

Marriage

A United Church of Canada Understanding



The United Church of Canada, 2005

Executive Summary

When the 38th General Council—the highest decision-making body of The United Church of Canada—decided in 2003 to ask the federal government to recognize same-sex marriage in the marriage legislation, it was acting on a lengthy history of earlier actions. The purpose of this paper is to describe the United Church’s historical and theological understanding of marriage. Our theological understanding of marriage is informed by

- *people, the very neighbours Jesus has invited us to love*
- *scripture, which grounds our faith and our understanding of the nature and purpose of marriage*
- *history, which affirms the importance of marriage as a social institution*
- *social expectations, which regard marriage as a contractual relationship governed by legal sanctions and customs*
- *marriage as sacred covenant, a means of God’s grace not only for the marital partners but also for their offspring and for the wider community*

Introduction

When the 38th General Council—the highest decision-making body of The United Church of Canada—decided in 2003 to ask the federal government to recognize same-sex marriage in the marriage legislation, it was acting on a lengthy history of earlier actions. In the time that has passed since that action of General Council, same-sex marriage has become a highly controversial topic in Canadian society generally and religious communities specifically.

The last time marriage was an issue of such debate in the United Church was during the early 1960s, when the church was seeking to define a Christian understanding of marriage breakdown, divorce, and remarriage.

In the 1980s the United Church studied many issues relating to relationships and human sexuality, eventually affirming “that God’s intention for human relationships is that they be faithful, responsible, just, loving, health-giving, healing, and sustaining of community and self” (32nd General Council, 1988).

Subsequently, the United Church has stated clearly that its membership and Order of Ministry are open to people of all sexual orientations. The 37th General Council (2000) affirmed that all sexual orientations—gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual—are a gift of God and part of the wondrous diversity of creation. It was at that time that the church also committed itself to work for the civil recognition of same-sex partnerships.

In recent years, several Canadian courts have determined that it is unconstitutional to limit marriage to heterosexual couples. Subsequently, the federal government decided not to challenge such rulings, and asked the Supreme Court of Canada to rule on same-sex marriage legislation and religious freedom. In December 2004 the Supreme Court offered an opinion to the federal government that would allow for a redefinition of marriage to include same-sex marriage and maintain the freedom of religious institutions to determine whom they will marry. On February 1, 2005, the government introduced this legislation.

The United Church of Canada has elsewhere indicated its support for intended legislation. The purpose of this paper is to describe the United Church's historical and theological understanding of marriage.

People in Relationship

Our understanding of marriage is informed by people—by human stories. First of all, we see people: brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, unique, wondrous, loved creations of God. We see the very neighbours Jesus has invited us to love, people who long to make committed life partnerships, to celebrate love, and to have loving relationships recognized and blessed by the community and God. These people are male, female, straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, in opposite-sex relationships, in same-sex relationships.

Relationships bring joy, meaning, and hope into our lives. There are many different kinds of human relationships—friends, parents and children, family, and marriage or other intimate partnerships. The United Church has consistently affirmed the vast variety of human relationships that are possible. But the church has not held an “anything goes” ethic. The church has repeatedly emphasized the need for preparation and enrichment for committed life partnerships and has emphasized values within marriage and family relationships that “contribute to the wholeness of persons.” As a church, we believe we are also called to challenge those values that “limit and degrade personal worth” (30th General Council, 1984).

Marriage Informed by Scripture

Our encounter with God through scripture grounds our faith and our understanding of the nature and purpose of marriage:

- *God, Creator*—who created the world in all its wondrous diversity and declared it good
- *God, Covenant Maker*—who continually seeks to be in relationship with God's creation and honours these relationships with covenants of forgiveness, grace, and love

- *God, Incarnate*—who came in human form, God-with-us, incarnate love in Jesus, who continually asked his followers to stretch their boundaries
- *God, Lover*—God who is love and who loves us all unconditionally, who in loving us enables us to love others

God, Creator

God creates us for relationships, and God calls us into relationships. The creation stories in the first two chapters of Genesis describe God’s creation of a good world—a world filled with the marvellous diversity of God’s creation. God created male and female, and blessed them and commanded them to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). Genesis 2:24 states, “Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” The words “one flesh” do not merely focus on sexual unity, but also speak of emotional and spiritual union and of the commitment to nurture a relationship that intentionally cares for and loves the other. Jesus quotes these passages when asked to offer a judgment on the practice of divorce (Matthew 19:3–9; Mark 10:2–12).

