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SURRY HILLS BAPTIST CHURCH

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

31 March 2010

RE: Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2010

To Whom It May Concern,

As a Baptist Minister with a strong traditional Christian background, the concept of marriage equality was not something I historically agreed with. It posed questions of my cultural upbringing, unrealised fears, and dare I say prejudices. Yet in asking the simple question of what is best for my neighbour and for my community in relation to the just God I serve, I was able to listen in a fresh way. The answer I was left with was personal - not Christian, religious, gay, straight or otherwise. It was also simple: no person has the right to enforce their historical version of marriage onto those who form a committed life-long union while accepting the same social responsibilities as I do. Exclusive heterosexual marriage is not natural justice for my neighbour or our community and needs to change.

The values and influence of Christian marriage continues to be on significant decline in Australia. Outside of the church there has been a move away from the central value of Christian marriage but not away from committed partnerships. This can be seen in the increasing number of de-facto relationships and their value within our modern society and culture. This has led to questions about the way the church has presented their distinctive values surrounding intimate relationships and how they have applied them to a broader culture. The community is littered with narratives both historically and presently where individuals, couples and families amidst their complexity and vulnerability have experienced disappointment by the Church – solo mums, de-facto partners and divorced partners to name a few. (This is not to undermine the many churches that have set about making changes to those prejudices and in some cases have provided spaces of healing and wholeness, while simultaneously maintaining the value of Christian marriage.)

Yet Professor Lee Badgett [Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts and Director of the Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy at the UCLA School of Law] said,

“Research has clearly shown that allowing same-sex couples to marry has not caused or contributed to any perceived decline in

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marriage overseas... In fact marriage equality has strengthened families by fostering greater commitment between same-sex partners, providing their children with a greater sense of security and stability, and integrating same-sex couples more closely into their extended families and communities.”

This research suggests that same-sex marriage strengthens marriage and families, which in turn also strengthens society.

The Church is perceived by many as judgmental in their attitudes and actions towards those in alternative but now mainstream partnerships. This is not without consequence. What I question is the ability of the Church to present its core message - the transformative nature of Jesus - while waging a debate on values that even when truthful would require an acceptance of Christ as a central transformer. For those outside of this key relationship our message is understandably perceived as prejudicial.

What is concerning and I would suggest damaging is the modality of our message rather than the message itself. We followers of Jesus are perceived to be enforcing our views onto society through legislation that the rest of the community is moving away from. Instead, we should be creating a dialogue and relationship where our priority is an opening for Jesus to be the transformer of beliefs and values.

It is with this in mind that we at Imagine – Surry Hills Baptist Church believe that the sanctity of heterosexual marriage should be upheld within our Church as exclusive, but endorse the change in the community and legal system of Australia. We hope that by doing so we might build a bridge to the LGBTI community, acknowledging the significance of their partnerships and relationships, and have an opportunity to present the person of Jesus.

Yours sincerely,
Pastor Michael Hercock
Imagine – Surry Hills Baptist Church