

Statement to the members of the LCA on Marriage

LCA Bishop John Henderson

18 August 2017 update

Over the last few years the push to change the definition of marriage in Australian law has grown rapidly. It has gained support from businesses, political parties and lobbyists. We now commonly hear of 'marriage equality', a simple catchy term which renders all other views of marriage as 'inequality'.

This rapid shift in societal values has led to confusion among Australia's political leaders and in our parliament. In August 2017 we heard that the Australian Bureau of Statistics is to conduct a popular postal ballot, which will be followed by a parliamentary vote. This unorthodox way of proceeding is an attempt to by-pass the hurdles that have been thrown up by the confusion in the political system.

So it is understandable if Australians, and along with them the members of the Lutheran Church, are ever so slightly confused about what is going on. Coupled with that confusion are rising concerns about a lack of guarantees of religious freedom in the possible legislation, and a raft of consequences which would effectively hinder the work of the church in society, including welfare, education and public debate.

The Lutheran Church has never been alarmist. Because of our faith we can always see the hand of God at work. We have worshipped, worked, and served in Australia now for 180 years, in which time we have seen and weathered many changes. We will also weather this change, should it happen. We will increase our focus on God's grace in his Son Jesus Christ, and the promise which does not decay, spoil, or fade away.

We are, therefore, republishing our pastoral statement made to the Church in 2015 for the guidance and encouragement of members. The key points made in this statement have not changed, and our attitude to all involved with this debate must be one of love. When it comes to the popular vote, individual members of the LCA will vote according to their conscience, but the church and its pastors continue to teach that marriage is the union of a man and a woman voluntarily entered into for life. We know that our human weakness means that such marriages are not perfect, but they remain God's good design for the well-being of the human race.

Dear God, we pray for wisdom, patience, and perseverance. Help us to practice love and never to turn away from our sister or brother in need. Guide our leaders and our parliament and grant them wisdom in making laws to govern our land. Help us praise you and acknowledge all your blessings, including those of sexuality, relationship, and marriage. As our heavenly Father, bless all children that they may grow and become mature in loving and committed environments that bring out the best in them. Help us to remain faithful in our relationships and to honour the union of marriage as your good gift for partnership, sexuality and the blessings of family life. But above all, Lord, we dedicate ourselves to you that we may do your will in all things. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The 2015 Statement on Marriage follows.

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29 May 2015

On 22 May 2015 voters in the Republic of Ireland were asked to determine whether *'marriage may be contracted in accordance with law by two persons without distinction as to their sex'*. Of nearly 2 million votes cast, 62% voted 'yes'.

The success of this referendum, supported by the Irish government, has sparked a worldwide response. It is seen as the first popular vote to enact same-sex marriage, rather than a vote by elected representatives, as has already happened in New Zealand (2013), many European countries, and parts of the USA. Does this signify a turning of the popular tide in relation to the issue, and how should we respond?

A senior Vatican diplomat, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, has said, "The church must take account of this reality, but in the sense that it must strengthen its commitment to evangelisation. I think that you cannot just talk of a defeat for Christian principles, but of a defeat for humanity."

Opposition Leader, Bill Shorten, and his deputy, Tanya Plibersek, were among the first Australian politicians to respond to the Irish referendum by introducing a private members bill to Parliament. Well-known voices such as 2GB's Alan Jones have come out in support of same sex marriage. Now Prime Minister Tony Abbot seems to be preparing for a free vote in the Parliament, without the usual 'party line' restrictions. It could take place as early as August. All this seems to mean that the odds of a change in Australian marriage law have increased significantly.

In Australia, marriage is regulated by a Federal Act (1961), which defines marriage as *'the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life'*.

While in full agreement with this definition, the Lutheran Church of Australia recognises that governments have the duty and responsibility under God to make and enforce laws for the ordering of society. For Lutherans marriage is not a sacrament belonging to our salvation, but an order for the welfare of human society. If the rules of society stand in clear contradiction of the Word of God, the church is not bound by them.

