

## **Same Gender Relationships and the Church.**

**Some thoughts by Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Nolan, presented for consideration by members of the Bremer Brisbane Presbytery.**

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Some points on same gender relationships:

1. Much contemporary Biblical scholarship reminds us that the passages referred to most often in Scripture which appear to condemn homosexuality are either referring to heterosexuals changing their partner for one of the opposite sex in order to dominate or express power over them, or are general statements asking Hebrew people not to engage in such behaviour which is connected to 'pagan' or Gentile cultures.
2. Sin is anything that separates us from God but has been defeated by Christ's death and resurrection so that humans who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and turn to Christ have become God's friends, are reconciled to God, and have the responsibility of sharing this good news with others (2 Corinthians 5: 16-20). All humans are sinners and all broken promises to God, all negative behaviour towards other humans which are not showing God's love, are equally condemned under the term 'sin'.
3. Claims that same gender relationships are more 'sin' than opposite gender relationships would depend on the way that love and power are shown in the behaviour between the couples. Are they showing God's love and grace? Are they serving others or satisfying their own selfish desires at the expense of the other?
4. Many opposite gender couple (male-female) relationships would not acknowledge God, nor consider themselves under the critique of 'sin', yet their behaviours warrant condemnation as abusive, exploitative, and lacking in genuine love.
5. Biological research has failed to find a cause of homosexuality but recognizes that people of this sexual orientation claim they knew they were different from early age and despite great efforts cannot change the attraction they feel.
6. Acknowledging that homosexual orientation is less associated with paedophilia than heterosexual orientation.
7. Acknowledging that homosexual orientation is different from and not connected with other sexual deviancies (animals, dead bodies etc) but is just opposite to heterosexual orientation and is much less common than it.
8. Acknowledging that Australian law no longer prohibits homosexual relationships and that some civil rights and economic benefits already are given to same gender couples.

The issues at hand seem to be:

a) Can these couples be allowed to be recognised by a public ceremony announcing their commitment to each other?

and b) Can that ceremony and relationship be called a 'marriage'?

and c) Can the Uniting Church conduct worship services which include such a ceremony?

And d) Can the Uniting Church continue to encourage and support such couples in their relationship as it does other married couples?

I think a) is already happening in civil ceremonies here in Australia and in some other countries this ceremony and relationship is called 'marriage'. We know in Australia currently it cannot be called 'marriage' because of the gender (male-female) inserted into the Marriage Act during John Howard's time as Prime Minister.

If the sexual orientation of a person is innate and cannot be changed by an act of will or a miracle from God (despite much prayer and fasting for so many of these people) then the question does become one of the justice and equality of people under the law and in God's sight.

While the term 'marriage' is often empty of the commitment, love, trust, self-sacrificing, forgiveness, compassion, nurture, and sense of covenant under God's sovereign authority which we as Christians would expect of couples, we still have it used in our society to refer to married people and we respect their relationship. Some would argue for a new term for what we expect of a Christian marriage. Some may ask same gender couples to create a new term for their relationship. The decision on what term will be used is probably out of our hands and subject to government control. Our attitude towards the couples of both orientations is the real concern for the Uniting Church.

If same gender couples are recognised by the government legislation, our willingness to recognise them as people created by God who desire to make a commitment to each other under God's direction and sovereign authority can be our witness to God's grace and inscrutable creativity. If their commitment is genuine and their willingness to exhibit the same qualities in their relationship as we expect of heterosexual couples (see above) then commending them to God's care and authority is a natural expression of our ministry to all people. The blessing we offer is actually asking for God's care to be with them. The ongoing encouraging of their commitment and faithfulness to each other and their work within the community as a stable unit of society is just as important as for heterosexual couples.

Whether we call this relationship marriage or another term, is not as important as the commitment of the UCA to offer God's care and authority to people who genuinely ask for this blessing. The few same gender couples I know are deeply Christian people who have tried to be heterosexual and cannot change. Their relationship is similar to opposite gender couples in their loving commitment and care. As they so deeply desire this formal blessing and public ceremony, I wish we could offer it as UCA clergy. Many other same gender couples want nothing to do with a church or a sense of God's authority in their relationship, just like many opposite gender couples.

As a UCA minister, I have to decide whether the couple I 'marry' in a public service are willing to live in a Christian marriage and go through a Uniting Church wedding service. So it would be with a same gender couple. I would want to continue to encourage and support them in their commitment to each other simply because they are created in God's image and are part of God's family for which I am committed to care.