

# Discussion Paper

## **Distinctive Identity** ***Church and State*** ***Christians and Society*** Reflections prompted by the current marriage debate



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This discussion paper has been prepared by the Council of Churches of Christ in Victoria and Tasmania Inc. (CCVT), for discussion in churches, by church participants, ministers and other leaders.

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The paper does not come to any conclusions about issues raised by the current marriage debate. Rather, it seeks to create a dialogue around the way we who are within Churches of Christ can interact with society, and at the same time enunciate tools that can help us respond to issues as well as some related ways we can live as a 'contrast culture' with regards to this and other issues.

Readers are encouraged to prayerfully explore the discussion paper, to thoughtfully consider the questions at the end of the paper, and to enter gracious dialogue with others about its implications.

Any responses will be welcome at [council@churchesofchrist.org.au](mailto:council@churchesofchrist.org.au)

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## What do we think? What should we think?

A reasonable question that could be (and is being) asked, is this: “Where do Churches of Christ stand with respect to sexual orientation?”, and “what about gay marriage?”. There are many responses that can be made.

It's a difficult place to find ourselves, as followers of Jesus, as bearers of the Kingdom, as hospitable grace-givers, as a 'contrast society'; to be living in the context of a culture (the State or nation, the general public, the media and some parts of the church) that too often wants to polarize and oppositionally define the other around sometimes subjective views of 'right'/'wrong' on any particular presenting issue. It can be hard, if not impossible at times, to have meaningful dialogue, or to present an alternative view, without accusations of prejudice or discrimination, from either end of the spectrum of this or that issue.

A conversation like this is best located in one that considers the relationship between Christians and the society in which as followers of Jesus they are called to live; a conversation acknowledging the shift from Christendom church to missional Christian living. Missional<sup>1</sup> living is the embodiment of the mission of Jesus in the world by incarnating the gospel. As one contemporary writer puts it, "it is imperative that Christians be like Jesus, by living freely within the culture as missionaries who are as faithful to the Father and his gospel as Jesus was in his own time and place."

How can followers of Jesus live as a 'contrast society'? What should inform our thinking and our practices? In what ways can we respond to issues in the surrounding culture, living as we do as 'exiles' in the somewhat strange land of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?<sup>2</sup>

This discussion paper has been written to resource this conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> "Missional then, no matter what noun it is modifying, must qualify the meaning of that noun by referencing God's mission as defined by Scripture. More specifically, missional limits any noun that it modifies to the temporary mission task of the Church to make disciples of all *ta ethne* for God's glory and worship ... (we are) missional when (we) intentionally pursues God's mission for His glory among all peoples by following His patterns and His ways of expanding His kingdom." Van Sanders, "The Mission of God and the Local Church," in *Pursuing the Mission of God in Church Planting*, ed. John M. Bailey, Alpharetta: North American Mission Board, 2006, 25.

<sup>2</sup> See Jeremiah 29:1-14

## Called to distinctive identity

There is always a temptation to formulate Christian identity by binary oppositions; that is, by identifying what we are opposed to instead of by what energises and informs our deepest aspirations within Christian faith. The latter is much more difficult. Any reticence regarding a specific issue will be construed as weakness, while some will want to speak from off the tip of any reticent tongue. Within the propensity for people, inside and outside the church, to cast identity by *positions held* in relation to select issues, there is the potential to lose a valuable aspect of our identity. It is therefore important for us to articulate and reaffirm distinctive Christian identity by which any issue, however pressing, is engaged.

As Christians we are called to vulnerability within the generosity and veracity<sup>3</sup> of good news that we have received as gift and responded to as a commission in Jesus Christ. Our identity is Christological; it is expressed by generous activity and speaking with veracity through *grace and truth* in Jesus Christ. This identity implies that our responses to society on a range of issues and attitudes will surpass the stock criteria offered in either moral judgment or social deference, invoking instead, by articulation in generous responsibility and integrity, what it means to be truly human before God.

