

A Very Personal Issue

June was Pride Month in Australia and in other countries. Pride Month, celebrated annually in June, is a time to commemorate the LGBTQIA+ community and celebrate their contributions to society. LGBTQIA+ is an acronym used to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and aromantic individuals, as well as other identities that don't fit neatly into these categories. The "+", sometimes including "A" and, "I", and "P" as well, and signifies that the acronym is inclusive of a wider range of diverse gender and sexual identities. Pride Month is a month-long observance that aims to raise awareness of LGBTQIA+ history, promote inclusion, and celebrate diversity. It also acknowledges the ongoing fight for equality and the work that still needs to be done to ensure LGBTQIA+ people are treated with dignity and respect.

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For many people in the Church this is a very difficult issue. People's acceptance of or rejection of such people is rooted in both cultural and Biblical understandings. More than any moral issue, this one seems to be highly emotionally charged and can be divisive when congregations have addressed it. This issue has seen congregations split and has seen people and congregations leave the Uniting Church over both the Uniting Church's understanding of homosexuality and ordination and marriage. Yet, it is not only the Uniting Church which has seen division as a result of these issues. This year in a landmark decision, Canberra Baptist Church and Hamilton Baptist Church in Australia were expelled from the NSW/ACT Baptist Association for affirming LGBTQ+ people and supporting same-sex marriage, marking the first time in the association's history.

The Uniting Church Assembly, the gathering of representatives of the Church such as you and me, has endorsed a proposal that seeks to affirm, welcome and honour the life and faith of transgender, intersex and gender diverse people in our Church. As part of the proposal, the 17th Assembly in 2024 saw members agree "to recognise that transgender, gender diverse and intersex people are beloved by God and full members of the Body of Christ in baptism." The Assembly resolved to "invite congregations and councils of the Church to welcome and honour transgender, gender diverse, and intersex people, and the gifts and skills they bring to all aspects of the Church's life, including worship, leadership, and social justice advocacy."

Yet, for many people in the Church, the issue of LGBTQI+ is an issue of not only sin, but unrepentant sin. Sin is a falling short of the glory of God, it is literally a missing the mark. However, sin has been strongly linked to morality, especially sexual morality in the history and culture of the Church. One hand there is the notion of grace and Jesus² being a friend to sinners and relating to them, and even not condemning them, such as in the case of the woman caught in adultery, but also not condoning it. Yet on the other hand, people rightly also consider the teachings of Paul, especially in such passages as "Expel the immoral brother (or sister)" in 1 Corinthians 5. It is a difficult issue.

An example of how divided we can be on this kind of issue is the Uniting Church's stance on marriage. We hold two different understandings of marriage because the Church is divided on the issue of same-sex or gender marriage. The Uniting Church holds that on one hand that marriage is between a man and a woman, and on the other hand that marriage is between two people [regardless of gender]. What is amazing is that the Assembly honoured the fact that we are divided in our understanding of the moral issue, but we hold to unity and accept that division and allow us to be one in Christ despite our marked difference.

But in all this, some will ask how can something like homosexuality not be considered a sin when the Bible clearly lists it as a sexual sin? One argument is that the word "homosexual" never appeared in any Bible before 1946. It was introduced in the Revised Standard Version (RSV), mistranslating two Greek words: "arsenokoitai" and "malakoi." The word "homosexual" was invented in the late 1860s, with its first known use attributed to Austrian-Hungarian author Karl-Maria Kertbeny in 1868. He used it in a letter, and it first appeared in print in a German work in 1869, often contrasted with heterosexual. Most Biblical scholars now agree these don't mean 'gay people'. They likely referred to abusive or exploitative relationships, not consensual same-sex love. The Greek word ἀρσενικοῖται [arsenokoitai] is a compound term meaning "men who sleep with men" or "men who bed with other men". It's formed from ἄρσεν [arsen], meaning "male," and κοίτη [koite] meaning "bed" or "lying". This term is used in the New Testament, specifically in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Many scholars understand this to be about a particular kind of exploitative relationship in Roman society. However, the fact remains that it can also rightly be said that the Bible condemns sexual sin.

Many Biblical scholars do not see-interpret what the Bible seems to be dealing with in relation to same-sex sexual relationships as relating to people of the same gender loving each other, and even engaging in sexual relationships, but it being about a Roman practice where wealthy men and women undertook non-consensual or sexual relationships with slaves who had no power to refuse. This they would point to underlying Paul's comments in Romans 1: 26-27 where he writes, "Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error." Here the issue seems to be about lust, not about loving relationship.

