church could change its definition of marriage and offer the rites of marriage to opposite-gender and same-gender couples while allowing ministers and authorised celebrants freedom of conscience to perform marriages or to refuse to perform marriages.
- v. The church could decide that Ministers will no longer act as celebrants for marriage, but will offer blessings to couples after they have had a legal ceremony (as happens in many European countries). The church would then need to decide about the blessing of same gender couples as in ii and iii above.

There may be other options which you can think of. The issue is: if you had a voice at Assembly, what would you say the church should do?

**Chris Budden (Interim National Coordinator, 18 December 2017)**