Our context is humanity within which, in many things, people *do not know their right hand from their left hand*. The generosity and veracity of God speak into uncertainty, hesitancy, folly, expedience, exuberance and failure with creativity in grace and truth.

Our identity and mission within society are not contingent on our responses to select issues and stances but on the call of God to distinction within genuine relationality among all people. We seek neither judgment nor justice around select issues, either of which can skew and obscure Christian witness to grace and truth for humanity that is restless for God in whose image we are created.

Christian congregations have unique contexts. The veracity of every congregation within its testimony to the generosity of God is its gift to a local context, whatever the issues and challenges of that context. To underestimate the uniqueness of our identity as a community in Christ is also to underestimate the resources by which we can respond to any issue of human identity and integrity. As summoned into Christian existence by grace and truth, our responses to humanity only approach Christian adequacy when they exhibit genuine generosity and veracity. Anything less, expressed either by judgment or by deference, will divide Christian community.

### ***Society and Christian identity***

Our identity is not defined by the State, nor is it defined in hostility to society. Our identity is naked in terms of any State leverage we might easily seek and defer to within the slipstream of ecumenical posturing.

We can respond to controversial issues by either judgment or deference. Moral judgment of others is resisted in the gospels and in reality, closes down possibilities for ministry. Alternatively, deference is beholden to others' criteria for acceptance, thereby diminishing distinctive Christian identity and witness to unique sources of human integrity and dignity.

We can respond to selected issues and overlook a range of issues by which human dignity is tacitly compromised and silently diminished. The gospel calls us into the midst of humanity, not select issues. The general tone of New Testament testimony exhibits a degree of reticence in isolating specific social issues, identifying instead, the precarious shape of human existence that has so *missed the point* or *missed the mark*, we cannot redeem ourselves. We cannot find our own way out of a labyrinth.

Particular social issues need to be addressed contextually and existentially in terms of human struggle, within the relationality of face-to-face communities that can sustain particular and contextual expressions of generosity and veracity toward *righteousness* (*sedaqah* and its equivalent *dikaïosynē* *right relationality*), rather than by ambit claims made within dogmatic judgment or a partisan pursuit of justice—both of which foster self-righteousness and blindness. Christian congregations can be trusted to

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<sup>3</sup> Synonyms of 'veracity' include, truth, reliability, authenticity

ascertain their contexts with wisdom, within generosity and veracity of commitment to the gospel, for appropriate responses with their particular communities. This is a challenge of patient discernment and building trust over time.

We express Christian calling and vocation in serving others at many levels and manifestations of state organisation, yet we are not chaplains of the State.

Where does marriage according to State law sit with marriage within Christian community and identity? Does the current Marriage Act reflect Christian values? Will proposed changes, if they occur, reflect integral Christian sensibilities? Can the State have anything but a compromised view on marriage (let alone human relationships) when it is crafted at best from a base of more or less than 50% of the electorate? Are ministers of the gospel performing a public servant role within the legal aspect of conducting marriages? How are we to be hospitable rather than judgemental in this context?

### ***The future in the context of our movement***

Churches of Christ, as a movement, have always been involved with society rather than being in perpetual conflict with society, while remaining independent of State endorsement of our identity and purpose.

We are a movement that has focused on Scripture as the primary source of hearing, thinking, call and articulation of our Christian identity in generosity and veracity as these are given Christological focus in grace and truth.

Invitation, hospitality and inclusion are crucial characteristics of church community, which our movement sought to engender from the beginning and exhibit in hospitality around an “open table” by contrast to doctrinal and social forms of tacit gate-keeping or even explicit exclusion.

Our movement rejected a “Christian use of law” as a necessary principle for fencing Christian behaviour within a zone of safety, focusing instead on responsibility, accountability and intelligent faith within the integrity of each person’s maturation by grace and truth in Christ. We also rejected the crab-walk conjectures of theological and moral casuistry with its focus on circumstantial exceptions and exemptions, even under the rubric of tolerance. Tolerance is not love; it can be indifference and is silent as to transformation of human lives through the generosity and veracity of love’s genuine engagement.

