

Uniting Sexuality and Faith

Final Report of the
Assembly Task Group on Sexuality

For presentation to the Eighth Assembly of the
Uniting Church in Australia

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UNITING SEXUALITY AND FAITH

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Introduction

'Living as the Task Group'

Background

- o.1. Responding to widespread concern within the Uniting Church on issues relating to sexuality, the Sixth Assembly (1991) established the Sexuality Task Group. Its brief was to research these issues and bring a report to the Assembly in 1997. The aim of the report was to help the Uniting Church to:
- 'respond to changing patterns of human relationships and sexual activity in our society, with a view to promoting healing and wholeness in human relationships.'¹
- o.2. In undertaking this, the Task Group ordered its life around worship, Eucharist, Bible study and prayer. It grew in its commitment to be a community of God's people, struggling together to grow as we learned to respect and trust one another across our different theologies and life experiences. It has been a demanding yet valuable journey, and one which we hope the whole Uniting Church will be willing to undertake in God's Spirit. We recognise that it is still an unfinished journey.
- o.3. The Task Group attempted, to fulfil its charter by working on a number of levels. Following the Terms of Reference we made some analysis of the changes occurring in society and considered frameworks for discussing the issues from the perspective of the Gospel. We studied the diverse witness of Scripture and noted the variety of ways Scripture is interpreted within the Christian community. We also looked at how we make ethical decisions.
- o.4. In order to make some of these discoveries available to the Uniting Church, we commissioned a series of Occasional Papers reflecting something of the breadth of approaches within our Church.²
- o.5. As described in the Year of Listening Report,³ members of the Task Group devoted much time to holding hearings and discussions throughout the church, in which all members were invited to participate. Consultations continued across the Uniting Church following the release of the Interim Report in May 1996⁴ with the aim of stimulating further discussion and indicating some possible directions for the Church. Regrettably, despite attempts to engage the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and ethnic congregations in dialogue, the Task Group was largely unsuccessful.
- o.6. Further, we consulted other churches around the world who have already engaged in similar discussions on human sexuality. We greatly benefited from this exchange. It is interesting to note that several Australian churches have now taken up the discussion.
- o.7. Many will be aware of the strength, both positive and negative, of the responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality.⁵ For some respondents the directions put forward for prayerful consideration in the Interim Report indicated 'a capitulation to the spirit of the age and a departure from received Biblical and Church teaching.' For others it indicated 'a new movement of the Spirit in the direction of a more gracious and inclusive Church.'
- o.8. We pray that this Report will be a significant resource for members of the Uniting Church in the on-going task of making faithful decisions relating to sexuality and human relationships.
- ### The Journey of the Church
- o.9. The Uniting Church is a diverse Church. Many differences were carried into the Union. On an even broader canvas, the UCA reflects the diversity that has characterised the church since its beginning. Therefore, the question arises: in what does our unity consist? Are there limits to diversity? What central affirmations need to be made in order to embrace God's mission in the world together? At what points can we accept or even celebrate that within our Church, there are different understandings about Christian life and witness?

1. Terms of Reference, cf. Appendix I

2. *Sexuality: Exploring the Issues*, Assembly Sexuality Task Group, Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 1996.

3. 'Year of Listening Report' in *Sexuality: Exploring the Issues*, Chapter 14.

4. *Interim Report on Sexuality*, Assembly Sexuality Task Group, Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 1996.

5. *Summary of the Responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality*, Assembly Standing Committee, April, 1997.

- o.10. The Task Group does not want to presume the answers to such large issues but we are conscious that they form a significant part of the context within which the Uniting Church is seeking to make faithful decisions.
- o.11. In this Report the Task Group sets out a suggested approach to issues surrounding sexuality. We were not asked to conduct a survey of opinions of members of the Uniting Church nor undertake market research to discover how the Uniting Church might present the most palatable approach to sexuality for the contemporary world. Instead we have been asked to *assist Church members to make faithful decisions relating to sexuality*. That is, to help people allow the light of the Gospel to shine into our created nature as spiritual/sexual beings called to glorify God in every dimension of our lives, including our relationships.
- o.12. We offer this work for prayerful consideration aware that many may not share our conclusions. Ultimately it is for the Christian community as a whole to decide upon these matters.

Definitions

The following definitions refer to the way in which this Report uses its terminology. It is understood that the definitions do not necessarily apply in other contexts.

Adultery: sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than their legal spouse.

Bisexual: one who is erotically attracted equally to those of the same and the opposite sex, though the attraction may not be expressed overtly.

Celibacy: the intentional decision not to marry or engage in sexual intercourse.

Chastity: abstaining from sexual intercourse, either temporarily or permanently.

Church: large case designates the Uniting Church in Australia and 'small case' 'church' designates the church universal or other churches.

Coming Out: the process of accepting one's sexual orientation and no longer hiding it.

Covenant relationship: a term used by unmarried couples, including gay and lesbian people, to describe their commitment to live in a long-term, loving, faithful relationship.

Erotic attraction: sexual arousal and desire.

Feminism: the belief that women and men are equal and should equally determine the structure and ordering of society and its relationships.

Gay: A word used by homosexual men to describe themselves. The word dates back to 13th century France.

Gender Identity: the understanding which is formed from the role models and norms of our culture, society, family and peers, as to what it means to be a man or a woman.

Gender dysphoria: the inner awareness of being male in a female body, or female in a male body (sometimes referred to as trans-gender) and the desire to change the body and live according to one's inner awareness.

Heterosexual Person: one who is exclusively or overwhelmingly erotically attracted to those of the opposite sex.

Heterosexism: the belief that male-female relationships are the norm, thus inherently superior and that sexual expression is appropriate only within such relationships, marriage being the highest form.

Homophobia: the irrational fear of homosexuality and homosexual people, including fear of one's own attraction to those of the same sex. This leads to prejudice and discrimination against gay and lesbian people, sometimes involving violence.

Homosexual Person: one who is exclusively or overwhelmingly attracted to those of the same sex.

Inter-sex: having to some extent both male and female reproductive organs at birth.

In the closet: keeping one's sexual orientation hidden from others for self protection.

Incest: the inappropriate sexual intercourse between persons who are so closely related that such intercourse is forbidden by law.

Intimacy: the emotional, spiritual depth and warmth experienced mutually in a relationship/friendship.

Lesbian: A word used by homosexual women to describe themselves.

Masturbation: the stimulation of the genitals, personally or mutually, for sexual enjoyment.

Pederast: an adult, generally male, who desires and engages in sexual activity with a boy (as in Ancient Greece).

Patriarchy: (literally 'rule of the fathers') the social system where the male is dominant and seen as superior and holds the power to determine the structure and ordering of society, politically, economically and culturally.

Paedophile: an adult, male or female, who is sexually attracted to children of the same or opposite sex and initiates sexual activity. A paedophile may be heterosexual or homosexual.

Pornography: exploitative writing, pictures, films, photographs and computer programs designed to arouse sexual desire.

Sexual Abuse: includes sexual assault (not limited to sexual intercourse) and any unwanted sexual behaviour or threat there of which makes the person feel threatened or afraid. It may entail verbal, mental, emotional, spiritual, economic or physical abuse.

Sexual Harassment: a dehumanising misuse of power, where a perpetrator torments a victim verbally, mentally, emotionally or physically with regard to their gender, physical characteristics, sexuality or relationships.

Sexual Identity: biological and psychological factors which shape our awareness of being male or female.

Sexual Intercourse: the sexual act in which the male penis is inserted into the female vagina, usually resulting in ejaculation of the male semen.

Sexual Intimacy: sexual activity which is mutually desired and mutually pleasurable/satisfying within a close, intimate relationship. It may or may not include genital sexual expression.

Sexual orientation: the direction of a persons erotic attraction.

Sexuality: our experience of being in the world as embodied selves, male and female.

Transvestite: one who desires to and wears clothing appropriate to the opposite sex..

Virginity: not having had sexual intercourse.

Chapter 1

'Living as the Church'

*We are born,
we are nurtured
and we live.
As we live
we seek to learn
how to be human.*

This chapter explores our Christian identity as Church. It includes:

- our identity as God's good creation
- our identity as sexual beings
- our identity in covenant relationship with the Triune God
- our identity as a broken and sinful people
- our eschatological identity as people seeking God's Reign
- our baptismal identity in Christ
- our communal identity as Church
- our Church's identity in relation to the changing patterns of society.

God's Good Creation

- 1.1. As Christians, we believe that people are born to live in partnership with God, with one another and with creation. In the beginning, God created the world. In God's own image, God gave life to humankind, male and female he created them. God blessed them... and God saw everything he had made and indeed it was very good. (*Genesis 1.*)

Sexual Beings

- 1.2. The creation stories provide a beautiful image of the creation of humanity. God made the first human being from the dust of the earth and 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being' (*Genesis 2:7*). It is into our human body that God gives the breath (spirit) of life. We are not disembodied spirits, but created bodies, part of God's good creation. With the creation of the second human being from the bone of the first, maleness and femaleness are identified for the first time and with it the gift of sexuality. With the concluding word 'therefore', the story explains that because of the good gift of sexuality 'the man clings to his wife and they become one flesh. And they were both naked, and were not ashamed'. (*Genesis 2:24*)
- 1.3. Far from being something shameful the human body can be spoken of as the temple of the Holy Spirit (*1 Corinthians 6:19*). The naked bodies of the male and female are not an occasion for shame (*Genesis 1:26-31*). The body is a wonderful creation (*Psalms 139:13-15*). Sexual love is celebrated in the Song of Solomon. It is through the sexual union of male and female that the human race reproduces. It is in the body that we encounter one another, giving and receiving love.

In the Image of God

- 1.4. The understanding of humanity as being in God's image forms an important basis for a theological understanding of sexuality.
- The human person is created by God to be male and female.
 - Sexuality is good and ordained by God as part of the creation.
 - Genesis (*1:27*) speaks of humankind as both singular and plural. This peculiar formula makes an important affirmation. 'On the one hand, humankind is a

single entity. All human persons stand in solidarity before God. On the other hand, humankind is a community, male and female.....and according to this bold affirmation, not mirrored as an individual but as a community'.⁶

Covenant with God

- 1.5. The God in whose image humanity is created is the God of the covenant. God's self-communication led Israel to understand that God seeks relationship. The human capacity to respond to God and to relate to other human beings therefore, can be seen as a reflection of our creation in God's image and likeness.
- 1.6. God's relationship with humanity develops in the form of a covenant with the people of Israel: 'I will be their God and they shall be my people' (*Jeremiah 31:33*). The covenant calls people into a relationship of obedience to God, love for one another and faithful stewardship of the whole creation. The Hebrew Scriptures tell the story of God's continuing commitment to humankind, a story of God's faithfulness and liberating purpose in the face of human unfaithfulness.
- 1.7. The New Testament develops this understanding but adds a new dimension. Jesus Christ inaugurates a new covenant. He is God's image (*2 Corinthian 4:4, Colossians 1:15*) and our humanity finds its fulfilment in being transformed by the Spirit into the likeness of Christ. The incarnation of Jesus Christ reveals to us God's intention for humanity, which we experience only in its fallen and incomplete state. Through union with Christ we participate in the image of God manifested perfectly in him. Our creation in God's image points towards and finds fulfilment in our being conformed to God's image in Jesus Christ and sharing in the love and fellowship of the Triune God.
- 1.8. God's commitment to humanity in Christ calls forth the response of Christian living. We discover how to live as we seek to fulfil our potential as beings made in the image of the God. We begin to glimpse God's nature through the stories of God's relationship with Israel, as we seek to live the way of Jesus Christ and as God's Spirit dwells with and transforms our living.
- 1.9. Trinitarian theology affirms that our creation in God's image reflects the Christian understanding that God is essentially relational; 'the *koinonia* of persons in love'.⁷ The divine image does not primarily characterise human beings in isolation from each other. Rather it describes us as beings who are both individual and social.

