



sexual (church) Politics

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Not for nothing has the recent Eighth Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia been dubbed 'the sexuality assembly'. It is difficult to write about it without focussing on sexuality. Even though there were major discussions of other issues, and certainly important proposals were endorsed, sexuality permeated everyone's thinking and doing from breakfast to supper, with continued discussions on the bus, huddled groups at morning tea and at other times, and the many public media interviews and coverage, quite apart from the lengthy debates highlighted by procedural matters and personal experiences.

This reflection is my personal observation. Of course I was intimately aware of many of the issues related to the discussion on sexuality because of my contracted work to analyse the responses to the Interim Report of the Task Group on the subject, but I went to the Assembly as a private observer with no right to speak.

At least I got a seat in a reserved section as the media representative for *National Outlook*. Overall I was probably in a unique position, but then perhaps I knew too much. Anyway, I think it best to leave the public relations exercise to the official church media people, so I will report with a focus on the political dimensions of the debate.

The Eighth Assembly saw the installation of the new President, Rev John Mavor, who saw his task as being to get as much consensus as possible and to keep the unity of the church at the forefront.

As well as special business, there were the ordinary triennial reports from the permanent church commissions and special committees, illustrating the variety and depth of work of the Church at a national level including its extensive community service work, mission activity (including social justice and human rights), and ecumenical endeavours.

A special time highlighting the 'Stolen Generation' was movingly illustrated by personal example as well as input from Sir Ronald Wilson, a former Assembly President. This Assembly also expressed its appreciation for the report *Bringing them Home*, indicating that it provided an essential basis for the advancement of the reconciliation process.

This provided an opportunity to support Sir Ronald and to confirm his work with the report, which apparently some elements within the Commonwealth Government had been trying to discredit from the time its orientation was known. Perhaps it would have been simpler if the Government had just ordered another report to be prepared by its media relations department!

Among substantial matters considered, the Assembly approved changes to the structures of the church, allowing a more flexible arrangement for the organisation of meetings and the possibility of having local churches (congregations) as the foundational or primary unit to relate to other councils of the church, rather than the parish (the present grouping of congregations). There will continue to be structural reviews, particularly focussed on the larger coun-

cils of the church, especially the presbyteries (regional groupings). These moves will have long term effects on the viability of smaller churches, the category into which the majority of Uniting churches fall.

Readers need to know that the basis for Uniting Church decision making is the use of fairly detailed meeting procedures, with the aim being to achieve consensus. It is difficult to outline the whole structure, but basically cards are used to gauge reaction and to indicate a personal formal position on proposals. A blue card shown by a delegate indicates: *not in favour/problems, etc.*, while an orange one denotes: *okay, etc.* For example, a proposal to receive a non-contentious report would witness a cloud of orange cards being held up, indicating *consensus achieved*. Reversion to formal voting, which would mean a majority verdict, is severely discouraged by the use of consensus.

The consensus procedure is ably facilitated by a small groups process whereby certain proposals are examined, opinions noted and reported back to a convenor and facilitation group who then report to the Assembly on how things are shaping up in terms of possible consensus or agreement on different proposals. Opposing groups are also encouraged to meet and negotiate in order to reach a common position or a more realistic proposal which can then be put to the Assembly as a joint position.

Obviously many matters easily achieved consensus, or the next best thing—agreement, meaning that *some people have concerns but they are willing to agree to go forward, rather than hold matters up or go to formal voting, etc.*

Sexuality was a dominant concern from Day 1, when there was the introduction of the Report by various Task group members including its Chairperson, Rev Alistair McRae, (a parish minister from Victoria) and a time for initial reactions and responses. This immediately took the debate to the usual level of Uniting Church discussion, the experiential, (as in the doctrine of experientialism: *experience rather than some philosophical or other abstract principle dictates out theology and our policy*), with various stories placing the discussion on a personal level.

Another key player in the debate was the Director for Mission of the Assembly, Rev Dorothy McRae-McMahon who made an early public statement concerning her own position.

These personal revelations were an immediate blow to the evangelical group who had not wanted anyone to 'come out' because it made it extremely difficult for them to present what was basically the negative case without Assembly members consistently being referred back to personalities and pastoral sensitivities.

So, on the issue of sexuality, consensus or agreement was possible on general affirming statements on sexuality as a good gift from God and on statements on marriage; separation, divorce and remarriage; and the issue should be processed by the Assembly. However, it was soon evident that consensus would never be achieved on matters related to homosexuality and in particular the prospect of eventually blessing gay and lesbian relationships, a possibility which had been raised in the Task Group report.

Given the clearly apparent lack of consensus, the facilitation group eventually recommended that the Assembly not proceed with any statements or positions on homosexuality, apart from affirming the previous decisions of the Standing Committee. These basically state that sexual orientation is not in itself a bar to ordination and leave responsibility for decisions about matters related to homosexuality with presbyteries and state synods. The facilitation group also put forward as a compromise a watered-down form of a proposal for blessing gay and lesbian relationships.

Still, there were problems with these proposals. It was clear that no significant groups were satisfied and some thought the church was going backwards. This session produced more frustration and some possibly explosive moments. One was when Warren Bartlett (present Moderator of the Victorian Synod) outlined his distress that for the Assembly to take no action would show a lack of pastoral sensitivity toward gay and lesbian people. Then, referring to the Aboriginal concerns, he implied that there were different 'voices' available that would counteract the official position of the Aboriginal and Islander Congress. It was probably just as well he ran out of speaking time before he unintentionally created internal conflict for Aboriginal members of the Church. Eventually the matters were adjourned to the next session with (it was hoped) a possible solution being arranged over morning tea.