Then there is the Old Testament denunciation of men lying with men in such passages as Leviticus 20: 13 which states, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them." Of course, it can be argued that this is not so much about homosexual sex than about men sinning in their duty to procreate. Men were ~~in~~ ancient Biblical understanding men were the ones who had the 'seed' and women were the soil. Hence, we have terms like barren and infertile, because ancient people did not have a correct understanding of human reproduction. The wasting of one's seed was sinful as in the case of Onan. avoided impregnating Tamar by performing coitus interruptus (withdrawing before ejaculation), as he did not want to produce an heir for his brother. This act displeased God, who subsequently struck Onan dead in Genesis 38.

~~In regard to~~ Regarding sin, we need to note that firstly, if we are to take passages such as Leviticus 20: 13 literally, then logically anyone who commits adultery must be placed under the curse of death, which according to Jesus includes divorced people, along with a list of other sexual sins. Even those who condemn sexual sin don't hold with death penalty for them. So, we hold double standards around a range of what the Bible lists as sexual sins and how they should be responded to, and some seem more emotionally charged than others. Secondly, if we are to apply consistency to sin in general, especially unrepentant sin, then we need to get ready to condemn wealth and the holding of it, given that Jesus condemned holding wealth outright in his teaching in several instances and in several parables, and the early Church clearly lived this teaching literally in the sharing of wealth, even to the

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extreme case of Ananias and Saphira who died for keeping wealth [Acts 5:1-11]. We who have two coats should share with those who don't have a coat. As in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, which further denotes the nature of sin and its penalty, it's not so much about sexual sin, but a failure to love through sharing material wealth and practical care for those in need.

There is more that can be said and discussed around the complex and difficult issue of sin and how we should respond to it. Of course, for me, this is a very personal issue. I have two daughters who identify as LGBTQIA+ or queer, and I have many LGBTQIA+ friends and colleagues whom I love and respect, many of whom I would consider better people in terms of their character and faith than myself. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, but all are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus, is what Paul also writes [Romans 3: 23-24] Similarly he writes, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them." [2 Corinthians 5:18-19] For me, I take Jesus very literally when he says, "Judge not lest you be judged" [Matthew 7:1-5; Luke 6:37-42] I have a clear bias in this where I have changed from one stance to another in my life and faith and discipleship.

In the end we each have to do our own work to understand the issues which face us and work out how the Bible guides us in our response. This is usually not as easy as it seems. It can be easy to take a simple stance, but most situations are rarely simple. Pride month is something I support personally, but it is not my place to tell you what to think or believe. Similarly, in respect to marriage of people, I will marry any couple who come to me, be they previously divorced or of the same-gender or of different genders. This is my right within the Uniting Church regulations and guidelines. However, in the same ethos I cannot tell you as the congregation what to think or believe, or who you should accept or reject as being able to be wedded in our Church spaces. It is a journey that we each have to take, and one which we also have to engage in as a community.

As the Marriage Act of Australia and the Uniting Church position on two understandings of marriage allows for same-sex unions, we may be approached by a couple requesting that their wedding be held in our space. In the upcoming months, Church Council will be starting the process of talking about this issue, as the decision of who is married on our premises rests with our congregation.~~The Church Council will be bringing a process talking about this very issue, because as a congregation we need to have a position on who we allow to get married on our premises because the Marriage Act allows for same-sex unions and a couple may come and request that their marriage be held in our spaces.~~ My hope is that we can, like we have been able to do as a Church at the gathering of our Assembly, be able to share our thoughts and beliefs honestly and authentically, but also with grace and respect as we seek to maintain unity in our diversity.

The Uniting Church in Australia has invited congregations and councils of the Church to welcome and honour transgender, gender diverse, and intersex people, and the gifts and skills they bring to all aspects of the Church's life, including worship, leadership, and social justice advocacy. The Uniting Church also believes that sexuality itself is not a barrier to ordination or leadership in the Church. We have two understandings of marriage in response to Australian marriage legislation. We need to consider this invitation and also consider who we welcome into our space in terms of those seeking to exercise leadership or to be married. This is something that gives us much to think about and will require all the fruit of the Spirit, especially that of

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love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control, as we seek to discuss these issues together and look to see if we can come to consensus or agreement on where we stand as a community of faith and a congregation of the Body of Christ. May God bless us in this endeavour.

- Jon