Sin

- 1.10. The early chapters of Genesis give the church a language for describing our sexuality as both blessed and broken, gift and dilemma. Every created reality is both good and fallen. Our sexuality is one dimension of life in which we experience this tension acutely.
- 1.11. The creation story of Genesis 2 has its sequel in the story of human fallenness in Genesis 3. This story tells how people seek to be like God, by 'doing their own thing' and breaking the trust and covenant of God. The result is alienation from God, from the rest of creation, from one another and from ourselves. Alienation from our bodies, from one another, and from the rest of creation is a sign of our alienation from God. When the partnership with God is broken human life becomes distorted. Because sin is separation from God, it cuts us off from the One in whom 'we live, and move and have our being' (*Acts 17:28*). Sin is the failure to become what we are, to be in the image of God - social beings destined for loving communion.⁸
- 1.12. Sin is manifested where love is overwhelmed by hate, where power is abused and misused, where the earth is exploited, where peace is threatened by war and where there is injustice. In this sense, sin is more than wrong actions. It is not just about breaking the law.⁹ The law reflects and supports right relationships, but following the law does not guarantee the rightness of relationship (*Matthew 12:1-8*). Sin is about not being in tune with God's intention for creation. Furthermore,
- 'For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.' (*Romans 3:23-24*).
- 1.13. Where some Christians today prefer to believe in the Augustinian theology of 'original sin', which links sexual desire with 'the fall', this Report concludes that the

6. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation - A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox, 1982, pp. 33,34.

7. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, Eerdmans Publishing, Michigan, 1991, p. 68.

8. James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1979, p. 104.

9. Chris Budden, 'Christian Faith and Human Sexuality' in *Sexuality: Exploring the Issues*, p. 9.

creation stories name the sin of humanity as seeking to be like God. When Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil they seek independence from God. Their sin is the breaking of relationship with God. As a consequence of their sin their sexuality is affected. They realise their nakedness and their innocence is lost. (*Genesis 3:10*)

- 1.14. In Christ we are set free in order to turn again to our vocation of love for God and one another.

A Mixed Legacy of Teaching

- 1.15. In the church we have received a mixed legacy of teaching regarding the body and sexuality. By and large we have inherited a fractured view of the human person. It has involved viewing the human person as a dualism of spirit and body: that which is of the spirit is good, of the body, evil. The male has been regarded as superior to the female.¹⁰ One of the major problems that Paul faced with the Church at Corinth was this dualism of body and spirit.¹¹ 'Body' for Paul was primarily the medium by which we are in touch with other people and the world. He saw the resurrection of Christ as the symbol of the resurrection of our bodies as a part of the new covenant. The 'spiritual body' (*1 Corinthians 15:44*) is in fact not a spiritualised body, but one that has been 'vivified by the Spirit'.¹²
- 1.16. By the fourth century the church had a clear standard of sexual behaviour. All sexual activity, even within marriage, even for the express purposes of procreation was regarded as defiling and dangerous for the Christian soul. The only completely acceptable lifestyle for Christians was absolute sexual abstinence.¹³ Sexual desire (concupiscence) was understood as a punishment the human race paid for the Fall. Marriage was a necessary but distasteful means of propagating the human race: a concession to the weakness instilled in human beings through our primal disobedience. Although these standards are no longer generally taught their influence lingers still, deep in the psyche of western men and women. We believe they underlie much of modern society's sexual obsession, fear and dysfunction. They also conflict with Paul's message to Corinth.
- 1.17. Only comparatively recently has the church begun teaching that sexuality is a good gift of God. Part of this positive approach entails recovering the Hebraic sense of the unity of the person. God has created us as intellectual, emotional, spiritual, physical, sexual beings (*1 Corinthians 6:19-20, Romans 12:1-2*). We are both body and spirit.

The Reign of God

- 1.18. Every person's sexuality then is under grace and under sin. Holiness is a goal of the Christian life in response to grace:
- 'By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing...not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works...' (*Ephesians 2:8-10*)
- 1.19. Through the working of the Spirit, in the context of the community of faith, we seek to become whole persons in Christ. (*John 10:10*)
- 1.20. 'While we still were sinners Christ died for us' (*Romans 5:8*). The grace of God finds its clearest expression in the sending of the Son for our salvation. Christians are on the journey of discipleship which began in Galilee during the life-time of Jesus. Mark's gospel account of the ministry of Jesus begins with these words:
- 'After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news"'. (*Mark 1:14-15*)
- 1.21. Declaring this at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus makes a clear link with the Reign of God declared in the Hebrew Scripture.
- 1.22. As Jesus models a new disclosure of God so he embodies a call for a new human community. The writer to the Ephesians urges the abandonment of the old life for an embrace of the new:
- 'You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to

10. Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs of the Kingdom of Heaven*, Penguin, 1990, Chs 1, 8 & 9.

11. Nigel Watson, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Epworth, London, 1992, p. xxviii.

12. Brendan Byrne, *Inheriting the Earth*, St Paul Publications, Homebush, 1990, pp. 95f

13. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Faber & Faber 1988; Graeme Griffin, 'An Historical Approach to Christian Attitudes to Sexuality', in *Sexuality : Exploring the Issues*, 1996; Muriel Porter, *Sex, Marriage and the Church: Patterns of Change*, Dove, Blackburn North, 1996, pp. 17-19.

clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.' (*Ephesians 4:22-24*)

- 1.23. Jesus gathers people around him and reveals in his life, teaching, death and resurrection that the 'end time' vision of the Reign of God has already begun. 'The righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe' (*Romans 3:21f*). God's gift in Jesus Christ brings about a new era. An era in which the 'end time' expectation of God's promised righteousness becomes a present reality, when the Kingdom of God breaks into this world. It is an invitation, initiated by God in Jesus, offered to all people without distinction, to have faith in Jesus Christ.

Baptismal Identity

- 1.24. We believe that God chooses us (*John 15:16*) and trusts us with the work of the Reign of God. As a sign and a celebration of God's ongoing invitation to relationship, the sacrament of Baptism symbolises and celebrates Christian identity. God's love and acceptance comes before our deserving. Christian life is lived in response to this grace in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are justified by grace through faith. Baptism reminds us that our identity as Christians does not finally rest on what we *do* but on who we *are* in Jesus Christ (*Titus 3:4-7*). We are made to be with God and with each other. Our personal identity, including our sexuality, finds its meaning in this double relationship and is not defined by anything else.
- 1.25. In affirming the goodness of sexuality the church speaks neither simply from the origin of creation nor from a state of fallenness. Instead it begins with the forgiving, redeeming Word of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus points to our creation by God as the basis and promise of our existence including our existence as sexual beings.

Church Community

- 1.26. While individuals are invited to make a decision to follow Christ, Christian faith is a communal response of sharing the beliefs of the past and present faith community. The term 'ecclesia', or 'church', refers to 'those called out' to be a community of God's new creation. In the New Testament, there are many images used to describe 'the church'.
- One set of images refers to the church as the *people of God*. This image picks up the image of the covenant between God and God's people. The church is primarily a group of people called out and chosen by God, not an organisation or building.
 - Another set of images refers to the church as the *body of Christ*, a vine with many branches or of a body with many parts. These organic images communicate the mutual dependence of members on one another and the role of Jesus Christ as source of life and direction.
 - A third set of images refer to the church as a *servant people*, just as Jesus is a servant Lord of the community. 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (*Mark 10:45*). The people of God are called to be helpers, co-workers and ambassadors for Christ. The church serves God through worship, prayer, proclamation of the Word and living out God's call for justice.
- 1.27. Paul describes the church as a *community of the Holy Spirit* in which diverse and complementary gifts are bestowed on the community (*1 Corinthians 12:4-6*). Through the Spirit, the community is made visible as individual members use these gifts for God's reconciling purpose. The Reign of God comes to people as a gift from God through the work of the Spirit. (*Romans 8:2-11*)
- 1.28. In its relationship with Jesus Christ, the church becomes part of God's creative and redeeming purpose for the world. Where the Spirit dwells, the reign of the world is finished and the Reign of God has begun. We are called to be 'transformed' by the Spirit, rather than 'conforming' to the society around us (*Romans 12:2*). People continue to struggle with self-absorption, alienation and brokenness; yet the church is to be a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, and it seeks to express, in its life and work, the signs of that Reign. The church anticipates and serves the coming Reign of God but does not fully realise it.

- 1.29. The Christian community exists in the tension between pressures of this world and the call to live in the life of the Spirit. The history of the church is testimony to this struggle. The details of these tensions vary with every generation and every culture. Historically the church has had a significant role in shaping Western culture and has also been influenced by it. The Spirit calls Christian people to acknowledge and repent of their sinfulness and to participate in the radical call of the Gospel. Wherever the cultural context is dominated by greed, injustice, violence, self centredness, Christian people are called to be faithful to the life inaugurated by Jesus Christ. Since Christian communities first began to gather around the teachings of Jesus, people have struggled with questions about what it means to be faithful to the Gospel and to the life of Jesus Christ.

Changing Patterns in Society

- 1.30. The Terms of Reference of the Sexuality Task Group (*Appendix 1*) indicate that the Uniting Church is concerned about the changing patterns of human relationships and sexual activity in our society. The Assembly has asked for a report which promotes healing and wholeness and which suggests ways in which the Church can respond to these changing patterns.
- 1.31. We do not have to look far for examples of the current sexual ethics prevalent in modern western liberal culture:- 'Sex is exciting, to be enjoyed by all'. As individuals, we are encouraged to claim our right to experience 'good sex' as part of our life style. Personal sexual health is important as a guiding factor in sexual practice. Having many and varied sexual experiences is regarded as a healthy expression of our freedom to choose what we do with our bodies and with whom. Sex can be bought, sold and exchanged for personal gratification. Moralistic attitudes toward sexuality are portrayed as out-dated, naive and limiting.
- 1.32. Western culture has developed a focus on the individual. We live in a profoundly materialistic society where independence rather than interdependence is emphasised. Community is valued as important, but often only to the extent that the private person makes a choice to join groups which meet their current needs. In the changing economic climate, competition has become a way of life, while poverty and unemployment are increasing. The rate of technological change and access to information produce an exciting but uncertain climate in which people struggle to keep abreast with changes. Constant restructuring of our economy, loss of services in local communities and the growth of new technology all carry the risk of developing a less intimate and caring society.
- 1.33. The Interim Report included a brief discussion of the changing patterns in human relationships in mainstream Australia. In this Report we refer to them in summary.
- Sexuality is now discussed openly.
 - There is widespread experimentation in sexual activity.
 - Feminism has been influential but there remain many areas where women are disadvantaged.
 - Education in sexuality and human relationships has improved and become more available.
 - Attitudes towards marriage have changed and are more varied.
 - People on average, are marrying at a later age (Today the average age when people marry is 26 years for females and 29 for males).
 - More people live in defacto/common law relationships.
 - The divorce rate is at an all time high.
 - Methods of effective contraception are widely available.
 - There is a greater awareness of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.
 - People have become more aware of and less tolerant of sexual abuse.
 - The nature of sexual orientation is more widely understood, and with it, a greater awareness of gay, lesbian and bisexual people.
 - The availability of pornography and the explicit depiction of sexuality in the media has become more widespread.