*Where Scripture speaks, we speak* and especially where this is Christologically explicit by contrast to overzealous reasoning that seeks to conjecture and plot cause and effect from selected verses, theological systems or constructs of society and human behaviour. The Christological imperative for *two becoming one flesh* is clear as repeated three times in the gospels. In this imperative, hospitality to “the other” in human relationships is formed in the most extraordinary relationship of difference, between male and female. This difference is more tangible and proximate as other than any construction of “other” by ethnicity, colour, creed or chosen sexual identity. We celebrate this gift of proximate otherness and do not wish to diminish its profound formative possibilities for human relationality within communities that can be as small as a family.

As a congregational movement, we value the creativity of congregations in unique expressions of mission and ministry within their peculiar contexts. By reference to our articulation of identity in the past and anticipation toward the future, Churches of Christ are today constrained neither to be defensive against society’s perennial groping for satisfactory human identity nor deferential to society’s variegated and conflicted articulations of human dignity.

**Turn page for *Questions to consider***

## Questions to consider:

These questions seek to create dialogue around ideas raised in this paper. A question or series of questions follows a relevant excerpt.

1. *“Our identity is not defined by the State, nor is it defined in hostility to society”.*
  - “Where does marriage according to State law sit with marriage within Christian community and identity?”
  - Does the current Marriage Act reflect Christian values? Will proposed changes, if they occur, reflect integral Christian sensibilities?”
  
2. *“As a movement, we have always been involved with society rather than being in perpetual conflict with society, while remaining independent of State endorsement of our identity and purpose.”*
  - What is the biblical view of: the roles of the State and the Church; and the relationship between Church and State, between Christians and Society?
  - Given that practicing Christians are a minority in Australia, how do we voice a 'minority view' without seeking to impose that view on others?
  - What is the place of the Church's prophetic role in this?
  - Can the Church be a 'contrast society', and at the same time allow Ministers to operate as servants of the State (i.e. 'public servants') through their implementation of the legal requirements of the Marriage Act? Can we find a way of separating the legal, civil marriage processes from a Christian blessing of a marriage within the context of a pastoral community environment?
  
3. *“We can respond to controversial issues by either judgment or deference. Judgment is uncharacteristic of the gospels and closes down possibilities for ministry; deference is beholden to others' criteria for acceptance, thereby diminishing distinctive Christian identity and witness to unique sources of human integrity and dignity.”*
  - How can we contribute to this 'debate' without being caught up in its adversarial nature? Can we find a way to ensure that our stance, comments etc. help a debate become a conversation?
  
4. *“Tolerance is not love; it can be indifference and is silent as to transformation of human lives through the generosity and veracity of love's genuine engagement.”*
  - How can tolerance become intolerance, indifference, and a failure to love and to genuinely engage and transform another? How could we live differently?

5. *“Our movement rejected a “Christian use of law” as a necessary principle for fencing Christian behaviour within a zone of safety, focusing instead on responsibility, accountability and intelligent faith within the integrity of each person’s maturation by grace and truth in Christ.”*
- How can we, as Churches of Christ, honour our DNA, particularly the dictum, 'no creed but Christ'?
  - Various viewpoints in this debate are tagged with the moniker of being *the Christian viewpoint*. Is this then an addition to the Gospel? Does one have to believe in Christ and one particular viewpoint to be considered 'in'? Does this—and other stances on other social issues—run the danger of becoming add-ons to the Gospel in terms of the language used?
6. *“Invitation, hospitality and inclusion are crucial characteristics of church community, which our movement sought to engender from the beginning and exhibit in hospitality around an “open table” by contrast to doctrinal and social forms of tacit gate-keeping or even explicit exclusion.”*
- How can we be generous, hospitable and inclusive in this environment?
7. *“Particular social issues need to be addressed contextually, existentially in terms of human struggle, within the relationality of face-to-face communities that can sustain particular and contextual expressions of generosity and veracity toward righteousness.”*
- How can we honour the image of God in all people as we engage with a deeply personal subject for many people?