

WHY I AM RETURNING MY AO HONOUR

By Alistair Macrae

I have decided to join the ranks of Australia Day award recipients who are handing back their awards in response to the “upgrading” of Margaret Court’s Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) to the highest award of Companion (AC).

As an avid sports fan, I celebrated the awarding of an AO to Mrs Court, a suitable recognition of her outstanding sporting achievements.

I question, however, why it was deemed appropriate by the committee to upgrade her award. Her public comments in relation to LGBTI people – I won’t repeat them here – are damaging to significant parts of our community, and by no means represent the views of many Christians.

I was awarded an AO in 2017 for contributions to church and community. Hence, I feel compelled to take this action as a Christian leader.

One area that was not specifically mentioned in the citation for my award is my contribution to discussions within the life of the Uniting Church. Since the early 1990s, I have offered leadership to help the church address changing patterns and understanding of human sexuality and to respond in terms of the church’s core values and beliefs.

As a result, in the Uniting Church a person’s sexuality is no bar to membership or leadership, although all members and leaders are expected to exercise their relationships according to the highest standards of respect, mutuality and faithfulness.

More recently, I convened the group that resourced the Uniting Church in its deliberations about same-sex marriage. In 2018, the Uniting Church agreed to allow its ministers to exercise freedom of conscience in relation to celebrating same-sex marriage. Marriage rites were developed accordingly.

The decision recognised that members, in good faith, hold different views. Churches worldwide are wrestling with these issues.

It is utterly disingenuous, in this day and age, to claim that Mrs Court’s sporting achievements can be separated from her highly publicised comments about LGBTI people.

I wonder what prompted the move to upgrade her and I wonder at the naivete (at best) of the committee who seem to be able to make this separation, apparently unaware of the hurt it will cause. Religious faith has private as well as public ethical dimensions.

As a minister and theologian, I am aware that bad theology kills people. Bad theology underpinned the racist apartheid regime in South Africa. Bad theology supported Hitler’s racist ideology and the evil it produced.

Bad theology underpinned or failed to recognise the racist assumptions behind the destructive program of colonisation not least in this land. Bad theology continues to alienate and oppress sexual minorities.

The upgrading of Mrs Court's award will rub salt into these wounds.

Statistics relating to suicide and mental health issues among the LGBTI community are well known and should be of concern to the whole community, not least the community that claims to follow the teaching and life example of Jesus Christ. Jesus' life was characterised by openness and welcome to all manner of people excluded from full participation in their communities, often on religious grounds.

To its shame, the Christian church has often perpetuated teachings and practices that marginalise and exclude people. I long for the day when people will associate the Christian church with the spirit of welcome, inclusion and grace reflecting the God we worship.

Alistair Macrae, is minister of Wesley Uniting Church, Melbourne, and a past president of Uniting Church in Australia.

