**On ‘marriage ... as a doctrinal matter within the United Reformed Church’**

**This is an advice paper, whose status is presently informal. It was prepared by members of the URC’s Faith and Order Committee, at my request, to be forwarded as advice to the URC’s Law and Polity Advisory Group. It has not yet been considered by LPAG, and is being made public on that understanding. Consent to publish has been given in the name of both FAOC and LPAG.**

**I am grateful to members of the FAOC for their careful work on this matter, and for permission to issue it. Readers are reminded that it is a component of a larger discussion, and that no church council has yet been asked to consider it.**

**John Proctor,**

**General Secretary of the United Reformed Church**

**4th November 2014**

**------------------**

**FAITH AND ORDER COMMITTEE**

**August 29 – 30 2014**

**A comment from the Faith and Order Committee on the United Reformed Church’s understanding of doctrine, in relation to the question as to whether and how far marriage is regarded as a doctrinal matter within the United Reformed Church**

The Faith and Order Committee had a wide-ranging discussion, within the limits of the time available, about doctrine in general and the issues of the understanding of marriage as a doctrinal issue within the United Reformed Church.

The following papers were taken into consideration:

* One plus One, the discussion booklet produced by the human sexuality task group of the United Reformed Church for General Assembly 2014 and reissued by the General Assembly to the Church.
* The Clerk to Assembly’s Advice concerning Same-Sex Marriage
* A paper by Professor David M. Thompsons, ‘The nature and development of doctrine in the Reformed tradition, with particular reference to the doctrine of marriage.’

PART ONE: THE NATURE OF DOCTRINE

The discussion began by each member of the committee being invited to say what she or he considered to be the nature of doctrine. There was a range of views about this matter.

A starting point is to see doctrine within the Christian church as primarily about the church’s understanding and articulation about the nature of God, with God being seen as three ‘persons’ in one, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This understanding leads on to a particular interpretation of the nature of creation, both in terms of human existence and the created world. The church’s doctrine of the nature of humanity is that human beings are made in the image of God and therefore autonomous beings and good, but also fallible and subject to decay and death, thus in need of redemption. A Christian doctrine of the world is that it too is subject to decay and death and in need of redemption. One consequence of this understanding is to emphasise God’s role in creation, and thus the potential for all of creation being seen as the arena for doctrinal discussion. However, if all of creation is seen as the arena for doctrinal discussion, it could mean that doctrine comes to refer to everything that exists, and in doing so, loses its specific content. It was felt that more work needs to be done with regard to the anthropological side of doctrine.

There is an issue with regard to doctrinal development over the centuries, and the nature and understanding of the development of doctrine. It was noted that there is a tension in doctrinal development between receiving the deposit of faith, as received in scripture and as handed down across the generations, and re-articulating the faith in terms that are relevant for each present age.

A further issue was raised about whether doctrine can be regarded as in any sense ‘hierarchical’, that is to say, that some matters, as in the nature of God, are primary, and other matters, that is, in relation to the detailed nature of the understanding of creation, are secondary.

The point was made that doctrine involves the teaching and interpretation of the scriptures. In the early church, doctrine emerged both because there were theological issues to be addressed, and because there were matters of discipline within the church. The early church had considered that there was a limit to the diversity of doctrinal understanding, as seen in the lengthy discussion by the early councils with regard to the understanding of the nature of the Trinity.

There was some discussion about the social and psychological aspects of doctrine and its development. This discussion included looking at the way doctrine is determined by a particular group and what that group believes, whether the acceptance of certain doctrines are a condition of joining the group and how far there can be doctrinal diversity in any one group. Reference was made to the way in which doctrine has from time to time been used in the church as a controlling measure. Reference was also made to the need to address the motivation of the creation of doctrine, and to see the way in which doctrine should be rooted in love, celebration and joy, and not in fear. Doctrine can be seen as enabling change and growth in the life of the person and the church, as people are taken closer into the heart of God.

The Faith and Order Committee looked at the historic formulations of the church over the centuries, including those drawn up in the early church and the Reformation era, as affirmed in the Statement of the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church, and the role these have played in the life of the church. It was noted that the church receives these formulations with gratitude, but that there is an issue with regard to the weight given to them in the life of the United Reformed Church. However, it was also noted that due consideration needs to be given to these formularies, as part of the United Reformed Church finding new insights under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It was not a case of ‘anything goes’. The nature of the consideration given to the historic formularies is a matter on which more work would need to be done to come to a formal understanding about the role that they play within the United Reformed Church and about the spectrum of views that are possible across the United Reformed Church.

PART TWO: THE NATURE OF THE DOCTRINAL ISSUES WITH REGARD TO MARRIAGE.

It was noted that there have been wide variations in the views of marriage from scriptural times until today. Mention was made of Jacob and his wives and concubines, of some of the helpful aspects of polygamous marriage in some African settings, of the twentieth century changes with regard to the acceptance of divorce and re-marriage, of the changing views with regard to one of the primary purposes of marriage being the procreation of children, and of the enhanced status of women in society.

The Faith and Order Committee suggests that marriage is a secondary doctrinal issue, rather than a primary issue. The primary doctrinal issue is about the nature of God, and secondary doctrinal issues flow out of this primary understanding. It was noted that the historic creeds of the early church do not contain a doctrine of marriage. A doctrine of marriage became part of the formulations of the Reformation confessions, in view of the particular social and political changes to which the church was responding at the time.

It was noted that in the doctrinal formulations of the United Reformed Church, since her coming into being in 1972, there is no reference to marriage. The nearest the United Reformed Church comes to a position is in the service books, which outline an understanding of the nature of marriage. The committee discussed the role of service books in presenting the faith of the United Reformed Church. A range of views were expressed. It was noted that for some people, use of the services contained in the service books is more normative than others, but that, within the United Reformed Church, service books are not regarded as holding the doctrine of the church.

A view was put forward that the doctrinal significance of marriage flows out of the human relationship to God, and the understanding of the love and grace of God, drawing people into loving, committed relationships.

It was considered that marriage is an evolving human institution that flows from the church’s doctrine of humanity, but that people do not need to be married to be human (we are ineradicably social beings but marriage is only one way of living in community) so it is not a doctrine as such, but derived from our doctrine. Therefore although permitting same sex marriage is a significant change to the church’s practice of ministry it is not a change to the United Reformed Church’s doctrine.

It was noted that even if same sex marriage under United Reformed Church auspices would represent a change of church practice rather than departure from any existing doctrine, it would still engage the strongly held religious convictions of many faithful church members; this needs to be recognised in the time taken for consultation, the method of consultation and the attention paid to consultation outcomes.

It was also noted that in the United Reformed Church the theological principle of subsidiarity, based on mutual trust, whereby different convictions can be taken forward in the practices of the local church, has been seen in other matters such as the United Reformed Church’s understanding of baptism, in which matter two views are held.

At the end of the discussion, attention was drawn to the possibility of the United Reformed Church withdrawing from legal marriage, and only offering blessings. However FAOC did not have time to consider this proposal.

Revd Elizabeth Welch

Convener, Faith and Order Committee

September 2014