An example of this freedom occurred when the LCA discussed conscientious objection to conscripted military service during the Vietnam War. It argued: *When governments wantonly subvert their God-ordained functions and act in contempt and violation of God's law, the individual Christian is bound to examine his position as a citizen and to*

let his conscience, bound by the Word of God, determine at what point and in which matters he must refuse obedience rather than to permit men to involve him in sin. Acts 5:29; Augsburg Confession XVI, 2.3.7. (Conscientious Objection to Service in War, CTICR, adopted by General Convention 1970)

So if the government were to change the law on marriage, the LCA would not be obligated to change its position on marriage. LCA pastors will not conduct same sex weddings. The legal requirement under which a religious celebrant conducts a marriage is that it be in accordance with the rites of the Church. The LCA marriage rite is clear in this regard, quoting Genesis 1:27-31, '*God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it'. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good'* and Matthew 19:4-6 '*Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female', and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no-one separate.'*

In 1978 the LCA issued a statement on 'Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage', which reads in part:

1. *God, the Creator of humankind, instituted marriage. It is part of the created social order. So society, through custom or legislation, decides when a man and a woman are in fact married (Genesis 1:27,28; 2:18-24; Matthew 19:3-9; Augsburg Confession 16 and 28; Apology 23.9).*
2. *Marriage is the union of a man and a woman. This union excludes all other people. It is publicly and voluntarily entered into for the whole of life (Matthew 19:6; 1 Corinthians 7:39).*
3. *The purpose of marriage is*
 - *to unite one man and one woman (that is, husband and wife) so that they become 'one flesh'. In this relationship the one person is the complement of the other (Matthew 19:5)*
 - *to produce children and to care for their upbringing within the framework of a family (Ephesians 6:1-4)*
 - *to provide an appropriate place and context for a man and a woman to have sexual relations (1 Corinthians 7:2,3).*

The Lutheran Church of Australia today still affirms this understanding of marriage. The Commission on Theology and Inter-Church relations is preparing a new statement on Human Sexuality, which is planned for release in July, along with a series of Bible Studies. Here is an excerpt on the topic of same sex marriage:

... Even though marriage's attendant rites and ceremonies may vary over time and from place to place, it still reaches back to its divine origins within creation. There God instituted marriage as the union between a man and a woman. While a same sex union may be based on romantic attraction, mutual affection and promises of long term commitment, it is not an estate given with creation and embedded in the fabric of society from time immemorial. Unlike the union of a man and a woman, it is not the natural arena for bringing children into the world and thereby perpetuating the human community. Theologically speaking, therefore, a same-sex union is not only contrary to God's design, but it does not have the fundamental features that give marriage its unique quality. To use the name 'marriage' for same-sex partnerships would be to use the same name for things that are fundamentally different.

The LCA will do what it can to bring its views to the attention of government and the voting public. Do not expect us, however, to be quoted much in the popular press. Most of that space will be taken up by the bigger, noisier, more favoured voices in our society.

For our part, God is placing before us the challenge of remaining faithful to him, and of showing love and compassion for all people. While we do not identify same sex unions as marriages, we know that all people seek and deserve the support of loving human relationships. We can no longer assume that those relationships will be in the form of marriage as the church knows it. This is the new reality in which we will share our faith in Christ. The Christian Church has no moral superiority to force its way onto society. To our mutual shame Christians have condoned evil under the banner of their churches, as the current Royal Commission is showing plainly to the whole world. Our only way forward is through repentance, turning back to Christ, and renewal in the power of his Spirit.

You and I live only by the grace of God's forgiveness in Christ, and that must be what we want for all whom we meet, heterosexual and homosexual, just as Christ came, not to condemn the world, but to save it. Finally, we will pray for our politicians, opinion makers, the churches, and the Australian public, as our society grapples with this most sensitive matter.