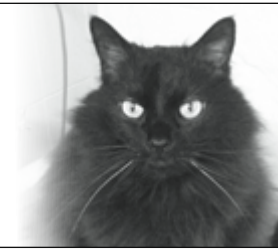


Liberal Theology

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The Liberal Theological Development of the Uniting Church

The current debate about sexuality in the UCA would not have arisen to the extent it has without a prominent liberal theological presence in the wider councils of the church, especially the Assembly. A question I am often asked when I visit congregations is how did we get to this place? Another question is: Why has the UCA developed an overt liberal theological orientation (especially when its membership has been largely theologically conservative)?

While many PhD theses could be written about these questions, I note below some brief points and comments. These points are expanded on in my earlier articles available on the [UnitingViews](#) website and in a revised article taking into account more recent developments.

1 Heritage

Given the context of union, the UCA was always destined to become more theologically liberal than the antecedent denominations because in the case of Congregationalism and Presbyterianism most of the more conservative ministers, and a good section of the more conservative members stayed out of union. It is worth noting that Victoria was the only state to have more Presbyterians enter union than Methodists. The larger base of former liberal Presbyterian ministers made Victoria into a more overt liberal state that soon overwhelmed Tasmania as well.

2 The Interim Report on Sexuality (IRS)

Liberal theology was spurred on by the didactic report of the Task Group on Sexuality (1991-1997). The Victorian base of the Task Group, the process adopted, the IRS (1996), and the final report itself (1997), helped to provide a foundation for public liberal theology as well as entrenching the polarisation during these formative years of the UCA.

3 Leadership of Officers and Members, particularly in the Assembly

Before the Task Group on Sexuality the liberal theologi-

cal section of the church had strengthened its involvement in the growing institutional life of the church (especially the Assembly), and following it maintained significant influence through membership on key Synod and Assembly committees which contribute to the overall directional leadership of the church. As liberal leaders have moved into Presbytery positions, presbyteries have also come under the influence of the liberal school of direction. Over time, more and more of the theological liberal members of presbytery and synod gained election to the Assembly, leading eventually to the dominance that exists today.

4 Theological Training

Theological training in the UCA developed towards a general progressive and theologically liberal character (with some individual and Synod exceptions at times) and over time more liberal theological ministers were produced, often then ending up in moderate-evangelical congregations with the result usually being decimation or slow bleeding out and/or conversion of the congregation to a neutered faith or an ideological liberal theology.

5 Attitudes to Sexuality in a changing society

The growing public discussion, influence and position of homosexual people in society in the 1970s and 1980s provided a pointer to how homosexuality would become a major focus for the church. As the UC became more focussed on 'loving our neighbour' through provision of good works and community services and a certain understanding of social justice, sections of the church began to equate 'loving God' with 'loving our neighbour' and supporting their personal needs a priority. As society moved toward support of the GLBTIQ agenda, parts of the church saw this as a natural step as well.

6 The dominance of personal story in UCA theology

It is an irony that the UC has produced critics of Pentecostal and charismatic theology because of their perceived focus on experience, and yet within the public voice of liberal theology, personal experience is the cornerstone of UCA theology and personalisation of the debate has played a very significant role in the councils of the church. The bottom line is: personal story today trumps the story and theology of the bible.



Summary

Up until the 2003 Assembly there were enough evangelicals and moderates at the Assembly meeting to ensure no major radical sexual agenda crept in at least by defined resolution. The agenda was not forgotten though and by 2003, the sexual agenda pushed again and the start in terms of resolutions, R84, opened the door for the future liberal pattern. The three areas in which the UCA has traditionally been identified:

- * Ecumenical Relationships
- * Relationships with Aboriginal and Islander members
- * Multicultural and cross-cultural relationships

had slowed the adoption of the sexual agenda, but they had become more sidelined in favour of a focus on the place of gay and lesbian people in the church.

In the 1997 Assembly, it was the Church's broad commitment to these three areas that helped to affirm the church's traditional understanding on marriage. Since 2003, the increasing focus on the need to make a more defined commitment to gay and lesbian ministers and members in the church eventually produced the outcome at the 2018 Assembly. Once the Australian parliament had changed marriage, it was clear what was the next step for the dominant liberal theological group, even though the majority of UCA members were not supportive of same-gender marriage. For the liberal members at the Assembly they had already moved with the direction of Australia and it would have been more unusual to have not gone down that path.

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