

A cry in the wilderness
Please can we have less political speak in the church?

Peter Bentley: *December 2005*

Political Speak 1. “We need to live in the messy middle”

One of the main problems with the idea of the messy middle is that very few people in church leadership actually live there, and some have not even visited the place, even though they may say it is a great place to be. Most people take sides, even if they say they do not. I was intrigued when a minister told me that he loved being in the messy middle, because I had noted that he had been more than happy to endorse a particularly one-sided liberal proposal at a Synod meeting.

I believe it is more consistent for people who call others to live in the messy middle to lead the way in abstaining in any debate on matters of defined policy, and certainly take no active part in the promotion of the more liberal alternatives in matters of sexual standards.

Surely the only path for ‘messy middle’ people when confronted by proposals that call for a categorical position is to abstain.

Political Speak 2. “There is no hierarchy in the Uniting Church.”

There are many things in life that are technically true, but we know that is not the way it works out in practice. I have been constantly amazed at how some church leaders think presbytery proposals need to go to the Assembly only after they have been to the respective Synod. It has also been intriguing to see how presbytery proposals are considered after Synod proposals in terms of Assembly process. I am not aware of any justification for this in the Basis of Union. Perhaps unwittingly, leaders of the church give the impression that their particular council is superior to another council, and thus help to raise the common perception that there is a hierarchy and ordinary members are certainly not part of it.

The failure of the Assembly to listen to the voice of the wider church through the responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality is one of the most significant examples of the way in which the reality of hierarchy squashed the ideal of interrelated councils.

Political Speak 3. “We (‘the liberal side’) do not caucus!”

An interesting reaction to evangelical gatherings for prayer, support and information over the last two years has been the response – “how dare you”, usually coupled with “we do not do these things”.

One could probably argue that the liberal response is at least partly true, because when you have so much power you don’t need to overtly caucus. If you already start with 20-25% of the votes at major councils of the church because of the number of paid employee representatives and co-options, then you have an excellent starting point for the first decision making process. When you add the present system of appointments which has a tendency to produce an ever increasing theological liberal orientation as one moves toward the Assembly meeting, then you have an excellent foundation for directing the whole decision making process.

In reality, however, many of the ‘theologically liberal’ members and groups in the church constantly caucus. It is sometimes termed ‘having coffee’, other times it is ‘a sharing meeting’, and some times it is ‘worship’. Rarely is a term such as ‘political meeting’ used, but the nature of politics makes the caucus a constant reality because of the experience and orientation of many overtly ‘theological liberal’ members of the church toward political life. Everyone caucuses, and if you think you don’t then, you are in power.

Political Speak 4. “People need to understand the bible better.”

This is perhaps a not so subtle way of saying, ‘you have got it completely wrong and you will be educated until you get it right.’

I am aware that we all need to understand the bible better. It is purely astounding arrogance that promotes the view that the ‘theologically liberal’ approach is the best or only approach.

I believe it would now be helpful for those on those on the ‘theologically liberal side’ to either admit that there is intellectual foundation for the evangelical and reformed approach to scripture, or to publicly inform our membership in a more direct way that they do not think so. At present, the language used, like the reference sentence at the start, makes a mockery of the supposed idea that there are two (or even more) valid positions in the church.

Political Speak 5. “The migrant-ethnic churches need more time.”

Please, let us not patronise our migrant-ethnic churches even more than we normally do.

This is about strongly held positions. Why can’t the Uniting Church recognise that migrant-ethnic churches have well grounded and maintained positions on sexuality and sexual practice? Our migrant-ethnic churches know the value of family life for the vitality of, and development of their community.

Political Speak 6. “There are other voices in migrant-ethnic communities”

This is a very interesting attempt to bring doubt mainly into the minds of Anglo members who dominate the councils of the church. It is a subtle way of raising issues without reference to the real situation and real beliefs of the members of our migrant-ethnic congregations.

Yes, of course in any debate there are other voices, but in most debates it is important to base your argument in reality. The Uniting Church needs to recognise that 95% plus of our migrant-ethnic members are supportive of traditional positions on sexuality. From my discussions with leaders and members in these communities, there is also overwhelming support for traditional positions from all generations, and it is not a matter of more time or other voices.