- While prostitution may not have increased, it has become more visible and in some cases more regulated.
- We live in a time of great cultural diversity which means that values and attitudes to sexuality and human relationships vary greatly across the various groups in our community.

- 1.34. It is important to note that Aboriginal, Islander, and other non-Anglo cultures reflect many models of community rarely experienced in western society today. In multi-cultural Australia, some indigenous and migrant communities are under enormous pressure to conform to the dominant culture.
- 1.35. It is not possible to analyse the positive and negative implications of all the changes listed above. We can celebrate the greater levels of honesty and openness in issues of sexuality and may have much to learn from society in this regard. We believe the Church must condemn all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation and take an active and positive role in the prevention of sexual exploitation and in support of victim/survivors of sexual abuse.
- 1.36. We acknowledge that the church carries some of the responsibility for the oppression of women over the centuries and that patriarchy is still a powerful force in church and society. As long as it persists it will have an adverse effect on the way women and men relate and the way we operate as communities. In the Church we have a special responsibility to model a community of equality and justice. Until we do, both women and men will suffer and the Church's witness will be compromised.¹⁴
- 1.37. The message of this list of societal changes is a call for the Church to be ever vigilant in its discernment of what is happening around it. It is also a call for the courage to speak out against the principalities and powers which continue to dehumanise human beings and threaten human community.
- 1.38. The fundamental question then, for this Report, and for the Uniting Church, is how are we to be God's people, living the way of Jesus Christ in anticipation of the Reign of God in the context of changing patterns of human relationships and sexual activity? Within the Uniting Church our call to follow Jesus is manifest in a rich diversity of shape, form and theology. While we celebrate and are enriched by this diversity, our unity is also challenged when confronted by issues of sexuality.
- 1.39. With this Report we seek a way forward amidst our diversity and do so in the light of who God is calling us to be:

'The... term *ecclesia*, or church, refers to a unique and transformed way of being human in relationship with God and with other persons. It designated a distinctive form of human community characterised by mutuality, interdependence, forgiveness and friendship. In this equal community, power and responsibility are shared and there is always a special concern for the poor, the weak, and the dispossessed. Ecclesial life is a new community of free people centred on God's love in Jesus Christ and empowered to service by the Holy Spirit'.¹⁵

14. Maryanne Confoy, Dorothy Lee & Joan Nowotny (eds), *Freedom and Entrapment: Women Thinking Theology*. Dove, North Blackburn, 1995. There are many texts on this issue, but this series of ecumenical essays is a useful beginning.

15. Daniel Migliore, *op. cit.*, 1991, p. 189.

Chapter 2

'Living with the Biblical Story'

This chapter explores the sources that give identity, shape and direction to the church and to the lives of its members. Special attention is given to the primacy of Scripture.

Traditional Sources of the Faith

- 2.1. The history of the church indicates that in addition to Scripture, there are three other sources which play a role in understanding the story of our faith. These are *tradition, reason and experience*. Wesley refers to these as the 'Quadrilateral'. Others would add *revelation* and *culture* to this list.¹⁶ People give different weight to these components. However most would agree they are all important in the growth and nurturing of our faith, often throwing light on one another. All are implicit in the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church:¹⁷

'...the Uniting Church enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God's ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith. The Uniting Church lives within a world-wide fellowship of Churches in which it will learn to sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God by contact with contemporary thought. Within that fellowship the Uniting Church also stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help it to understand its own nature and mission'.¹⁸

The Primacy of Scripture

- 2.2. The Basis of Union declares that:

'The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses. The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the church'.¹⁹

- 2.3. The churches which came into union regarded Scripture as providing the primary and indispensable resource for theological and ethical reflection. It is the experience of Christians throughout the ages that through Scripture, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, the living Christ encounters people. In order to discover God's intention for us as sexual beings, we acknowledge the primary authority of the Scriptures. The Scriptures reveal God's will for the creation and God's claim on the total life of God's people.

Faithful interpretation

- 2.4. '...God has never left the Church without faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture, or without those who have reflected deeply upon, and acted trustingly in obedience to, God's living Word.'²⁰
- 2.5. We affirm the need to read Scripture with open minds and hearts. Furthermore we affirm that interpretation of Scripture properly takes place within the believing community, informed by the Holy Spirit and the theological tradition of that community. Individual passages are to be read in the light of their original context and intention as well as in the context of the whole of Scripture.
- 2.6. Biblical scholars themselves reflect the diversity evident in the church in their understanding of the Bible's authority, and the ways in which that authority should function in the church. While we all affirm the primary place of the Scriptures, there appears to be little consensus on how we listen to and interpret the Bible. This has been true all through the history of the church. In the area of sexuality this diversity

16. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, SCM, 1970.

17. Clauses 5, 9-11.

18. *Basis of Union*, 11.

19. *Basis of Union*, 5.

20. *Basis of Union*, 11

is acutely evident. In its allusion to 'faithful interpretation' the Basis of Union recognises the complexities of the Biblical witness itself and the distance in time and cultural assumptions between the Biblical world and our own.

- 2.7. The Scriptures, through the Holy Spirit, can speak in new ways of God's faithfulness to each generation. The question for us is: How does this complex collection of writings which we receive as Scripture inform the church as it seeks to live in faithful response to the Gospel? Responses to the Interim Report reveal a wide diversity of approaches to this question.
- 2.8. One approach takes the literal textual authority of the Bible as the starting point which is then brought to bear on the present situation. It accepts that there is a direct and relevant connection between the text and the present issue. Particular texts from the Bible are identified which may speak directly to the situation being addressed.
- 2.9. Another approach regards the Bible as being historically and culturally conditioned. Major themes have to be identified and examined in order to address the present situation. This approach assumes that different interpretations of particular texts will be given by different people in differing situations. The way in which the Bible is used is inclined to be shaped in a subjective way by the interpreter. The starting point in this approach is the context of the people, human realities and needs. The Biblical theme identified as relevant is then applied to the situation.
- 2.10. In this Report we will endeavour to approach Scripture in a way that includes both a deep concern for fidelity to the original message and a dynamic understanding of God's activity in relation to the world.

Jesus Christ, the Living Word

- 2.11. Being faithful to the wording of the Basis of Union, we understand that the Word of God, Jesus Christ, is the living Word active within the church as a community. It is not simply the book but the living account of God's activity which the church carries and which carries the church. The criterion for reading and interpreting the Bible is Jesus Christ. Scripture forms the church's life because it is the narrative of God's revelation. Since Jesus is the ultimate revealer of God's nature and will, the Bible is of fundamental importance to us as we seek to live the Christian life.
- 2.12. The Uniting Church claims in Jesus Christ the freedom not to accept all of the Law of the Old Testament as obligatory for its life and witness. Jesus, while affirming the centrality of God's law, recognised and practised the process by which certain teachings and perspectives take precedence over others. Jesus distinguished between the laws of God and the additions which had been made to them over the years by scholars (*Mark 7:9-13*) and he deepened the interpretation of the law (*Matthew 5:21-22*). The disputes over the Sabbath laws are an obvious example (*Mark 2:23-27*). Jesus identified *love of God and neighbour* as the pre-eminent commandments which form the basis of all the Law and the prophets (*Matthew 22:34-40*). Paul used the Scriptures as the basis for explaining justification by grace through faith (*Romans 3-5*) and for defending the Gospel of Jesus Christ against the 'circumcision party'. (*Acts 15:6-29*)

Scripture in its Historical Context

- 2.13. Recognising the historical contexts in which Scripture was written will help us to discern what is authoritative for us. For example, scholars acknowledge that the Bible was written in cultures where male interests dominated and class and racial discrimination was often allowed. Furthermore, for the greater part of church history, Biblical interpretation has been done by men and reflects male perspectives. For centuries some Biblical texts have been used to justify and perpetuate the oppression and exploitation of women.²¹ The Uniting Church accepts that the Gospel of Jesus Christ challenges assumptions and practices which produce or reinforce oppression, dehumanisation and inequity.
- 2.14. The historical distance between our times and Biblical times means we cannot necessarily simply translate the Scriptures' conclusions about sexuality into our own context. For example, many of the laws of the Hebraic Scriptures relating to sexuality cannot be understood apart from the 'populate or perish' context in which those writings emerged. That is, early Israel was a fledgling nation striving to

21. Phyllis Trible in Confoy, Lee & Nowotny (eds), *Texts of Terror*, SCM, London, 1984.

- sustain its life as a people under God. Later in its history, periods of exile or the proximity of larger and threatening neighbours meant that the command to 'be fruitful and multiply' was an imperative for survival.
- 2.15. This context is reflected, for example, in the address to Adam and Eve (*Genesis 1:28*) and the promise to Abraham (*Genesis 12:2-3, 15:2-6; 17:2-5*). Thus the practice of polygamy, assumed throughout much of the Hebrew Scriptures, is never explicitly forbidden (*Deuteronomy 21:15-17*). Similarly, purity laws regulating sexual behaviour were never rescinded (e.g. *Leviticus 18:19*), nor the laws ostracising persons with deformed sexual organs (*Deuteronomy 23:1*). The prohibitions on homosexual intercourse (*Leviticus 18:22, 20:13*), contraception (*Genesis 38:9f*), bestiality (*Exodus 22:19, Leviticus 18:23, Deuteronomy 27:21*) and masturbation need, in part at least, to be understood as forbidding the wastage of sperm meant for reproduction. The belief of the time was that all life came from the male sperm and that the womb was merely an incubator. Incestuous acts (*Leviticus 20:11f*) were seen as degrading the fitness of the next generation to survive.
- 2.16. Today we live in a context of population explosion which if unchecked threatens the very life of earth's people and the life of our planet itself. We know also from medical science that both men and women contribute equally to the creation of new life.