Both creation stories agree that men and women are created differently as sexual beings yet as equal partners. Both agree that the union of man and woman is designed by God. The second creation story also indicates that God intended one man and one woman to be joined together. God’s intention in creation is, moreover, regarded as the norm for relationships between men and women.

Some believe these passages provide us with limits to an understanding of marriage, that the creation stories assume that the male and the female, who complement each other, are God’s only given structure for human sexual relations. Others argue that part of God’s intent in creation is to provide companionship. “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make for him a helper as his partner” (Genesis 2:18). While the partnership portrayed in Genesis 2 is a heterosexual one, the basic need for companionship is relevant for all people, regardless of sexual orientation.

God’s creation is not complete. We affirm this regularly in United Church congregations when we say the words of our creed, “We believe in God: who has created and is creating....”¹ The creation stories allow room for further development. God evaluates the created world as good, not perfect. God has not created a static world; it is still in the process of becoming. God, continually creating, invites us to experience the new creation unfolding around us.

It is possible to hold in tension the male–female relationship as fundamental to God’s purposes in creation, with openness to other possibilities for committed, lifelong human relationships.

¹ The United Church of Canada, “A New Creed.”

God, Covenant Maker

The biblical God is by nature communal and relational rather than solitary and uninvolved. God has created us for relationships, for community. The covenant relationship begins with God's love for us and God's desire to be in relationship with us.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God is portrayed as one who establishes covenants and whose will is accomplished through them. God knows our potentials and capabilities. God does not desire a relationship in which only God acts. The covenant relationship is one of partnership in which our whole person is engaged. The covenant relationship with God involves choice. The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed God's new covenant, the heart of all covenants: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Jeremiah 7:23). At their best, such covenants are written not on paper but rather on "every human heart."

Marriage is a union in which the covenant relationship can be expressed and mutually experienced. This will be a relationship of equal partners who freely choose willingly, gladly, and completely to entrust themselves to each other and to be in relationship with each other. The love we offer the other in this covenant is God's gift to us. We are able to love because we are first loved by God.

Marriage for Christians is a covenant made before and with God. God is a participant in the covenant. Because God is committed, faithful, and gracious, we are enabled to be so in our relationships. Indeed, the covenant exists because God offers it to us.

Through Jesus, Christians experience this covenant and live it out. Because of him we are able to

- know more clearly how God would have us live
- know that when we fail and hurt others we can ask for forgiveness and experience forgiveness
- receive each other's good gifts and enjoy each other fully

The biblical God enters into covenant relationships with a variety of people. These covenants are not limited to those whom society claims as the "norm"—in fact, God's covenants are often initiated with those who are on the margins of their society: elderly people, the Hebrew people, a poor young woman, an exile.

There is room in God's covenant for both opposite-sex and same-sex couples.

God, Incarnate

God came in human form, God with us. The gospels give us a picture of Jesus as one who celebrates marriage at a feast (John 2:1–11) and who stands for monogamy, the value of human persons, permanence in marriage (Mark 10:2–9), and equal responsibility in the marriage relationship (Mark 10:11–12). Jesus opposes domination and deception in relationships between the sexes (Matthew 5:27–30). He is also the one who announced the reign of God with radical new images—an unclean woman healed, an outcast embraced, and a banquet to which all are invited. Jesus continually entered into community with those his society had excluded and condemned—social outcasts, those who were ritually unclean, the sick, foreigners, and those judged by others to be sinners. He did not condemn but healed, affirmed, befriended, and loved. He challenged unjust systems and structures and invited everyone to experience God’s gracious love.

