

LIBERALISM, SEXUALITY AND THE FUTURE OF THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

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This account concentrates on liberal developments and reactions in the Uniting Church, rather than conservative and evangelical reactions, because the liberal development has been far more pronounced. In particular, there has been the progressive orientation to sexuality issues which, while only one issue, is really the catalyst for the present debate and predicament within the Uniting Church in Australia.

Most commentators would agree that the Uniting Church is trying to develop as the mainstream, theologically liberal and politically 'progressive' church in Australia, with its primary focus being social justice and social responsibility. I have written elsewhere on this point.¹ Sexuality is central because this is where lines have been drawn.

Historically, for such a young denomination, the most important factor in the continuing debate was the *Interim Report on Sexuality* and the final report on sexuality presented to the 1997 Assembly, *Uniting Sexuality and Faith*, documents probably more well-known than the Basis of Union. Looking at the Interim Report itself, the style and editorial layout of the Interim Report unfortunately or unwittingly focuses the reader's attention on issues related to homosexuality. It is

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the main area where significantly different or radical conclusions are outlined and clearly endorsed. In particular, the last chapter focuses all the report back onto a particular aspect, reinforcing the introduction which set the context.

Why was the church so polarized over this report? Rather than helping the debate, or provide a new context (because the Interim Report did not really provide anything new to the debate), the traditional liberal positions on sexuality were presented and deliberately campaigned for in a way that marginalized those with a different point of view, thereby sealing the direction and future of the debate. Why was the smaller liberal side so committed to change, and why was there such a reaction from the liberal side to the responses and then a continuing re-visioning of the church's history and context?

Much of the negative reaction to the responses from certain groups can be traced to the first couple of weeks in November 1996, around the time of the deadline for responses. This was especially the case with reactions from some Assembly staff and key players in the debate. Reactions included being 'traumatized', shocked, outraged. Some people opined that the responses signalled the need to split the church. The sheer volume which arrived during this period and the overall weight of the responses appeared overwhelming to many people committed to change at the next Assembly and led to a continuing campaign and even more entrenched positioning to ensure change in the church. After the initial reactions, there were two broad responses from the liberal group.

First, there was the view that respondents could not have read the report. Some people found the large negative reaction simply impossible to believe so they presumed respondents could not have read the report. This of course implies that if people had read the report they would of course have reacted differently, or perhaps it was the standard line of just more time was needed to make people

understand and thus approve. For example, a member of the Task Group, in answering a question at the Assembly highlighted the form letters in the responses. This unfortunately could have helped to promote the myth that all the negative responses were just form and petition based letters from people who had not read the report and this had not really considered the theology and issues raised by the report. You need to read my statistical analysis to understand the true picture of the substantial and detailed responses received.

Secondly, there was the view that the negative orientation of the responses was simply not true or could be shown to have been wrongly reported or a different interpretation made. The strength of the responses and the volume encouraged a view that said it couldn't be true, there had to be another 'story'. Never before had the Assembly received such a volume of material.

However, one of the most interesting responses I heard was 'after all there were only 8000 responses and this was only a small percentage of the church'. In fact this person implied that everyone who did not respond could be taken to be in agreement with the report's theological direction. Unfortunately this viewpoint does not acknowledge the fact that the number of responses was many times larger than any volume of responses received for any other Assembly document. Also, many people chose to respond through their relevant parish or council or a small group. That is why the actual number and comparison of **parish responses** is very significant in my analysis and also quite amazing given that responses were voluntary.

As to whether those people who failed to respond were really not at all 'troubled', I believe one could also argue on the same logical plain and perhaps anecdotal level that a good percentage of the members of the church did not respond because they believed that the Assembly would not listen to them. Certainly a common remark in the reviews and letters to Assembly and church papers after the release of the final

report was 'Why did we bother?' and this theme has continued as evidenced in the latest round of consultations.

Another issue was the fact that the responses were not a survey. I became fascinated by the traditional line – 'it was not a survey'. Of course this should have been obvious to any one reading my report. I believe one has to be careful of setting a dangerous precedent by fostering a perceived implication of the line that 'it wasn't a survey', namely that we cannot take the responses seriously. Yes, it was not a survey, but I stress that any group which did not take such a response seriously is in danger of irreparably damaging its basis for being. It has raised a question for me. 'Does our church seriously want feedback from its members and actually believe that God could speak through this way, or it is just paying lip service to a process of consultation?'

Another objection to taking the responses at face value was that the responses only reflect the orientation of the people who responded, that is, one always has a large group of negative people who respond negatively to material. This is an interesting argument, but how we really know this, and what does it say about the **comparatively** large number of positive responses to the Interim Report? How do we regard these responses, as the lunatic ravings of radical liberal fanatics? They have certainly not been categorized in this way, and I have often wondered what would have been the response from some circles if the percentages had been reversed.

When asked to comment as to whether the responses were representative of the church, I commented, basing my opinion on my knowledge of National Church Life Survey material and National Social Science material. In the broad sense they were representative of the church, though I believe that both the affirming and negative response rates were slightly above what a random survey would have revealed at the time. Also, the responses revealed a much smaller group of people who fitted into the 'don't know' category.

Respondents usually expressed a strong opinion, no doubt prompted by the orientation and purportedly non-partisan nature of the Interim report.

It is interesting and not widely known that a small number of significant theologians and scholars who were very affirmative of the direction of the report also blasted the report for its polarizing and caricaturing tendencies and for failing fully to present an adequate theological case. There is also the fact that, in terms of process and decision-making, the responses to the IRS were treated differently from responses to other reports. Having studied or read reports on the responses to other reports from the Assembly there are many other cases I could name, but two will suffice here.