Some Guidelines for Reading Scripture

- 2.17. It is clear, that given the wide diversity within the Uniting Church as to how we read Scripture, it will be important that we be mindful of certain guidelines so as to preserve the integrity of Scripture and as a check against undue subjectiveness.
- Our approach to Scripture must centre on the *Good News of God's activity in Jesus Christ*. The centre of the church's preaching is the Good News of the God who reconciles us to God who, in Jesus' life, death and resurrection proclaimed and inaugurated God's Reign and a new creation. Reading Scripture predominantly as a rule book of ethical conduct may obscure the central proclamation of God's Reign.
 - This raises further questions about how we might define the heart of Jesus' teaching and ministry. This Report assumes the importance of the proclamation in word and deed of the Reign of God in the ministry of Jesus. This understanding places emphasis on *the radical nature of the gospel and the values of the Christian community*. The Christian community is one which views all questions of family, kinship, sexuality, gender and reproduction in the light of the coming Reign of God where the focus is on the new community in which older traditional values are not destroyed but radicalised. Sexual activity is neither negated nor elevated. It is to be understood in the light of our creation by God, our redemption through Christ and our participation in and witness to God's Reign in the power of the Holy Spirit.
 - The Bible does not belong to individuals but to the church. The Bible is always to be interpreted within particular denominations and in the light of confessional traditions.

'The Uniting Church...will commit its ministers and instructors to study these (historic confessional) statements so that the congregation of Christ's people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for constant appeal to Holy Scripture.'²²
 - Even if our tradition defines faithfully a particular approach as an interpretative guide to Scripture (justification by grace through faith) we must always be mindful of the importance of the *whole canon of Scripture*. Undue subjectiveness can be avoided by seeking to consult the entire canon of Scripture in all its diversity and by exploring our views with the diverse community of interpreters within the church. In this way we can correct one another, yet still acknowledge legitimate differences.
 - Also needed is the humility to recognise that our *historical/cultural circumstances* will significantly influence how we interpret Scripture. Understanding Scripture requires us to 'stand-under' the Word. We not only come to it with our experiences and questions; we also seek to cultivate an openness to the action of the Holy Spirit so that our own assumptions and values can be challenged and illuminated by the Gospel.

2.18.

In reading and reflecting today on God's Word, we are called to:

- Acknowledge there are times when the Scriptures address circumstances that no longer exist in our society or are based on understandings that are no longer valid;
- While continuing to build on the church's history of ethical teaching, recognise that this has never been unchanging;
- Learn from the good in our cultural setting while resisting and challenging other cultural values and beliefs which dehumanise God's people and abuse God's creation. The Church is called to resist conforming itself unthinkingly to the values of the world but to 'be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect'; (*Romans 12:2*)
- Confess that at times the Church has, in the name of tradition, resisted change that is just and at other times has abandoned the clear testimony of the Scriptures in the name of the new.
- Recognise the diversity of Scripture while still affirming that the Scriptures as a whole witness to God's gracious purposes and the life of God's Reign.

BIBLICAL CASE STUDY

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS

Paul's letter to the Romans has been particularly significant in the traditions of the churches stemming from the Reformation. The Uniting Church honours that tradition. There are a number of reasons for special attention to Romans:

- Paul's way of addressing issues that caused conflict in the early church is helpful in approaching differing views on sexual behaviour within the church.
- The Basis of Union, consistent with Reformation teaching, finds 'justification by grace through faith' to be central to the Christian faith. Romans is the most comprehensive exposition of this doctrine.

Because of this importance, we believe it would be useful to look at Romans in greater detail. In doing so we have drawn heavily from an unpublished paper by the Rev. Toska Williams.²³

Later in the Report we shall return to this perspective outlined in this Biblical case study and draw out some possible implications for how the Church might deal with the issues before us in relation to sexuality.

INTRODUCTION

A pressing problem for the early church was its relationship with Judaism. In Romans, Paul explores the various dimensions of this dilemma.

It was *a problem about God*: how can God be just if God justifies believing sinners on the basis of faith without distinguishing between Jew and Gentile? Does God thereby nullify the election of Israel?

It was *an ethical problem*. If God makes no distinction, is that not undermining standards and condoning sin? If so, why work hard at obeying the commandments and leading a good life? Why not just do what you want?

It was also *a pastoral problem*. How can Jewish and Gentile Christians live together in one church?

Paul was a controversial figure. As the Apostle

to the Gentiles he was bringing them into the faith community without first requiring them to become Jews. He was regarded by some as undermining the election of Israel (hence *theologically suspect*) and disregarding the law, thus encouraging immorality (*ethically suspect*). As well he was constantly in trouble with the Jewish authorities and at times with his fellow apostles (*pastorally suspect*).

The people in Rome most likely to harbour deep reservations about Paul were believers who came from a traditional Jewish heritage. In this letter Paul lays out the basis of his preaching so that the Roman church can judge for itself.

Our current discussions about sexuality have parallels with the dilemmas faced by first century Christians.

Theological questions include: can God be trusted if the Bible is now interpreted to mean the opposite of what we have always been taught by the church? And how can God be just if God treats sinners and law-abiding people the same?

An ethical problem for many is: if the church is completely inclusive, does our conduct matter? Are there any standards left or does anything go?

And a *pastoral problem* for all of us is: how can we live together with integrity in the same Church if we hold opposing views and practise opposing lifestyles?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE JEWISH CHRISTIAN

In the opening greeting (1:1-7) Paul reassures the Jewish Christians that the Gospel is firmly grounded in Holy Scripture (1:2) and is not Paul's own invention. He reminds them that Christ, an Israelite himself (1:3), gave Paul his apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles. Then Paul makes his bold and controversial claim:

'For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the

Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written. "The one who is righteous will live by faith." (1:16)

Both Jews and Gentiles are saved without distinction because they believe. God is faithful, as Paul will show; but only from a perspective of faith. This perspective will require of the Jewish Christian a new self-understanding. Paul himself learnt something profoundly new about the ways of God and he wants the Romans to enter into this.

Paul then invites the Jewish Christians to re-think their view of the justice of God, and their own self-understanding. He does this by first joining them on their own ground:

'The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.'(1:18)

With this the Jewish Christian can heartily agree: isn't this the problem with the world? People know the truth about God, or could know it, but choose not to acknowledge God. Instead people's minds have become twisted, worshipping creatures rather than the Creator. Such perversion of truth has consequences:

'God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity.' (Romans 1:24)

God leaves them to their own devices and so their lives are ruled by dishonourable passions. The self-deception of the mind produces the degradation of the body; natural intercourse is replaced by unnatural, both of females with females and males with males (1:26-27) and the proliferation of vices; wickedness, greed, evil, envy, murder etc. (1:29)

However we would describe it today, this is the picture the good Jew had of pagan society: a world filled with abomination and vice, a consequence of not honouring God as God. Such deserve death. (1:32)

Having joined them on their own ground, Paul then draws out the implications of their stance (Romans 2). You who have just judged others as deserving to die have thereby condemned yourself:

'...because you, the judge are doing the very same things. You say, "We know that God's judgement on those who do such things is in accordance with the truth". Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself you will escape the judgement of God?'

(2:1b-3)

By refusing to examine your own actions, Paul says, you store up wrath for yourselves. For God will judge everyone impartially, both Jews and Gentiles. With this the Jewish Christian must agree. God will not be unfair. So if the Jewish Christians rest on the law (2:17) and pride themselves in knowledge of God's will, they must also acknowledge that none of them have kept the whole law; each has been unfaithful. So before God, all stand condemned, whether Jews or Gentiles (3:9ff). All people are thrown on the mercy of God. (3:20)

Paul has led the Jewish Christian to an impasse. Sin is taken seriously, named and condemned. God the judge of the whole world is acknowledged as impartial and just. But the separation between the just and the unjust, Jew and Gentile, that the Jewish Christian wants to maintain has been undermined. There is no distinction: all have sinned. (3:22-23)

Therefore, Paul argues, all are invited to live not by the righteousness that is based on obedience to the law, but the righteousness which is through faith in Jesus Christ (3:21-22). This is not setting aside the Scripture, indeed the law and prophets attest to this righteousness (3:21). If God were to judge by the law the whole world would be destroyed. Because God chooses to be gracious to all by accepting the self-giving of Jesus as an atonement for the sins of all, both Jews and Gentiles are saved from God's wrath and justified, i.e. restored to right relationship with God. So the law is upheld (3:31) and sinful humankind is by God's grace saved from destruction.

In Romans 4 Paul invites the Jewish Christian to consider Abraham. He was considered in right relationship with God not because he obeyed the law (which as yet did not exist) but because he put his faith in God.

In Romans 5 Paul summarises that because of God's grace and forgiveness in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles are now at peace with God.

Paul then anticipates the obvious objection. What about sins we may commit after we believe in Christ and have been forgiven? Paul answers that if Christ saved us from God's wrath will God not also do so all the more now that we are God's friends?

But this is a dangerous teaching. Does it not lead to complacency? If grace is overwhelming

we might as well go on sinning (6:1). Paul answers: of course we cannot continue to sin. (6:2). To believe in Christ is to participate in him. Our old self, under the dominion of sin, was judged and crucified in him. As Christ now lives to God, so in him do we. To remain in Christ does require human struggle and effort, otherwise we would be returning to the slavery of sin (6:15-23). We are no longer bound to the law that condemned us; we live the new life of the Spirit (7:6). When we struggled to keep the law we found we could not do it (Romans 7). But now we are rescued from the law of sin and death and live under the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. (8:2)

In chapters 9-11 Paul addresses the painful question of whether God has abandoned Israel. Has the Word of God failed? Is it fair that God abandons Israel who did strive for righteousness and embrace the Gentiles who did not even try? Paul replies that Israel did not achieve it because it pursued righteousness on the wrong basis, that is by doing the works of the law (9:32) In effect, Israel tried to establish its own righteousness (10:3) instead of submitting to God's righteousness which comes by faith freely given to all who believe in Christ. (10:12-13)

HOW CAN THE JEWISH AND GENTILE CHRISTIAN LIVE TOGETHER IN ONE CHURCH?

The Jewish Christians have been asked to rethink their self-understanding. Both Jewish and Gentile believers are exhorted 'by the mercies of God', by which both groups live and upon which alone their righteousness is founded (12:1), to present their entire selves to God as a living sacrifice. This can only happen by a renewing of the mind (12:2) which leads to freedom from the self-understandings and ways of the societies from which they have both come (the world).

They are humbly to accept one another as members of the one body, each with gifts that

are to be contributed to the whole (12:3ff). The virtues listed are practical expressions of profound love of both believers and strangers (12:9ff). Evil must be overcome not by cursing and condemnation but by good (12:14ff). In chapter 13 Paul sums up the Torah in the law of love:

'Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law'. (13:8-10)

As for living together in one church, there are some who are 'weak in faith' (most likely those of Jewish background): they abstain from eating meat and they keep special days. Others are 'strong' in the knowledge that all foods are clean, and may be consumed with thanksgiving. Paul counsels:

- the strong must support the weak and not argue with them; (14:1)
- the strong must not despise the weak and the weak must not condemn the strong. Both are servants of the Lord and accountable to him, and he will uphold them both; (14:1-4, 10-12)
- each must act according to their conscience; (14:5-6, 23)
- the strong must not put stumbling blocks in the path of the weak. If your weaker fellow Christian is injured by your lifestyle keep your conviction between you and God and change your lifestyle in order to help your fellow Christian; (14:15)
- each must serve and welcome the other as Christ has served and welcomed us, both Jews and Gentiles. (15:1-13)

23. Toska Williams, *An Outline of the Pastoral Approach of Paul's Letter to the Romans*, Unpublished paper, 1996, Used with permission.