Jesus set aside human barriers and false traditions that violate human dignity and community. Jesus lived out the life-changing reality that God cannot be compromised by human prejudice, fear, or bigotry.

God continues to enter into and transform human experience with love, justice, and healing. God incarnate, God in Jesus, calls us to new realities. God invites us to step out of our previous notions of what God’s love is all about and embrace God’s new creation.

God, Lover

God’s love is freely given to us, encircles us, and calls us into being. This love of God finds expression in our caring, just, mutual, honest, and healthy relationships—both in our marriage relationships and in other relationships that touch our daily living. It is in loving relationships, such as marriage, that we may experience the richness of God’s love.

It is God’s love that inspires and supports us to try to live in loving relationships—to love others. Loving someone is not easy, and being in healthy, mutual relationship takes time, effort, and commitment. Marriage provides us with one opportunity to experience the intimacy and depth of God’s love. God’s love is the benchmark against which we test all relationships.

*Marriage in History*²

Marriage has changed throughout history. In earlier centuries, only free people were allowed to marry, interracial marriage was forbidden in some cultures and legal jurisdictions, and for most of history women were subordinate in the marriage relationship. The primary reason for marriage in some societies was to ensure economic succession (there are remnants of this in our taxation systems) and political alliances. Many of these historical elements of marriage were supported, to some extent, by the church.

Today, the changes from those earlier eras are evident, and some are supported in different ways by various parts of the Christian church.

Challenging the prevailing understanding of marriage is not new. Jesus spoke out against the divorce practices of his day, which easily set aside women and children to abject poverty. He called for marriage and all relationships to be grounded in love. In the early Christian world, the church did not define marriage or prescribe its celebration; rather, the church assumed the existence of marriage and its legal recognition in the society of the time. The focus of marriage rested on the consent of the partners.

There is no evidence of Christian wedding rites until at least the 9th century and quite possibly not until the 11th century. Obviously, Christians married in earlier centuries, but at the time marriage was considered a civil order and not a rite of the church.

During the Middle Ages, there was more control of sexual conduct, and marriage in some traditions became a sacrament (though Augustine notes the sacramental nature of marriage much earlier). In this time, marriage was a public ceremony, with banns being issued and the couple consenting to the marriage. The religious ceremony was meant to be public, granting status to the married couple in the community.

During the Reformation, the church increased its control over marriage and divorce. The public ceremony took place in a church, and clergy officiated on the authority of the state.

In Canadian history, clergy did not always have the right to officiate at marriages. In fact, it was strongly argued that broadening the definition of who could officiate would diminish the value of marriage. Anglican priests in Canada were given the

² The sources for this history are D.B. Walters' "Marriage and Christianity: Reflections on the Persistence of Secular Marriage Law in European Christianity," *Studies in World Christianity* 3, no. 1 (1997), and Pamela Dickey Young's "Same-Sex Relationships, Religious Traditions, Marriage and Law," *Studies in Religion* 29, no. 4 (2000).

right to officiate at weddings in 1793, while Congregationalist ministers could not officiate until 1829. It was not until 1857 that all ordained ministers were given the right to officiate at marriages.

Being single, particularly when it was combined with being celibate, was prized above marriage for most of the first 16 centuries of the church.

Throughout most of history there has been a fairly dim view of sexual desire, with the state and the church often trying to control sexual acts, particularly those of women. Sexual pleasure was not considered wrong in itself, but it needed to be justified through a focus on procreation. During the Reformation, marriage was affirmed and sexual relations in marriage became seen as natural, good, and ordained by God in creation. By the 17th century, some Christians began to teach a new understanding of the divine intention for sexuality, characterized by love, intimacy, and mutuality—not procreation alone. If children were born to a marriage, that was an “added blessing” but not the central purpose of marriage.