Political Speak No. 7 “We listen!”

Yes, there has been a great deal of listening going on. Sometimes it is good to actually act on what people say, or at least let people know that no matter how much is said, it will not make any difference. Rather than more listening, what is needed is brutal honesty. Church members need to know the whole agenda for the future of the Uniting Church, rather than listen to more political-speak.

Political Speak No. 8 “People are really not sure.”

While there is a group within the church who are not sure when questioned about matters of sexuality, the overall opposition to liberalisation of standards for sexual practice within the Uniting Church has been plainly evident to anyone who has read survey material over the last ten years.

It is evident to me from my research and contacts that synod and area differences are very important in terms of the position of the membership of a local congregation. Also significant is the influence of the minister, and people may be interested to learn that it is actually the lay members with traditional viewpoints who are more suppressed by their ‘theologically liberal’ ministers, and as a consequence are now the ones who are probably becoming less sure. This should not surprise anyone who is familiar with the overt orientation of the leadership in the UCA. There should be an honest and up front statement from the Uniting Church to clearly outline why the church does not want to listen to the voices of the majority of members on this particular matter, when in the past it had always done so.

Political Speak No. 9**“The church is not a democracy.”**

I agree that the church should not decide matters by plebiscite, but it needs to hear the voices of its membership. From my study of the Assembly and its decision-making processes over twenty years, it is evident that one of the main ways the Assembly heard the voice of the church was through responses to reports. The opinions of members have been very clear, and to dilute, belittle or interpret these opinions to the idea of “not sure” is simply propaganda.

I marvel at the way the church can use these types of ‘slogans’ when they suit, and discard them if they do not. As I have stated before, if the statistics on sexuality and leadership had been the other way, then the Uniting Church would have proudly proclaimed the voices of the membership and declared the church had spoken.

Many times evangelicals have been outmanoeuvred, and credit must be given to the actually very small group of strongly committed really ‘theologically liberal’ members who have been trained in party politics and know how to wield the stick with slogans like this one.

Political Speak No. 10.**“The church is a safe place.”**

There is a curious idea in the Uniting Church that if we pass resolutions about a council being a ‘safe place’, then this will provide the basis for a ‘safe place’. Just like the myths associated with the idea of ‘safe sex’, there is in reality no such thing as a ‘safe place in the church’. We may be able to provide a ‘safer place’, but at present the orientation of the ‘safe place’ often impacts negatively on other people’s culture and practice. A ‘safe place’ can be abused in ways that are seemingly innocuous to most people, simply because they are not aware of the politics within the church. Factors that can actually contribute to an un-safe environment, especially for evangelical members include careful or subtle use of didactic ‘liberal’ devotions, and heavily dominated chairing of meetings and business arrangements. The Uniting Church needs to work harder at providing a ‘safer place’ for all people.

Political Speak No. 11.**“The church membership is too comfortable”**

This means “why is there not more support for social justice and social programmes from the membership?”

Support for any programme or initiative developed by the leadership of any church is based on the level of connection and trust the leadership have with the membership. Thus any commitment to social renewal and justice programmes within the UCA is actually based on trust. Sadly the hierarchy of the UCA is so disconnected with the majority of the membership that the ideal of trust has been seriously damaged.

Political Speak No. 12.**“The church membership is too conservative”**

This is code for “too many church members vote for the National Party or Liberal Party”.

I have long been intrigued by the (usually private) bewailing of some leaders of the church about the conservative nature of the membership of the church, particularly in rural areas. One Anglican Bishop said to one prominent UCA member that he had finally figured out the Uniting Church

- “It was a bunch of socialists leading a bunch of capitalists.”

I believe most members of the church realise that all political parties are part of a fallen world, and that no one party has a monopoly on ethics and values.

While there has probably been significant change over the last ten years, many members today would still have a conservative political orientation, but woe betide anyone who publicly supports a more socially conservative position at a council of the church, or even raises questions that actually may be helpful. The Uniting Church should be part of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and not an implicit or even explicit part of a political party.

Yes, the Uniting Church needs to work harder at providing a ‘safer place’ for all people.