Chapter 3

'Living in God's Image and Grace'

'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.'

(2 Corinthians 5:17)

We are made in God's image.

We live as sexual beings.

We learn about our sexuality.

We develop our sexual practice.

So far we have identified the church as a community seeking to shape its life in response and witness to the reconciling grace of God in Jesus Christ and in anticipation of the Reign of God. We have discussed the sources of our faith and the way in which the Scripture informs our Christian living. We now consider the ways in which faith informs our sexual identity and our decision-making about sexual practice. This chapter includes:

- a brief reflection on the nature of Christian sexual ethics;
- introductions to questions of sexual ethics;
- a reflection on the nature of gender and human sexuality;
- a brief account of sexual ethics in the Judeo-Christian tradition;
- a proposed 'ethic of character' for Christian living.

Ethics

3.1. Ethics is the systematic study of moral principles, values and obligations that guide human behaviour. From a Christian perspective, ethics seeks to guide human behaviour and discusses how human beings ought to behave in the context of our covenant relationship with God. Indeed, Christian ethics is more than the systematic study of the moral principles, rather it is an attempt to understand and justify moral obligation in relation to the will of the God. For the Christian community, therefore, ethics relies on an appeal to the revelation of God's own moral character and will. Christian ethics can 'only make sense from the point of view of what we believe has happened in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.'²⁴

24. Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, Abingdon, 1992. p. 7.

25. Confoy, Lee, & Nowotny, *op. cit.*

26. James B Nelson, *The Intimate Connection; Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality*, Westminster, Philadelphia. 1988.

3.2. A church community seeking to follow the way of Jesus Christ cannot escape questions of sexuality. It is part of our human make-up. Sexual expression involves making decisions. Developing an ethic of sexuality is an important means of helping people make informed decisions about their sexual behaviour. It is the way of 'uniting faith and sexuality'.

Human Sexuality

3.3. Human sexuality includes far more than our experience and desire for sharing genital pleasure. It has to do with who we are, it is an integral part of our being. We are born with biological maleness and femaleness, with male or female genetic make up and genital organs. The social and cultural context provide us with gender roles and we internalise understandings of what it means to be male or female.

3.4. The Task Group held many discussions about gender roles and the social relationships between women and men. There is neither time nor space to deal with the issues adequately. It is important to note however that over the last 100 years patriarchal gender roles have been challenged. Many women are breaking free from historically and culturally-conditioned gender roles and seeking equality. There is an ongoing process of redefining what it means to be a woman.²⁵ More recently men are beginning to challenge some of the cultural definitions of what it means to be a man.²⁶

- 3.5. Human sexuality may begin with our being individually created male and female, but our sexuality is also the desire to be connected to other human beings. We tend to be pair-bonding creatures. The creation story describes the man clinging to the woman with the words 'at last bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh' (*Genesis 2:23*). We experience our sexuality as that desire to move out of our separateness into intimate communication and communion with another person. This desire to come together we call 'erotic attraction'. Human experience indicates that this attraction, while usually is towards the opposite sex, can also be to the same sex or both. Our sexuality draws us into relationships with others which have physical, social and spiritual dimensions.

Sexuality and Spirituality

- 3.6. As indicated by the title of this Report, there is a need to reunite the physical and spiritual dimensions of our lives. God created human beings as a unity of body, mind and spirit. Jesus, quoting the first commandment, urged his followers to love God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength. (*Matthew 22:37*)
- 3.7. The incarnation of Christ, whom the church confesses to be both fully human and fully divine, demonstrates the unity of body, mind and spirit into which we are called to participate.
- 3.8. Sexuality is not simply about gender, or about the reproductive process or even about pleasure; it also has to do with our connection with God. The act of sexual love is more than the expression of a personal relationship between two people, it is a symbol of something beyond the personal. Some have even described sexuality as one of the 'sacraments of our spirituality'.²⁷ It is often in our unity with the other that we experience our unity with God. Just as 'letting go' in the sexual act often brings pleasure, so 'letting go' in our relationship with God brings a greater sense of God's *shalom* (peace, wholeness).

I view these two powers, my sexuality and my spirituality, as dancers. Initially both were wall flowers afraid to dance. My spirituality was immobilised by proscriptions and fixed answers. My sexuality was hiding in a closet, ashamed of itself....Each took turns attempting to lead, to control the dance, while the other felt crowded and claustrophobic and backed away. Finally they found times when the dance led them, and for brief moments they became perfect dancers, full of grace, true to each other. They danced together as my soul'.²⁸

- 3.9. The connection between our sexual and spiritual dimensions often has been ignored. Part of that derives from the dualistic understanding of the person to which we have already referred. When we reclaim the wholeness of body and spirit, we also reclaim the connection between our spirituality and our sexuality.²⁹
- 3.10. While spirituality and sexuality are not identical they are linked. For Paul the body and the spirit are not identical, but their strength comes in their connection, not their separation or rejection (*1 Corinthians 6:19-20*). Stressing this connection, Paul calls for an affirmation of the body and therefore of our sexuality. Paul was at odds with those in the Christian community who sought to devalue the significance of the body in order to be more 'spiritual' (the gnostics).
- 3.11. By uniting body, mind and spirit, new life and energy may flow into our relationship with God. We may also be better enabled to experience the presence of God in our living, our loving and our relationships.

Sexual Ethics

- 3.12. Throughout the history of the church, Christian communities have studied Scripture, debated, prayed, practised different patterns, struggled and grown, in a faithful desire to discern God's will for the ethical ordering of Christian life. The search for a Christian sexual ethic has been part of this struggle.
- 3.13. The Judaeo-Christian tradition has regarded the central purpose of sexual intercourse to be procreation, with the result that sexual activity has been evaluated within the framework of marriage. Procreation, sexuality and marriage were understood primarily in terms of the welfare not of individuals, but of society. In this context, 'the ideal sexual act has been defined as heterosexual, potentially procreative and expressive of the permanent, monogamous relationship which facilitated the nurture of children and domestic and social stability.'³⁰

27. Morton & Barbara Kelsey, *The Sacrament of Sexuality*, Element, Rockport, 1986.

28. Chris Glaser, *Coming Out to God: Prayers for Lesbians and Gay Men, Their Family and Friends*, Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, 1991, pp. 14f.

29. Dorothy Lee, 'Freedom and the Body' in Confoy, Lee and Nowotny, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-50.

30. Lisa Sowle Cahill, 'Sexual Ethics' in James Childress & John Macquarrie (eds), *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, SCM Press, p. 579.

- 3.14. The Enlightenment and Reformation period prompted a shift in Western thinking to value the experience of the individual on a par with that of the society. For sexual ethics, this shift has had significant consequences. 'Personal fulfillment and interpersonal relationship have become a pre-eminent criteria of sexual morality; marriage and procreation are evaluated in relation to these goals'.³¹
- 3.15. To summarise, Christian ethical thinking in relation to sex has experienced a shift. In earlier times sex was understood to lead to procreation and domestic partnership in an essentially economic relationship. Since the mid 20th century, an increasingly high importance has been placed on a couple's interpersonal relationship and experience of love. Given the shifting understanding in the purpose of sexuality there has been a shift in the corresponding sexual ethic.
- 3.16. Christian people in Australia live and function in a secular society which has largely abandoned traditional Christian sexual ethics. With the so-called sexual revolution and reliable means of contraception, the 'thou-shalt-not' of the Christian tradition has been challenged by the 'thou shalt' of contemporary culture. For example, no longer is virginity seen as sacred, nor sexual involvement regarded as defiling. The sexuality of single, divorced and widowed people is no longer ignored and gay men and lesbian women no longer stay in the closet. Sex is talked about and the fear of sex has been replaced by the pressure to 'do it right', to enjoy it and let the world know how well you do it.
- 3.17. Responses to the Interim Report indicate that, confronted by changing patterns of behaviour, many Uniting Church people are concerned about the lack of ethical standards and call for a return to 'traditional morality'. Others celebrate what they perceive as a new openness, acceptance and honesty and call the Church to develop a new sexual ethic. Others are simply confused. This ongoing internal struggle creates an environment in which people feel hurt, confused and angry, which often hampers effective discussion about sexual ethics. Too often people feel trapped into taking sides, with the result that dialogue ceases.

A Christian Sexual 'Ethics of Character'

- 3.18. The Christian ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas, pleads for the church to avoid the pitfalls of moralism and legalism by working hard to develop what he refers to as an 'ethics of character' rather than an ethics of rules.³²

More than rules...

- 3.19. An ethics based simply on rules is bound to fail because of our natural resistance to commands. Rules emerge from the wider narrative in which they have meaning. The rules will have authority to the extent that they serve to witness to our calling - to who we are called to be in Christ (*Philippians 3:14*). *The focus is not on the rules but on the kind of people we want to be.* What sort of behaviours bear witness to God's intention for human life? What behaviours and patterns testify to the redeeming grace of Christ? Our behaviours consciously and unconsciously reflect our attitudes and underlying values and beliefs.

Character produces behaviour...

- 3.20. An ethics of character emphasises that our particular behaviours arise out of the beliefs we hold as Christians. Christ calls us to find life in loving God, neighbour and self. By desiring, by God's grace and in the strength of the Spirit, to be a loving person we will seek to behave lovingly.
- 3.21. In order to develop guiding principles as a Christian community we firstly ask: 'Who, in Christ, am I called to be? What sort of community is the church called to be?'
- 3.22. Christian discipleship, not least in the area of sexuality, is the outworking in community of how we might live in the light of who we are in Jesus Christ. St Paul's ethics have been characterised as the exhortation to 'become what you are'. That is, live into the identity and character of the new creation that is ours through the grace and mercy of Christ.
- 3.23. Those who participate in the community of faith are drawn into a web of belief or narrative. Rooted in Scripture, the narrative is the ever-evolving story of God's

31. Cahill, *op. cit.*

32. Stanley Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, University of Notre Dame Press, London, 1983.

relationship with God's people. It is this narrative which shapes lives and forms 'a community of character'. 'Christians have not been called just to do right, to observe the law, though doing the right and observing the law are not irrelevant to being good. Rather, for Christians the moral life, at least spiritually, is seen as a journey through life sustained by fidelity to the cross of Christ which brings a fulfillment no law can ever embody'.³³

Behaviours build character...

3.24. This process is two-way. Character produces behaviour and behaviours build character. Certain behaviour will arise out of a certain kind of character and behaviours reinforce character. Living faithfully in relationships, for example, can help form us into more faithful human beings. In the light of this, any decision on whether or not to engage in sexual activity involves searching for an answer to the primary question:

How can our actions in this situation best reflect the love, faithfulness and grace of God that comes in Jesus Christ?

3.25. So, an *ethics of character* leads us to ask different questions from those of a mere situational ethics. We seek virtues and behaviours not as 'best practice' on the human level but because they are modelled for us in Jesus whose Spirit empowers us to follow his way. In nurturing communities of character, decisions about personal sexual behaviour exist within the wider context of community.

