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Inquiry into the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2009

My Two World Experience

For many years I was an ordained Assemblies of God minister in a heterosexual marriage. During that time I performed marriage ceremonies. At the age of 40 I realised that everything I'd done to try and change my same-sex-orientation (including the heterosexual marriage) was a waste of time and there was actually nothing wrong with being gay. The years I spent rejecting my homosexuality was the result of being brought up in an ill-informed society where mental health professionals believed my natural orientation was pathology and if I acted on it, I should be imprisoned.

The majority of society today recognises the scientific research in the areas of sexuality but unfortunately some parts of the Christian church still hold on to out-dated beliefs. A homosexual orientation has been singled as a particular evil and hence they have opposed all efforts to end discrimination and gain equality for GLBT people. This is evident in the current lobbying to ensure 'marriage' is not 'redefined'. The accusations of an insidious agenda by gay and lesbian people to break down the fabric of society, eventually marry several partners or their pets is ludicrous sensationalism and fear-mongering.

I came out as a gay man in 1992 and since then have been an active member of the GLBT community. I have also performed a number of same-sex commitment ceremonies.

Living in these two worlds gives me a rather unique perspective on issues of sexuality and also relationships amongst gay and lesbian people.

Observations

It has been interesting to observe not only the couples in their preparation for the wonderful day but also the perceptions of their families and friends at the ceremony. Whether the couple has been heterosexual or homosexual the vows, celebratory nature, sacredness of the event and the language used have basically been the same. Interestingly, at the gay and lesbian ceremonies, family and friends consistently used traditional words such as 'wedding', 'marriage' and 'married'. Obviously in their minds these same-sex couples were doing the exact same thing heterosexual couples do. Getting married!

History

For centuries, we have only known marriage to be expressed within a heterosexual context, for obvious reasons. Previously same-sex-couples were reluctant to identify their sexuality or declare their love for their same-sex partner. To do so could mean loss of employment, rejection by family and friends and not being able to obtain rental properties; to name some examples. Things have changed and in many areas gay and lesbian couples can live openly and honestly. This is healthy for all concerned and reflects an enlightened, progressive society. In numerous parts of the world however, this is still not possible. Many countries today in the Middle East and Africa, as well as several countries in Asia, the Caribbean and the South Pacific, outlaw homosexuality. In six countries,

homosexual behaviour is punishable by life imprisonment; in ten others, it carries the death penalty. Thank God Australia is no longer one of those countries.

We need to demonstrate, as a civilised, democratic society, that we treat all people the same no matter what their race, religion, gender or orientation.

What is Marriage?

One does not have to look back far in history to see that what was defined as marriage was not so much about love and commitment but about property and ownership. This is still practiced and abused in some cultures. If we allow certain cultures the right to practice what many would consider outdated even barbaric, that is, forcing the parents will upon their adult children, how can the Australian government deny same-sex couples the right to marry?

Heterosexual and homosexual couples alike know that love, commitment, communication and trust are what makes relationships last. When either gay or straight couples make life-long vows of love, commitment and exclusivity this is indeed a marriage. Far from undermining traditional values same-sex committed relationships reinforce them. The sexual orientations and genders of the couples are irrelevant. I personally know same-sex couples that have been 'married' for over 50 years but they have never been able to have their relationship recognised legally. We need to honour and support these relationships in every way possible

It should be remembered that there was a time in our own country when indigenous Australians were not allowed to marry out of their race without permission. In the USA up until 1959 the law stated "*If any white person intermarry with a coloured person, or any coloured person intermarry with a white person, he shall be guilty of a felony and shall be punished by confinement in the penitentiary for not less than one, nor more than five years.*". In 1959, Mildred and Richard Loving, a couple from Virginia, were sentenced to one year's jail for breaking this 'law'. Marriage has been redefined as we have come to understand that human and civil rights are the foundation of a truly democratic society.

Some religious people will try and tell us that the story of Adam & Eve in Genesis demonstrates that God's sole intention is that one woman and one man be in union and to tamper with this model will eat away the foundation of our society. What these people fail to realise is that the reading the entire bible gives many examples of the approval of marrying more than one woman and slaves. When people use the clichéd statement '*God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve*', I remind them that obviously they have a grasp of reproduction but are ignorant about sexual orientation.

The changing of the law in 2004 to read "*Marriage means the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life. Certain unions are not marriages. A union solemnised in a foreign country between: (a) a man and another man; or (b) a woman and another woman; must not be recognised as a marriage in Australia.*" was regressive legislation not progressive. After losing the election in 2007 the former Prime Minister John Howard acknowledged that a number of his concepts and thinking were influenced by old mindsets. This introduced legislation is one example. Refusing to say sorry to indigenous Australians for the injustice of the stolen generation is another.

Recent polls tell us that the majority of Australians have moved to a place where they understand that same-sex relationships are the same as heterosexual relationships and that they should also be given equal status on all levels including the right to marry.

Heterosexual couples have choices

For too long gay and lesbian couples co-existed with no form of legal recognition of their relationships. Recent legislation has changed many of these inequalities. Heterosexual couples however have had the choice to live together in a de facto relationship, have a civil union or be married in a non-religious or religious ceremony. To not allow same-sex couples the same options is discriminatory and the law should be amended as has been done now in other countries such as Belgium, Canada, Netherlands, Norway, South Africa, Spain and Sweden as well as several states in the USA. It would be nice to think that my country was also a proactive leader globally, instead of just a follower.

Conclusion

Whilst I can respect that some within the religious world will not perform same-sex marriages and indeed should not be forced legally to do so, there will be many other options for same-sex couples to have a marriage ceremony. Marriage is a civil institution not a religious institution.

To continue to separate homosexual and heterosexual relationship status sends the wrong message to future generations that there are two classes. I don't believe this is what we want to build within in Australian society.

It is because of these things I believe that Australian government should amend the law to ensure that same-sex couples experience the full legal recognition that heterosexual couples enjoy. To have anything else is discriminatory on the basis of sexual orientation.

From my own experience and the experience of many others where heterosexual marriage has been enshrined as exclusive and superior may I suggest that "If you let us marry each other, we'll stop marrying you".

Anthony Venn-Brown

Professional Coach, Speaker and Author of '**A Life of Unlearning - A Journey to Find the Truth**'
Honoured to be on the inaugural list of the [25 Most Influential Gay & Lesbian Australians](#)