

Surveys, Statistics and Sexuality

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How does one determine the mind of the Church on an issue as complex and divisive as homosexuality? For over a decade, the Uniting Church has struggled courageously with this question. Task Groups have been set up to listen to the biblical, medical, sociological and personal evidence. Individuals, congregations, parishes, presbyteries, synods and assemblies have deliberated. Reports have been written, questionnaires have been sent out, and surveys conducted, and the results of each have been statistically and qualitatively explained.

In this short article, I would like to reflect upon surveys, statistics and sexuality, and use as my point of reference data provided by the National Social Science Survey (1993) on attitudes of Uniting Church attenders and affiliates to the practice of homosexuality. Affiliates are all those people who indicate an affiliation with the Uniting Church. Within this group are regular, 'basically weekly' attenders who are most likely to be members or at least actively involved in the local church.¹ This brief survey provides one picture, or rather, gives another angle to the already established picture.

Questions in the survey about how people view sexual relations between two adults of the same sex came in the context of a series of questions about sexual relations between adults. Four main categories of response to the question about what people thought 'About sexual relations between two adults of the same sex?' were allowed. These ranged from 'always wrong' to 'not wrong'. Seventy-two per cent of Uniting affiliates did not approve of sexual

relations between people of the same sex, with sixty-four per cent indicating it was always wrong. Twelve per cent did not believe same sex sexual relations were wrong. The only groups to record a higher conservative position (and with reasonable numbers for the sample) were the Baptists (75%) and the Pentecostals (95%).² Uniting affiliates recorded a higher conservative picture compared to the general population where sixty-one per cent did not approve of same sex relations, while twenty-three per cent endorsed same gender sexual relations.

The conservative orientation of the Uniting group is even more marked when comparing regular attenders, rising to eighty-seven per cent overall (compared to 82% of all regular church attenders), with seventy-four per cent believing same sex relations were always wrong (compared to 63% of all regular attenders). Only four per cent of regular Uniting Church attenders endorsed same sex relations. Two other interesting categories correlated in this sample were age and region. With respect to age there is a consistent trend to a more conservative position after age forty. The age group thirty to thirty-nine display the most liberal attitudes, with twenty-nine per cent endorsing same sex relations, while the fifteen to thirty years and sixty plus groups hold the most conservative positions. There were interesting state differences, with Queensland recording the highest conservative percentage (92%) compared to NSW (67%) and Victoria (68%).³

Two further questions in the survey again appeared in the context of a broad range of questions about sexual practice. The questions asked: 'What do you think about sexual practice between two men?'; and, immediately after, 'How about between two women?' These questions allowed people significant choice of position, ranging from 'absolutely wrong' to 'absolutely right', with five options, including a classic middle position. The results showed that just over eighty-eight per cent of Uniting regular attenders hold a general conservative position on male-male sexual practice, with seventy-two per cent indicating that sex between two men is absolutely wrong. Just over two per cent endorsed male homosexual sexual relations, with about nine per cent in the middle. These figures are similar to the overall picture for all regular denominational attenders, except that a higher percentage (80%) indicated that sex between two men is absolutely wrong.

² It is worth comparing the Uniting affiliates with the Presbyterian (71%) and the Methodists (68%). 2.4% of the total sample recorded their religion as Methodist. This group was 30% of the size of the Uniting group.

³ Interestingly, among the 'No Religion' group 33% indicated they agreed that same sex relations are always wrong, while 40% stated it was not wrong at all (ten times the Uniting Church sample).

¹ The National Social Science Survey (1993) is an Australian National University research-based survey. A usual survey involves about 2000 adults. In this case, a random sample of 2200 adults was polled. The survey included a range of questions about sexuality, including specific questions on homosexuality. (The Christian Research Association provided questions which related to spiritual beliefs and practices.) The Uniting Church proportion of the sample was approximately 9%. Individuals were also asked about their church attendance and were able to choose from: never attend; less than monthly; monthly; or basically weekly. Comparative material (1989-1993) is provided in the 1994 Christian Research Association Research paper No. 1 'Australian Families: Practices and Attitudes'. Philip Hughes provides a general comparative church sketch in his recent article 'Attitudes to Issues of Sexuality' in the June 1997 issue of the Christian Research Bulletin *Pointers*. Some of the material is seemingly duplicated, but this is purely an overlap because the Australian survey also included questions for the International Social Survey project. (All Australians taking part in the survey answered these questions which allows some comparison to be made between various questions.) What is particularly helpful is that in one part, separate questions were provided about sexual relations between two men and two women, as opposed to a general 'same sex' category.