- What impact will this sexual activity have on the wider community of faith?
- Is this sexual activity reflecting a faithful, committed relationship?
- Will this sexual activity enrich or enhance our relationships?
- Will the vulnerabilities likely to be opened up be respected by all parties?
- Is the decision to engage in sexual activity a truly mutual one? Does each partner respect the other's 'no'?
- Will this action create hurt or cause long-term distrust in the community?

33. Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, Winston Press, New York, 1985, p. 41.

Chapter 4

'Living as friends: seeking right relationships'

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I have commanded you. I do not call you servants any longer...; I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.' (John 15:12-15)

'From now on, therefore, we regard no-one from a human point of view...So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends, and gave us the task of making others God's friends too'. (2 Corinthians 5:17-19) (Good News Bible, American Bible Society, 1976)

In this Chapter we explore how we might live as friends of God and each other in response to the grace of God in Christ. It will include:

- how living as friends is an expression of our faithfulness to God;
- the nature and elements of friendship;
- in what ways sexuality and sexual expression are appropriately part of friendship;
- how as a community we provide a basic framework of values which nurtures just relationships and which in turn is enriched by such relationships.

In short this chapter explores how to 'do' friendship in response to God's grace.

A Model of Friendship

4.1. The model for our friendship with God and one another is the way in which God in Christ befriends us, inviting us to participate in the new covenant.³⁴ Throughout history God's love for humankind is seen in the faithfulness which was always shown to the people of God. The Gospel reveals again that God is graciously disposed towards us in love.

4.2. The grace of God finds its clearest expression in the sending of Jesus for our salvation. 'God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). God's love and acceptance of us comes before our deserving and calls us into new life. The Christian life is lived in response to God's grace and calling, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

An Inclusive Friendship

4.3. In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus affirms that we are to love God and our neighbour as ourselves. He then answers the question: 'who is my neighbour?', with the story of the good Samaritan. In that story lies the challenge to recognise the foreigner, the 'enemy' as neighbour. This is a powerful picture of being a friend, to the extent of befriending the 'enemy'. Jesus is saying, in effect, there are no longer enemies, there are only neighbours and friends and to be such is our calling and the gift we receive.

4.4. Furthermore, in much of Jesus' teaching and in his living he brought into the centre of the Kingdom those who were normally excluded:- the lame, the blind, the mentally disturbed, the leper, the haemorrhaging woman, little children, the poor and sexually outcast. The parable of the banquet is a graphic illustration of the bringing-in of the excluded ones (Luke 14:15-24). In the life of the Christian community we need to be mindful of those who are excluded in our day and invite them into the feast of life which is for all people.

34. See further discussion on the idea of 'friendship' in our relationship with God and God's relationship with us in Michael Vasey, *Strangers and Friends A New Exploration of Homosexuality and the Bible*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1995 and Sally McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, Fortress Press, 1987.

The Heart of the Matter: Love

- 4.5. When Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment?, he replied:
“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”. (*Matthew 22:36-39*)
- 4.6. Many of us are familiar with the Greek words for love: *agape*, self-giving love; *philia*, friendship; *eros*, human desire; *storge*, family love. *Agape* is used consistently in the New Testament. The original Greek word had connotations of cold charity and was given fresh meaning by the New Testament writers. But although they wrote in Greek, they still tended to think in Hebraic terms.
- 4.7. There are three main Hebrew words for love; *ahab* (love); *ahabah* (election love) and *hesed* (covenant love). Whereas *ahab* describes a relationship, *hesed* is a dynamic love, God in action demonstrating loving-kindness in faithfulness to God’s covenant. For this reason, when *agape* is used in the New Testament, *hesed* seems to be what the writers are seeking to translate.³⁵
- 4.8. Some influential scholars in the 1950’s³⁶ argued for a fundamental distinction between *agape* and every other kind of love.
- 4.9. The Task Group is persuaded that the Greek text of the Bible (Septuagint) does not support such a hard distinction between divine and human love. The Greek Bible, following the Hebrew Bible, has no word for sexual love as differentiated from other kinds of love. *Agape* is used hundreds of times to express the whole spectrum of human relationships.
- 4.10. *Eros* describes our human desire (including sexual desire but not confined to it) to reach out, a quest for communion with another, for connection. In this sense, *eros* can be present in our desire to reach out and connect with God.
- 4.11. If the new commandment of Jesus is to be taken seriously the sharp distinction between the divine and human dimensions of love need to be challenged. Linking *agape* with its wide range of meanings in the Greek Bible of Christianity promises a revitalisation of our love for God; and a new means by which the divine love can transform and inform our efforts to love God and love our neighbours as we love ourselves.
- 4.12. Paul tells the church in Rome (*Romans 13:10*) that to love the other person is to fulfil the law. He spells out the nature of love in 1 Corinthians 13. We are used to hearing this in the context of the marriage service. While this is appropriate, Paul is writing of love as that which is to characterise the Christian community and for which each member is to strive. He lists the qualities of the kind of friendship referred to earlier. The nature of this love or friendship is expressed in seeking the good of the other, in patience, kindness, trust, honesty, forgiveness, faithfulness and service.

35. Norman H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, Epworth Press, London, 1944, Ch. 5.

36. Anders Nygren, *Eros and Agape*, (trans. Philip Watson), SPCK, London, 1957)

- 4.13. **Called into a New Humanity**
- As friends of Christ and a community of friends in Christ, we are a new people, a new humanity in relationship with God and one another. Our old humanity is reconstituted and re-directed in the love of Christ. All this becomes possible because God in Jesus Christ chose us to be friends to love others as God loves us (*2 Corinthians 5:18-19*). In the same way our sexuality, as an integral part of our humanity, is reconstituted and redirected. Our whole lives are directed to giving glory to God as faithful disciples. This has at least three implications.
- While we are not called to uphold a series of rules and regulations, we are freed for responsible living.
 - We are not bound by community rules which do not honour the needs of uniquely different individuals. Rather as individuals drawn into the community in love for God and one another, we will discover our true humanity in Christ, ‘in whom we live and move and have our being’. (*Acts 17:28*)
 - God’s love is for absolutely everyone and we are called to be a community which is open to all people. Jesus challenged the culture of his time in its rejection of foreigners, women, the mentally ill and the sick. He chose to be friends of those who were excluded.. He restored people to wholeness and to the community. He touched the untouchables and accepted the ministrations of women (*Matthew 26:6-13, John 4:7-15*). He brought in a radically new

understanding of the 'Reign of God', which he lived, taught and began in the lives of his followers.

- 4.14. Living as a new people in love and friendship is a radically different way of living. It is no soft option! It cuts across the individualism, self gratification and competitiveness which often typifies modern society. It is profoundly at odds with the way society tends to divide people into 'them and us', inviting suspicion and distrust, creating enemies rather than friends. Because of God's grace we are drawn to love others.

Living as Friends of God and One Another

- 4.15. The Church needs to reflect on its own life, recognising those ways in which our life as a community of faith and as individuals mirrors society rather than reflecting the signs of our friendship with Christ. We need to hear again Christ's call to radical discipleship and seek God's strength to respond in penitence and faith.

- 4.16. It is as we hear that call and respond to it, that our lives take on the character of a community of friends of God and one another. If our faith works through love as Paul suggests in Galatians 5 then our lives begin to show the fruits of the Spirit:

'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.'(Galatians 5;22f)

- 4.17. That is the character of a community of friends of God and one other.

Elements of Right Relationship in Friendship

- 4.18. What are the elements of friendship and right relationship that we value as a Christian community and seek to reflect in our living?

Honesty

- 4.19. Honesty is an important component of justice and truth in friendships. It is something we look for in our relationships with one another. Honesty involves being open to the expression of feelings. It also involves congruence in the expression of our feelings, speech and behaviour. Friendship is enhanced when people can share openly and listen to one another's feelings and thoughts. Couples who break a relationship often note dishonesty and secrecy as a problem.

Trust

- 4.20. God is the one we can trust absolutely. Knowing that we can trust God helps us to be more trustworthy and prepared to trust others. Good friendship is built on and is sustained by trust. It is at the heart of our understanding of 'covenant'. As trust increases people become more honest and vulnerable with one another. A breakdown of trust is frequently hard to heal.

Faithfulness

- 4.21. Faithfulness, like trust, is a key element in God's covenant with God's people. It is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Our ability to be faithful in relationships and friendship is possible because of God's faithfulness. We learn how to be faithful and how to enter into commitment because of our confidence in God's sustaining love. We dare to commit ourselves to marriage, to parenthood, to friendship, to community. We make deliberate decisions to persevere in our relationships.

Equality and Mutuality

- 4.22. Jesus is our model. He treated all people with respect, holding them to be equally loved, respected and judged by God. Paul also affirmed our equal standing in Christ (*Galatians 3:28*), as does the Marriage Service.³⁷ Equality involves the absence of domination and double standards.

- 4.23. As well as a mutual honouring of one another we look for the kind of mutual dependency/empowerment which is experienced in a relationship between two people when each person goes beyond self to be present for the other, without either person being diminished. In such a relationship both people are enhanced.³⁸

Vulnerability

- 4.24. The supreme model of someone giving themselves for the sake of the other or allowing themselves to become vulnerable, is God's gift in Jesus. Risking being

37. *Uniting in Worship Leaders Book*, p. 381.

38. Geoff Scott, 'When Relationality Takes Centre Stage', in *Sexuality - Exploring the Issues*, Uniting Church Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 112.

vulnerable and offering oneself fully for the sake of another are qualities we look for in the Christian community. This is the friendship we have seen in Christ and involves the risk of being hurt.³⁹ To be vulnerable to another can also be regarded as an act of profound freedom. We are released from the protection and the security with which we have enclosed ourselves.

Freedom and Responsibility

- 4.25. The linking of freedom and responsibility is part of our vision of a new people in Christ. We would expect to find both elements in our relationships with one another. God has given us freedom and we give it to one another. A good friendship allows each person to grow and retain their individuality, while each is enriched within the context of mutual commitment. We see this in God inviting us into friendship and allowing us in freedom to respond. We see it in God's reconciling love which entrusts us with the message of reconciliation available to all people. (*2 Corinthians 5:18*)

Setting Limits and Self Control

- 4.26. The incarnation involved the self-limiting of God in order to be with us, as one of us. Part of the honouring of the other person requires us to set limits on our own needs and behaviour; that is, to exercise self control for the sake of the other and the good of the community. (*Romans 14:21*) In this way freedom and responsibility are brought together and we truly wait on one another.

Giving and Receiving Affection and Pleasure

- 4.27. Enjoying being together, feeling free with the other and when separated, looking forward to being together, are all part of the warmth of friendship. Affection is a natural expression of our pleasure and delight in each other which nurtures the relationship. To hug and kiss a friend is part of the warmth and endearment of being friends. While the expression of affection may vary according to the culture, it is a part of our human nature and indeed is a deep need in all of us. How pleasure is experienced in sexuality will differ from person to person; gender too may be significant. For instance in love making, women and men tend to be aroused to sexual pleasure in different ways. However, care needs to be taken not to draw firm conclusions in this regard.