By this stage on the Friday (the second last day) with really only one possible session available for more discussions on sexuality, it was very evident that members were so weary of the debate they were looking for a reasonable way out (of course with consensus).

Thus there was evident relief when a joint proposal was put up by the Synod Moderators (state leaders). They had the authority and political clout between them to ensure that this would bring the final curtain. They outlined a proposal which *noted*, rather than *affirmed* (perhaps a small point), the Standing Committee resolutions and recommended that three former Presidents consult and think about ways of responding to gay and lesbian people. This was an alternative to a new formal Task Group.

There followed various speeches, including a comment from the Task Group through its chair, Alistair McRae, who realistically conceded this approach was the only way forward, but also asked the Assembly to be mindful of those who would bear the cost of its taking this approach. This proposal was then carried by a sea of orange cards with only Alistair McRae holding a blue one as a final personal protest. He was overcome with emotion; the whole thing had obviously been a painful and emotionally draining experience for all the Task Group members.

All that was left then was the official thank you to the Task Group members, many of whom were visibly upset and disturbed by the recent events. After this, the General Secretary indicated his personal support for Dorothy McRae-McMahon, who went down to the rostrum to respond as if she was the new President-elect. This time she indicated she would never resign her ordination, but might

retire early if her ministry was no longer viable.

The session closed with one of the Task Group members, Joan Wright-Howie reciting her poem *Affirmation* to the Assembly again. (This had been used in the Task Group's introductory session.) Then Assembly members joined in with her, with the President finishing with a prayer, and introducing the hymn *Amazing Grace*. During the singing a number of people left, near to, or in, tears, some I believe brought on by the hymn which they perceived to be an inappropriate choice at the time.

It would have appeared at this stage that at least some members of the gay and lesbian group believed they had been defeated, but the very next day after a rallying around together and a pep talk it was a different story with many believing that things had gone better than they had originally thought.

On reflection I am inclined to agree, but I see their success to be within the informal process, rather than the formal process of the decision-making.

Perhaps, because it could be argued that no-one in the church really lost, could we say it was a win/win situation? Well, not really. The only real winners were the media, particularly on the final day of the debate (Friday 11 July) which provided a setting that secular media groups only dream about: Sex, religion and politics—it was all there in abundance.

Why was there no formal decision? There is no doubt that the significant factor in determining the outcome of the sexuality proposals was the role of the Aboriginal and Islander Congress. The dilemma confronting the members of the Assembly was clearly shown when the Congress produced a short statement outlining five points which it considered prevented its members from affirming or endorsing homosexual relationships and practice, formally indicating that it would "vote against the practice of homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle for leadership of its churches". This raised the prospect of perhaps killing the reconciliation process within the Church once and for all.

Another lot of opponents was the migrant-ethnic group. While overall it was very influential, unlike the Congress its members did not have a consistently strong position.

There was also the evangelical group. However by themselves, this group, being mainly white and male, were easy to stereotype privately as "misogynist, homophobic bastards" and thus sideline as opponents.

The possible withdrawal of the Congress was the key to 'the fall from' (Assembly parlance for a decision not to proceed with) any potentially radical decisions. I later heard one person express the belief that the Assembly had been blackmailed by the Congress (perhaps a most unfortunate use of words), but I think this displayed the high level of commitment of the different sides who had, at different times, raised the possibility of leaving, or of schism. (One senior person was reported in November last year as saying we owed it to the church to split it over the issue.) Rather than seeing these comments as just simple threats like "taking one's bat and going home", I think we

should see them as evidence of real commitment to particular views which quite naturally and logically imply that people would not be able to continue in good conscience if a categorical decision was made one way or the other.

Given the actual make up of the Assembly, particularly the delegation from the Victorian synod and the delegation of appointees and cooptees representing permanent agencies, commissions and special categories

(youth, etc.), it was possible that the Assembly could have made some radical decisions if it had

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moved away from the consensus procedures to formal (majority) voting. Perhaps the real irony of this form of consensus is (and its benefit for those who did not want any major decisions to be made) if you stick with it you will never make any decision about any controversial matter. If the gay and lesbian group wanted radical decisions at this Assembly, they would have had to force a vote. However, this would have meant alienating significant groups within the church, like the Aboriginal and migrant-ethnic groups, for whom people like Dorothy McRae-McMahon have been prominent advocates over the years. This irony and the dilemma facing the gay and lesbian group now is based on the concern to do justice to all.

Again, back to who won? Well, as I indicated, though no one won in terms of actual policy decisions (or non-decisions), it could be argued that the gay and lesbian group within the church have received a form of *de facto* affirmation at the national level of the church through the public recognition of Dorothy McRae-McMahon. (It was almost as if she were the *de facto* President-elect in the way she accepted the applause of many in the Assembly at the end of the debate after her recognition by the General Secretary, Rev Gregor Henderson). They also received wider recognition when the previous decisions of merely the Standing Committee regarding homosexuals in the ministry and the blessing of same-sex relationships were noted by the whole Assembly. Added to this was the interesting and wider interpretation given to these decisions by the General Secretary..

What will all this mean for the future debate on this issue within the Uniting Church? Well, as pop-singer, Karen Carpenter, used to sing in her melancholy way: "We've only just begun".

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