Examining the figures for affiliates it is clear that the majority still hold a conservative viewpoint. Sixty seven per cent state it was 'absolutely wrong', rising to eighty per cent 'not approving'. Six per cent of affiliates endorsed male homosexual relations. Fourteen per cent took a middle ground. Age was again a significant factor, with the thirty to thirty-nine age group being the most liberal (only 43% indicating 'absolutely wrong') and the sixty-plus group the most conservative (79% 'absolutely wrong'). There was a significant difference between male and female respondents with males more likely to say male homosexual relations were absolutely wrong (74%) compared to females (60%). Females were twice as likely to take a middle position (18%-9%).

Compared to male-male sex, a slightly lower percentage of regular church attenders believe that sex between two women is absolutely wrong (70%), with eighty-nine per cent indicating an overall conservative stance. Similar to attitudes to male sex, just over two per cent endorsed these same sex relations, with about nine per cent taking the middle ground. These figures are similar to the overall picture for all regular denominational attenders, except that a higher percentage (79%) indicated the conviction that sex between two women was absolutely wrong.

The figures for Uniting affiliates show that the majority still hold a conservative viewpoint with sixty-two per cent saying absolutely wrong, rising to eighty per cent less approving, but again there is a slightly larger positive group (5%) and fifteen per cent in the middle category. Age was again significant amongst Uniting affiliates, with the 30-39 age group being the most liberal (41% indicating absolutely wrong) and the sixty-plus group the most conservative (77% absolutely wrong). There was no significant difference between male and female respondents in overall orientation, but males were slightly more likely to say female homosexual relations were absolutely wrong (64%) compared to females (62%). Females were again twice as likely to take a middle position (19%-10%).

The National Social Science Survey also asked a question related to the approval of homosexual marriage. It is clear that the majority of Uniting Church affiliates do not regard homosexual marriage as an option, with only seven per cent expressing agreement, compared to thirteen per cent of all Australians. The percentage of approval from regular attenders was again lower and recorded only five per cent for all denominations.

It is clear from all the data above that Uniting Church affiliates are usually located on the most conservative end of the spectrum with regard to the approval of or endorsement of sexual relations between people of the same sex. While it is not possible to reach

definite conclusions about the reasons for this orientation from examining National Social Science Survey data, I believe that the following speculations may be worth considering:

Firstly, it is worth noting that most of the continuing focus on homosexuality within the Uniting Church has been on internal matters related to internal perceptions of appropriate standards and behaviour of leaders, including the blessing of same-sex relationships by Uniting Church ministers and the training and ordination of homosexual candidates, rather than on external matters related to the private rights of individuals in a pluralist society.⁴

Secondly, it should be noted that according to the NSSS, people in our society have reasonably conservative attitudes about homosexual practice. Fifty-nine per cent said that sexual relations between two men were absolutely wrong and fifty-three per cent said the same for relations between two women. These were higher percentages than those recorded for people who believed extra marital sex was absolutely wrong.

Thirdly, all church people have generally more conservative attitudes. This should not surprise anyone familiar with the church (catholic in particular) which has traditionally fostered a heterosexual lifestyle through its active commitment to and endorsement of the practice of marriage between a woman and a man and usually following, the promotion of the 'family'. The Church has also traditionally taught (implicitly if not explicitly) the unacceptableness of homosexual practices for at least a Christian lifestyle. Most regular attenders would have grown up within this theological and sexual ethic framework. Only a section of the church has been continually exposed to more liberal and alternative perspectives and an even smaller section of the church have actually taken up these perspectives as the basis for either practical or structural change. In any case, the broad topic relating to the place of homosexual people in society only became publicly prominent in the 1980s. In the Uniting Church this led to the establishment of the Task Group on Homosexuality, the publication of an Assembly report (1985) and eventually the Response to the Report (1987).

It is evident that the recent reports of the Assembly Task Group have increased public discussion of homosexuality within the church. It will be interesting to see in future years if there has been any change in the overall orientation of the attitudes of Uniting Church affiliates toward homosexual practice.

⁴ For a picture of the broader development of gay religious life in Australia see the article by Warren Talbot (a member of the Uniting Church and of the Assembly Task Group on Sexuality), 'On the Boundary: Gay Religious Groups in Australia', published in the *Australian Religious Studies Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1995.