Communication

- 4.28. Some sexual activity is culturally conditioned and therefore can be learnt. The important thing is that couples need to communicate their sexual needs and be patient with each other. Good skills need to be learnt and practised to resolve conflicts and deepen our understanding of each other.

Discovering Intimacy

- 4.29. As these qualities of friendship find expression between individuals and within the faith community, intimacy can be discovered. We recognise it as a particular experience of depth and closeness in relationship. Intimate relationships are built on trust, good communication and on the willingness to be vulnerable with each other. Intimate relationships do not necessarily include genital sexual activity.

Sexuality as Part of Relationships

- 4.30. As an integral part of our personhood, our sexuality is part of all our relating and friendships though expressed in different ways. While warm affection may be appropriate in all our friendships, more intimate sexual expressions belong with the more intimate relationships. That is, there needs to be a congruence between the nature of sexual expression and the depth of trust, intimacy and commitment of the friendship.

Sexual Passion and Setting Boundaries

- 4.31. Sexual passion and the desire for the beloved are part of God's good gift of sexuality, which moves towards the joy and the delight of sexual intimacy. The security of a committed relationship is the most appropriate context for sexual union.
- 4.32. The intensity of passion and desire needs to be tempered according to the nature and depth of relationship. This requires sensitivity and open communication between a couple in deciding how far it is appropriate to go. Such a discussion is

39. Karen Lebacqz, 'Appropriate Vulnerability: A Sexual Ethic for Singles' in *The Christian Century*, May 6, 1987.

not easy in the heat of the moment, but needs to take place openly and honestly as the relationship grows. It requires the willingness to listen to each other's feelings and needs to exercise self-control for the good of the other and the growing relationship. Another aspect of this issue of setting limits is to be found in the concept of 'waiting'.

Waiting with Patience

- 4.33. As a community of Christ's friends we need to recapture the important spiritual discipline of 'waiting', giving the time and space to wait on God and the other person. This gentle approach to our friendships is strongly linked with our willingness to limit our own needs and behaviour in order to allow space for the friendship to grow and flourish. Including sexual expression as part of this gentle 'waiting' approach enables relationships to grow in depth. This concept of 'waiting' is one which cuts across the expectation of instant gratification in today's society. In seeking to model this in community life and in individuals' friendships, the Church has something important to offer to all people and to the society as a whole.

Repentance, Forgiveness and Reconciliation

- 4.34. We recognise that we live in a world of brokenness, to which we contribute by our sinfulness and by which we are hurt. We fail to live as friends of God and as a community of friends. In our sinfulness, we can be guilty of dishonesty, selfishness, betrayal of trust and an unwillingness to risk being deeply open to each other. God's love enables us to seek God's grace to forgive when we are hurt and to seek God's forgiveness in genuine repentance when we have hurt someone else. In forgiving and being forgiven we grow in love. Forgiving is one path to healing; repenting and taking responsibility for our actions is another. When that happens forgiveness is no longer cheap, but can be given and received as part of the healing process. We need as a Church to create opportunities in our life together and in our worship, to give expression to this healing process. The process of confession, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation may be enhanced if it includes a liturgical act designed for the particular situation.

Sin, Abuse, Exclusion and Brokenness

- 4.35. Sadly many people do not experience, in the family, their marriage or in their personal friendships, the quality of deep friendship we have described. The sin and brokenness of our society and its structures, of individual lives and of our life as a Church cuts us off from God and one another. The violence depicted in films and TV programs is a reflection of the violence in the life of society and its individual members. The economic pressures placed upon people have a way of poisoning relationships as does the prevailing drive for competition and individualism.
- 4.36. There are those who are too abused and hurt to risk deep commitment and friendship. Many do not have the models of right relationships or the skills to enable the building of fulfilling and just relationships. This central aspect of living is not formally taught, it is learned from our experience as children. Then there is our sinfulness expressed in self-centredness, selfishness and the wrong use of power, which seeks to control and manipulate people rather than enhance and empower the other.

Role of Power in Relationships

- 4.37. From the responses to the Interim Report (*op. cit.*) many people do not understand the role of power in relationships. The misuse of power inflicts violence on people, mainly on women and children, though not exclusively so. While the misuse of power is clear in abusive relationships, rape, incest and pederasty, power is also misused in more subtle ways to intimidate, frighten, coerce and demean. These forms of mental, emotional, verbal, economic and psychological abuse violate a person's spirituality when it occurs within a family or the faith community. This is the very antithesis of the way of Christ and the picture of mutual empowerment we have tried to draw earlier in this chapter.

The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse

- 4.38. Many people are too abused and hurt to risk deep commitment and friendship. In the 1990's childhood sexual abuse has emerged as a significant social issue. Mostly

occurring in families, fathers and other older males dominate as perpetrators. (Stranger abuse forms only 1% of cases.) The effect on children is devastating, interfering with their normal bonding, confusing them over issues of right and wrong, undermining their capacity for trust in adult life. The adult sexual intrusion into childhood leaves the child no moral guide for future behaviour. Encounters with authority figures may get sexualised in later life without any understanding of the underlying motivations.

- 4.39. The adult abused in childhood may suffer serious psychiatric conditions. 'Dissociation', which is a protective form of forgetting, may help the child survive. But in later life, it may underlie a whole range of psychiatric problems from eating disorders to severe neuroses and personality disorders. Apart from stunting their emotional and spiritual growth, childhood sexual abuse may also lead victims into becoming perpetrators themselves.

Sexual Exploitation of Children

- 4.40. In the past, the violation of children for adult gratification was termed 'paedophilia' (love of children). Now we name this aberration as 'sexual abuse of children', one of the many forms of violence committed against children and adolescents. As a society, we have become more aware of endemic child pornography and prostitution through publicity surrounding tourism in Asia organised by Australians. World-wide networks of child pornography via the Internet are a cause for concern.

The Role of the Church

- 4.41. The Church has an important role in this.
- We must speak out against all forms of abusive, violent and predatory behaviours such as rape, stalking, abuse in all its forms, the ongoing trades of pornography and prostitution and the sexual exploitation of children wherever these occur.
 - The Church needs to model right and just friendships in its own life and maintain the quality of community life as an expression of the Gospel. It must name the sinfulness within its own community life and act with compassion towards those who have become its victims.
 - Child abusers are known to infiltrate child care agencies and youth organisations for their own purposes. We need to be vigilant about our choice of the adult leaders of children so that we can help create safe places for children and young people.
 - The Church needs to pastor people who have been abused and those who are abusers, always working for justice and healing. Within the Church community, we offer an environment of wholeness and nurture where people begin to trust again.

40. 'Marriage Service' in *Uniting in Worship*; Dorothy Lee, 'Freedom, Spirituality and the Body', in *Freedom and Entrapment*, p. 51.).

Right Relationships as an Expression of Community

- 4.42. Right relationship is essential in building community. The integrity of the individual begins with seeing themselves in community. In other words the basic unit of society is not the individual, but the individual in community. For the Christian that entails seeing the individual in the community under God. We need to beware lest our actions become a cause of stumbling to others. All relationships, including our intimate relationships, have an effect on the community.⁴⁰ We need to be open to the challenge and discipline of the faith community. This is both our limitation and responsibility. (*Romans 14*)

- 4.43. It is within the community that all our relationships and friendships are worked out. Not only are our friendships nurtured by the Christian community, our relationships and friendships enhance community. In other words, how we 'do' friendship is an essential element in the building of community, both in the faith community and in society as a whole. The community is weakened when people are excluded and abused and when power is misused and trust dishonoured. The issue of right relationships and of faithful friendships is a community issue. It is not simply a private matter between the individuals involved. This places enormous responsibility on the community to provide a framework which encourages and nurtures good friendships. It also means that the Uniting Church has a responsibility

to work against the structures and forces within itself and society that divide and put people at enmity with one another. This is a response to God's call of reconciliation made possible in Jesus Christ (*2 Corinthians 5:16-21*). In such ways we may be part of a ministry of healing and wholeness for all people.

Chapter 5

'Living alone, living together'

The previous chapter offered an outline of ways in which Christians might seek to develop right and just relationships as a response to the grace and justice extended to us in Christ; and how the church might indeed be that 'community of friends' Christ calls us to be.

In this chapter we begin to explore how our distinctive Christian perspectives might shed some light on particular issues of sexuality relating to life-stage and relationship contexts.

In ordering the material in this chapter we begin with experiences common to us all:

childhood,
adolescence,
singleness,
sexuality and people with disabilities,
homosexual relationships,
celibacy and chastity,
marriage,
divorce and separation,
sexuality and changes in life.

The key question is what sexual expression is appropriate for members of Christ's community that brings glory to God.

Children, Parents and the Church Community

- 5.1. Sexual awareness begins from birth - some would say even earlier. The growing child learns gender roles from the way significant adults relate to each other and the child. Attitudes to sexuality and modes of relating are also learnt through imitation and observation. If the elements of right relationships can be modelled and experienced in our families in a positive way, they will have a profound and lasting impact on children as they develop their unique personalities, including their sexual awareness.
- 5.2. Parents are seeking guidance on how to help their children develop healthy and positive attitudes to sexuality. The following suggestions, by no means comprehensive, emerge from the theological, Biblical and ethical perspectives outlined previously.
- 5.3. Healthy sexuality starts with *self esteem*. This begins when children are infants, when their first cries are answered and they are picked up, cuddled, fed, comforted. They learn that they are worth picking up and being cared for. If a child has been treated with respect the child will learn to treat others with respect and in turn, demand respect from others.
- 5.4. Parents need to model responsible sexuality in the household. For instance a child will gain a positive outlook if they observe their parents giving affection to each other, whether it be by word or physical means, such as hugs and cuddling. Confining physical displays of affection to the bedroom will not help a child understand the complexities of intimacy and sexuality. A child needs to understand that displays of affection do not necessarily lead to genital sex. It is hoped that our Church communities will also be able to model affection and warmth as a community of friends.
- 5.5. From very early on children are subjected to the pressures of a culture dominated by consumerism and instant gratification. Parents, reinforced by the community of faith, can model an alternative way by:
 - teaching children how to distinguish between wants and needs;
 - providing a safe environment in which questions can be answered in open, honest dialogue;

- showing the appropriateness of waiting for important things and so be able to resist the cultural pressures of instant gratification. It is hoped that by the time children reach adolescence and the onset of sexual desire, they will know the language and experience of waiting for the right time and context for sexual expression;
- equipping children to recognise both unwanted and abusive sexual advances and providing an environment where they can seek and find assistance;
- showing self-respect and respect for others and valuing people as whole persons;
- helping children to develop positive attitudes to their bodies, countering oppressive stereotype images presented through the media with toys like Barbie dolls. Our bodies are 'the temple of the Holy Spirit' (1 Corinthians 6:19). Children need to be taught about the importance and beauty of their bodies which deserve to be treated with respect and honour. Likewise children need to be taught to treat the bodies of others with due respect.
- instructing our children in the values of the Reign of God in a way that helps them participate constructively in society, yet be able to discern and oppose those aspects which go against values of the Reign of God.