In the United Church, this understanding has prevailed. We do not require procreation to be essential to marriage; thus we celebrate marriage with those who are beyond child-bearing age, as well as with those who cannot, or choose not, to have children.

In Canada today, marriage is one of the most prominent ways in which two people’s love and commitment to each other are recognized and affirmed. Excluding same-sex couples from the institution of marriage may imply that their relationships are less worthy of such recognition and affirmation.

Marriage Informed by Social Expectations

Although marriage is intimately personal, it is also a social institution—in fact, it is one of the oldest. For the sake of their own self-preservation and continuity, societies have developed characteristic customs, sanctions, and laws governing the expression of sexuality and the recognition of marriage.

If marriage was solely a personal relationship, it would be constituted by the will of two people to live together, quite apart from any legal, public, or religious act.

As a social institution, marriage may be regarded as a contractual relationship that is governed by legal sanctions and customs. Both church and state contribute to the definition and recognition of these sanctions and customs. In our society, the state is responsible for enunciating and enforcing the laws to protect the interests of society and the institutions of marriage and the family. Marriage is not just a private transaction between two people. In whatever form it takes, it is an expression of the culture within which it exists. In any form of society, marriage is a necessary

institution for determining who belongs to the family or tribe and who does not. Private relationships between consenting adults exist in every culture; it is social sanction that distinguishes between such private relationships and marriage.

The stature of “marriage” is bestowed on the couple by virtue of their observance of certain conventions, which can be called “getting married.” From the status gained by following social conventions, certain political, economic, and social consequences follow.

As a social institution, marriage reflects both good and evil in society. Couples preparing for marriage think mostly of the good. The subsequent reality also includes pain, immaturity, inadequate images of marriage, divorce, challenges in parenting, and a great deal of poverty, especially for women and children. The incidence of violence is high in committed life partnerships.

Christian Marriage as Sacred Covenant

Marriage for Christians is more than social sanction; it is a covenant made before God. The crucial question for the church is not what marriage is or has been in society, but what it ought to be.

The United Church of Canada upholds two sacraments: baptism and communion. While not a sacrament in our specific understanding, we believe marriage to be profoundly sacramental. Marriage is a means of God’s grace not only for the marital partners but also for their offspring and for the wider community.

In 1962, the United Church affirmed that marital unity is “of God’s creation” and that marriage is intended to be a “life-long and complete” partnership.³ For these reasons, it is not to be entered into (or abandoned) lightly or thoughtlessly. Underlying this position is the assumption that in every significant relationship there will be difficult times, issues that need to be confronted and, wherever possible, worked through.

The church acknowledged that in some marriages there is “such grievous offence or abuse or neglect that the union is in fact destroyed.” In such cases, it may be “in the best interests of all persons involved (including children and society) that the marriage be dissolved by divorce.” Further, the church established the possibility and conditions for remarriage.

³ *Marriage Breakdown, Divorce, Remarriage: A Christian Understanding*. Approved by the 20th General Council of The United Church of Canada, 1962.

In United Church celebrations of marriage, several elements characterize the service of worship:

- God is praised as the source of love and the initiator of covenant.
- Gospel values (love, justice, compassion), made known to us in Jesus, are expressed.
- Scripture is read and proclaimed in some form.
- Witnesses in the legal sense are acknowledged, as well as the presence and support of family, guests, and congregation.
- Promises are made between the couple and before God.

*Affirmations of the United Church in Regard to Marriage*⁴

- We affirm that marriage is a gift of God through which Christians make a covenant with one another and with God. In marriage we offer one another the promise of lifelong companionship and commitment, rich expression of human affections and sexuality, and if there are children, to provide for their love, nurture, and care.
- We affirm the value of marriage and that the church must work both to redeem and care for the institution and to support those entering into a covenant relationship with each other.
- We acknowledge that marriage can also be destructive. Marriage as an institution is shaped by cultural attitudes that have at times been patriarchal and oppressive; these attitudes have found expression in exploitation, abuse, and violence. Marriage is not to be idealized or idolized as an end in itself.
- We affirm that this unity is a creation of God and is greater than the two individuals. It creates holy ground that needs to be nurtured and cherished.
- We affirm that sexual intercourse in marriage is intended to be
 - a profound expression of the whole person
 - a yearning for total union with the other
 - a creative and holy expression in and with the other
- We acknowledge that sexual intercourse may be exploitative, using the other for one's gratification.
- We affirm that marriage from a Christian perspective is based on faithfulness expressed through
 - choosing each other above all others
 - risking and being vulnerable in the relationship