Bishops in the Uniting Church

A small number of responses were received, and following consultation the responses to this ensured that the church shelved plans to introduce an episcopal system of government.

Ordination and Ministry (1992 - 1994)

The Commission on Doctrine's report on Ordination and in particular its position on the diaconate and the sacraments. The number of responses received was less than 1% of the number of responses to the IRS. Interestingly, the percentage against the position of the Commission was similar to that which was opposed to the direction of the Sexuality report. The Commission was already aware of considerable opposition to its position and quite plainly admitted defeat and changed its position.

Why is the Uniting Church most liberal in terms of theology at the Assembly? It has to do with its makeup and representation, which does not fully reflect the conservative nature of the UCA. It also has to do with how consensus decision making has been used, and how personal narrative theology is the dominant theological expression which orientates decision making to pastorally based experience and

reason, rather than articulated or formulated doctrine or moral theology.

It is also related to where people come from in terms of their Synod and how influential certain people from certain Synods have been. Synods with greater Congregational and Presbyterian heritage (like Victoria in terms of Presbyterian membership) were more likely to be theologically liberal than Synods with Methodist heritage, and Victoria has had the most influence on the Assembly in terms of the direction in 'progressive' views on sexuality.

Well, what does the future hold? First of all, if there is no change after the 2006 Assembly, there will probably be significant conflict and continued problems at the local regional council of the church in terms of decision-making. 'There will be a prolonged and deep decline of the church with many non-viable and dysfunctional congregations but there will also be pockets of evangelical groups, and a handful of liberal congregations.

Secondly, if there is more radical change or reinforcement of a liberal position on sexuality then a significant split will occur, with the result that within 15 years the Uniting Church will have probably about 10%-20% of the number of viable congregations it has now and many of these may be migrant-ethnic congregations remaining in the church but almost separate, perhaps in Commissions (like the Korean Commission) or separate presbyteries. The Uniting Church will be known as a small church, with few churches in rural areas, and mostly niche type churches in the cities. It will have a large network of social and community services.

Thirdly, what are the options? There are many valiant attempts to look at options for the future. One is the suggestion of Networks have been - like the idea for the South Australian Synod, but the implications of the truncation or dismantling of UCA polity has not been adequately addressed. Here one attempts to deal with the

problem by making Presbyteries irrelevant or non-existent. Another suggestion is that of having theologically aligned presbyteries. New South Wales has already granted a quasi-presbytery status so this is probably the way some parts of the church will develop (if a Synod allows). A third option might be a 'dual Synod' model if the property issue becomes a significant one.

In concluding, whatever develops there will not be any real peace unless the following factors are addressed. First, in terms of theological education, conservatives and evangelicals are going to have to be allowed greater access to or diversity in training for ministry. Secondly, the issue of involvement in the decision-making process must be addressed. Genuine involvement of evangelicals in decision-making processes, including broadening the Business and Facilitation Committees of the important meetings of the church.

Thirdly, with respect to pastoral oversight beyond the congregation, the challenges to the proper functioning and oversight provided by presbyteries need to be addressed. How can the church maintain its polity, especially the responsibilities of Presbyteries, when they have the potential to become increasingly dysfunctional and divided, especially as presbyteries are now struggling to find competent members to undertake the many tasks assigned? In the WA Synod, the Presbytery of Peel has stated it can no longer undertake the responsibilities of being a presbytery.

Fourthly, there is concern about ministry placements and candidature. The church will need to address how the placement and candidate processes are undertaken, so that continuing and debilitating debates are not held within presbyteries especially where the presbytery is not reasonably homogenous in its membership. Fifthly, there is a need to outline or confirm in some way the traditional position and understanding of the majority of the Church with regard to sexual ethics. This is not to say that the church has to be ruled by survey, but

unless the views of the members are similar to those of the leaders there will be continued conflict.

Conclusion: Two Churches

The Uniting Church needs to address how it can continue to allow different two fundamentally different ecclesiologies to develop. You cannot have two churches in the one church unless you want to continue to have escalating difficulty and a move to doctrine being localized, at a time when the church still has regulations and a constitution. This will not work unless there is a new regulation of the Church which states that a member or a council can disregard any regulation or doctrine of the church if they do not like it. This is the ultimate in post-modern ecclesiology.

Is post-modernist ecclesiology possible in a church of our history, development and the age of our members? Here is a key factor for the current debate - our present dispute is quite natural and destined to happen when the majority of the membership basically believes one thing and the Assembly tries to tell them it doesn't, shouldn't or perhaps never actually did. The way sexuality has been handled in the Uniting Church may well have established a dangerous precedent and this is partly why our doctrine, our Basis of Union and our unity in Christ are all stressed and challenged at this time.

ENDNOTES

¹ Peter Bentley & Philip J. Hughes, *The Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research 1996); Peter Bentley, 'A Summary of the Interim Responses to the Report on Sexuality', Assembly Standing Committee. February 1997 and Peter Bentley, 'The Practice of Homosexuality-Comment on the Attitudes of Uniting Church affiliates', *Uniting Church Studies*, August 1997; and Peter Bentley, 'Liberalism, Sexuality and the Future of the Uniting Church', July 2004, Reforming alliance website, http://www.reformingalliance.org.au/Nat_assembly/Peter%20Bentley%20_Paper_.pdf