

Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa Statement on Marriage

(Adopted by the Executive Commission in 2005 and confirmed by the
General Assembly in 2006)

The Executive Commission affirms that Christian marriage is defined within the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa as an ordained covenant that exists between one man and one woman under God for life, and holds this definition to be consistent with the authoritative rule of Scripture as well as the tradition of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

The Executive Commission instructs all marriage officers affiliated with the UPCSA to remain faithful to the church's definition of marriage, and to exercise pastoral compassion and sensitivity in their dealings with all who approach the church for assistance with marriage.

The Executive Commission exhorts all members of the church to uphold the sanctity of Christian marriage, and to acknowledge its role as the proper context for the expression of sexual intimacy between a man and a woman.

Motivation

In view of the current initiative in our nation to re-define marriage through the law courts to include same-sex couples, it is imperative that our church give a clear and unequivocal signal as to the Christian definition of marriage, both for the guidance of its own members, and also that it may contribute effectively to the debate within wider society.

It should be noted that this matter, although clearly related, is also distinct from the debate surrounding sexuality and homosexuality. It concerns specifically the Christian understanding of marriage in the light of Scripture as our "final rule of faith and life", as well as of our inherited tradition arising out of the church's hermeneutic through the ages.

Both of these bear a unified resounding witness:

- Marriage arises out of the order of creation, and is defined in the creation accounts of Genesis as that which exists between a man and a woman.
- The prophetic tradition strongly reinforces this concept of marriage, and extends it to a metaphorical depiction of God and Israel (cf. Hosea, Malachi, Isaiah, Jeremiah).
- Jesus confirms God's creation of man and woman as the foundation of marriage and upholds marriage as that institution by which a "man shall leave his father and his mother and be made one with his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Matthew 19:4 ff.; Mark 10:1 ff.). This is central to the Christian view of marriage, encompassing both the physical and the spiritual realities of the marriage act as that which incorporates one man and one woman.
- Both Paul (Ephesians) and John (Revelation) allude to the church as the bride of Christ, reflecting the metaphorical line of the prophets.
- The New Testament consistently exhorts that marriage as a relationship of sexual faithfulness between a man and a woman be held in honour and that it be undefiled (cf. Hebrews 13:4; 1 Corinthians 7: 1-5)
- Whilst not exclusively so, marriage is linked to the procreation and nurture of children in several Biblical passages (Cf. Genesis 1:28, 4:1; Ephesians 6:1; Colossians 3:20-21).
- This definition has held sway in the church through the ages, as is evidenced in the writings of the Church Fathers (Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Jerome et.al.) and in marriage service orders of different denominations and eras (cf. the Sarum Liturgy, the Latin Rite, the 1549 Prayer Book right through to our own- remarkably consistent).

The conclusion inescapably to be drawn from this witness is that, according to the Christian understanding, marriage is:

- Ordained by God;
- Covenantal in nature;
- An exclusive relationship involving one man and one woman.

The Church has been remarkably consistent in this definition, across the denominations and across the ages, in spite of other serious differences and disputes. This should inform us. It is fallacious to say that our current time is unique and different to all the contexts that have gone before us. Homosexuality has been a reality in all of them, condoned in some of them, but this has never led the Church to review its definition of marriage.

We would do well to acknowledge that it is not only the same sex agenda that threatens the institution of marriage in our society. Adultery and co-habitation are far

more pervasive if not as dramatic. These too require the attention of the church in its representation of grace and truth.

The intention of this motion is to uphold the Christian definition of marriage, not to provide a basis within the church for the exclusion and/or persecution of those who may pursue certain sexual practices, gay or otherwise. These practices must be addressed through the One who is "full of grace and truth".

It should be noted that our government has given the assurance that, notwithstanding any change to the definition of marriage on the part of the state, marriage officers will not be compelled to act against their consciences or the principles of their religious bodies. Alarmist reactions to this issue should thus be avoided. Nevertheless our church's stance must be firm, clear and unequivocal, both for the guidance of its officials and members, and also that it may stand alongside fellow churches in faithfully representing to our lawmakers the Christian view, and that which we believe God requires of us as a nation.