⁴ See *Gift, Dilemma and Promise: A Report and Affirmations on Human Sexuality*. Approved by the 30th General Council of The United Church of Canada, 1984.

- willingness to put into the relationship the patience, understanding, and work required to help it grow
- accepting and nurturing the other for his or her unique gifts; putting the other before one's own interests in a lifelong commitment that is spiritual, emotional, and physical

and that these intentions are most fully achieved and symbolized when sexual intimacy in marriage is exclusive.

- We recognize the commitment that is present in many relationships other than marriage, and that the church is called to minister to people in these relationships as in others.
- We affirm that the church is called to emphasize and work for the essential values in marriage and family that contribute to the wholeness of people, and to challenge those forms and attitudes that limit and degrade personal worth, even when the culture supports them.

As a church, we have consistently committed ourselves to providing resources to help prepare people for marriage, and have provided and supported marriage enrichment programs.

At the 38th General Council (2003), we committed ourselves to work for the civil recognition of same-sex marriage in the marriage legislation.

The 32nd General Council (1988) affirmed that God's intention for all human relationships is that they be faithful, responsible, just, loving, health-giving, healing, and sustaining of community and self. The implication is that these standards apply to both heterosexual and homosexual relationships.

"We believe in God: who has created and is creating..."⁵

The United Church of Canada has recognized that we do not have a full and complete understanding of God and God's intentions, and that we must continue to grow and learn as individuals and as a faith community.

Marriage in our understanding is grounded in love: God's love for humanity; love between life partners who seek to live in relationships based on trust, mutuality, and commitment. It is also about the love of caring communities—families, friends, churches—that acknowledge, support, nurture, challenge, and honour such relationships.

The civil recognition of same-sex marriages affirms the love that is expressed in

⁵ This section is adapted from resources found in *Of Love and Justice: Toward the Civil Recognition of Same-Sex Marriage* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2003), pp. 25, 26, 40.

these committed relationships. It is also about justice, according same-sex couples the same rights, responsibilities, privileges, and protections as any other couple in our society. It is about ensuring that all people are treated with fairness, dignity, and respect. No one is beyond the love of God; no one is disenfranchised because of her or his choice of partner.

“We are called. . . to seek justice and resist evil. . .”

We are called to be part of a faith community that lives out a vision of love and justice in response to hatred and evil. We are called to reconcile—to be in community with one another and to continually seek to return to a place of wholeness. As agents of reconciliation, we invite others into community, and we open ourselves to relationship with others and with God. In so doing, we may experience a small part of God’s reign on earth.

References

This statement draws on the wisdom, insights, commitment, and faith statements affirmed in the following United Church documents:

Gift, Dilemma and Promise: A Report and Affirmations on Human Sexuality, 1984

In God’s Image...Male and Female, 1980

Living Together in Marriage: A Manual for Marriage-Education Leaders, 1985

Marriage Breakdown, Divorce, Remarriage: A Christian Understanding, 1962

Marriage Today: An Exploration of Man/Woman Relationship and of Marriage, 1978

Of Love and Justice: Toward the Civil Recognition of Same-Sex Marriage, 2003

Passion and Freedom: A Resource for Ministers and Leaders Supporting the Lives of Couples, 2003

The Permanence of Christian Marriage, 1975

Together in Faith: Inclusive Resources about Sexual Diversity for Study, Dialogue, Celebration, and Action, 1995

Toward a Christian Understanding of Sex, Love and Marriage, 1960