5.6. Bearing and raising children raises a number of issues relating to sexuality, personal identity and self-esteem. Many women speak of giving birth to children and caring for them as an experience that has a deeply enriching spiritual dimension. For other women, elements of this experience can be devastating to their self-esteem (e.g. the damaging effects of post-natal depression).

5.7. Grief and anger are often bound up with issues surrounding fertility and infertility. For example, people coming to terms with the fact that they will never bear children, or facing the challenge of raising a child with severe disabilities, need sensitive pastoral support from the Church community

5.8. As Christian community we have an important role in supporting mothers and fathers and grandparents in the nurture of their children. Parents promise at the baptism of their child to '*encourage their child to grow within the fellowship of the church, so that they may come to faith in Jesus Christ.*'⁴¹ The congregation is charged to '*maintain the life of worship and service, that this child and all the children among you may grow in grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the knowledge and love of God.*' These are significant promises to make. They provide us with the framework of care and responsibility to be communities of inclusion and friendship as we all live out our baptism as a loving community in Christ. Children developing personal identity will be more likely to have healthy self-esteem when their parents and grandparents are supported by other Christian people.

41. 'Baptism of a Child' in *Uniting in Worship*, p. 44.

Adolescence

5.9. Adolescence is a time of profound physical, emotional and sexual change. Sexuality is a key issue for teenagers as they are drawn into relationship with others. It is a time of great vulnerability for most young people and may involve such experiences as:

- a growing awareness, understanding and exploration of their bodies (sometimes through masturbation);
- a wish to have their desirability as sexual persons affirmed;
- a longing for the particular kind of connectedness which comes from having a girl or boy friend;
- a desire to express their sexuality with a partner, possibly in genital intercourse;
- confusion about their sexual identity;
- a sense of isolation and loneliness;
- conflict over the messages of the media and popular youth culture which promotes freedom and the exploration of sexual expression and the expectations of their family or their own expectations;
- a sense that the Church has a negative attitude towards any sexual expression;
- concerns about the effect that intimate sexual activity with a partner (or absence of it) might have on a desired relationship;

- confusion and frustration in making wise and faithful decisions about appropriate levels of sexual activity and in developing a positive understanding and expectation of marriage;
- a sense that the Church is silent about their dilemmas.

How can the Church community help adolescents?

5.10. For young people to maintain self-esteem through the period of adolescence, the Church community needs to:

- be a community which is seen to be living out its baptism 'as a loving community of Christ, nurturing one another in faith, upholding one another in prayer and encouraging one another in service';⁴²
- promote sexuality as a normal healthy aspect of being human;
- provide an environment in which young people know they are accepted by adults as well as by their peers;
- recognise the strength of young people's hormonal drives and the possibility of their confusion about their actual desires;
- assist young people to develop communication and negotiating skills which will help resist unwanted pressures and free them to make appropriate decisions;
- provide an environment in which young people can develop friendships and enter into activities with others, without the pressure to pair off or to engage in genital sexual expression;
- provide role models who have integrated their sexuality into the framework of their Christian discipleship;
- provide opportunities where young people can experience a wide range of people who model flexible gender roles;
- help young people appreciate the different needs and perspectives of others;
- listen carefully to the concerns of young people in a way that respects their privacy and vulnerability;
- answer clearly and carefully questions on matters of sexuality and help young people find the information they need by referring them to appropriate people;
- encourage young people to build relationships characterised by self-giving love, justice and responsibility, while being mindful of the needs of those who feel excluded from such relationships;
- recognise and name the power of sin in the sexual lives of its people;
- be a community which demonstrates reconciliation as mistakes are acknowledged and God's forgiveness made real in the life of the community.

42. 'Baptism Service' in *Uniting in Worship*, p. 29.

Single Adults

5.11. We are all single at some time in our lives. People are single for different reasons. We cannot speak of single people as a group as if there is some common understanding of what it means to be single.

5.12. Single people within the church community offer valuable examples of lives lived in the fullness of the gospel. While the Church upholds the centrality of marriage, it has never taught that marriage is an essential prerequisite for faithful Christian discipleship.

5.13. Some of us are single because we have chosen or felt called to be celibate. Some have not had the opportunity to marry or are not yet able to form a committed relationship. Some of us have been divorced or widowed. Others have been hurt in relationships, or have experienced the pain of the breakdown of the relationship of their parents or friends.

- Single people have a legitimate need for intimacy and community. There is a danger of stereotyping single people who choose to share accommodation or live in communal households, making the assumption that such people are engaging in sexual activity. Similarly, the single person who lives alone needs that choice respected.
- Single people may often feel marginalised by the Church community whose life

tends to favour families and those who are married. Sometimes their loneliness and isolation goes unnoticed. The exclusion of single adults from adult groups of married couples is painful for those of us who are single.

- People going through the grief of widowhood may experience an acute loss of sexual warmth and expression. The loss of the intimate 'other' is a major adjustment for someone used to giving and receiving tenderness in everyday life.
- Some separated, divorced and widowed people question the trust others have in them; some feel the rejection of church groups as moral censure. As one recently divorced woman said, 'the loneliest time of the week was standing around outside after church on Sundays'.⁴³
- Sole parents, whether they are widowed, separated or have never been married, have the same need for intimacy and suffer different kinds of pressures. They may also know loneliness and are often bereft of adult support.
- One form of oppression in society is the habit of hosts finding an equivalent single adult to 'partner' a single guest for an event. It is as if the community is embarrassed to have people unattached.
- There are some single adults who are the life-blood of the Church community who may at times be exploited because they are seen to have fewer commitments than other members.

Celibacy

5.14. Celibacy as a vocation has a long and respected tradition within the history of the church. It is also part of some of the other great world religions. Some advocates of this tradition have seen the elevation of celibacy and chastity as being closer to God's will than marriage.⁴⁴ We can admire people who over the centuries have served church and society as celibate people for all or part of their lives. As a Task Group we affirm both marriage and celibacy as appropriate and honoured vocations for Christian disciples.

5.15. Some will choose celibacy because they believe they can serve God more effectively than if they were married (*1 Corinthians 7:32f*). There may be other reasons for that choice.. Given the societal pressures to marry or find a partner, the journey of the celibate person is not easy. At times celibacy can be lonely and requires enormous discipline.

5.16. This does not mean that celibate people deny themselves all sexual expression, nor does it mean that they deny themselves close and intimate friendships. The celibate person is still a sexual person with needs even if they have chosen to deny themselves genital sexual expression. The celibate person expresses their sexuality through their appearance, their speech, their gestures, body movements, and other expressions of physical warmth apart from genital activity. Some will express their sexuality through other creative pursuits, such as the arts.

Chastity

5.17. While the 'celibate' person is 'chaste' when it comes to genital sexual expression, a 'chaste' person may not necessarily be 'celibate'. Some married couples choose to live in a chaste partnership. This may be total, or for specific periods of their married life, depending on the circumstances.

Seeking a Partnership

5.18. Many young adults and single people desire marriage or some other close partnership.

- Some are still quite young and are not ready to commit themselves.
- Some are alone because they have rejected or been rejected by a potential partner or for some reason a desired marriage has not occurred. Some have never been approached by a potential partner or have failed to choose one for themselves and this can be a source of pain.
- Many single people choose to be chaste until they are married. In other words they have decided to forego genital sexual expression. This does not mean that

43. 'Report of the Year of Listening' in *Sexuality - Exploring the Issues*, chapter 14.

44. Peter Brown, *op. cit.*, Chapter 4; Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *op. cit.*, Chapters 3 & 7).

they forego all sexual expression, for they may desire the warmth of sexual affection such as hugs and kissing. Single people who make the choice 'to wait' need to be respected and supported by the Church. Of all places, the Church community should provide such people with affirmation.

- Many will experience a number of relationships as a way of seeking the right partner. Sexual expression may well play a part in such relationships.
- Many single adults, for various reasons decide against chastity, but are not promiscuous. For them chastity is not realistic. In an age of effective contraception they question the legitimacy of 'drawing the line' at genital sexual expression.
- Some single people find that close emotional intimacy which does not include genital activity is in fact a more significant expression of intimacy than genital activity.

5.19. For all single people, guidance for appropriate behaviour can be found in the principles developed earlier in this Report, especially in assessing the depth of intimacy and commitment in their relationships.⁴⁵ Caution and honesty will be required for them to be sensitive to the effects of their behaviour on others.⁴⁶ The Church cannot stand aside from being there for them as they work through the complexities of their choice.

Engaging in Sexual Activity

5.20. The Task Group believes that the decision on whether or not to engage in sexual activity involves searching for an answer to this primary question: How can our actions in this situation best reflect the love, faithfulness and grace of God that comes in Jesus Christ?

People Living Together

5.21. The Church acknowledges that many couples live together either prior to or instead of marriage. There is some indication that this trend is a reaction to the failure of traditional patterns of partner selection, courting, marriage and family. Many young adults have experienced the failure of relationships in their parents' generation, and have resolved to approach marriage cautiously and critically. They are still struggling with the question of what constitutes a long-term relationship. Because reliable contraception is available many are sexually active while they work through the meaning of commitment. They still have high hopes for their own relationships and are seriously working out what long-term commitment means. For many, including church members, this premarital living together has the status of betrothal.

45. Chapter 4.

46. Karen Lebacqz, *op. cit.* explores in particular the place of appropriate vulnerability in such relationships.

5.22. For others who wish neither to observe sexual abstinence nor be promiscuous with all its attendant risks and abuses, the possibility of a stable sexual relationship is important. For many who have had unhappy marriage experiences, living together is an important way to explore new relationships. It is important that the quality of these relationships be assessed on the basis of love, commitment and care for each other. Other criteria might include the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness and self control. Marriage is no guarantee of their presence, nor living together a sign of their absence.

5.23. The phrase 'living in sin' is an alienating concept that fails to take seriously the situation and the questions that people are asking today. It has the effect of denying the complexities and seriousness of people's choices. It fails to reflect ethically and theologically on the uniqueness of people's relationships. It can even lead to a denial of ministry to people within the reality of their everyday experiences. Their relationships are in need of affirmation and building up in faith like every other relationship.

People with Disabilities

5.24. We affirm that people with disabilities are sexual people. Questions often arise about how people with disabilities can express their sexuality, whether they are living in supported care at home, in residential care or independently.

- To what extent can the yearning to be connected with others find expression?

- What are their expectations or ours, if the ordinary patterns of responsibility and marriage are not open to them?
- Is the young man with a degenerative disease that will lead to permanent hospitalisation to be encouraged to enter a temporary live-in arrangement with a woman friend?
- Does our acceptance of birth control mean that an intellectually disabled young woman can have uninhibited and pleasurable encounters with the young man she meets at an activity centre though she has not the capacity to sustain a stable relationship with him?
- How can care-givers be sensitive to the sexual needs of people with severe physical disabilities?
- How can psychiatric services respond more sensitively and effectively to women with psychiatric disabilities who are survivors of sexual abuse?

5.25. There is room for much more discussion with the people most affected by these issues. The families, friends and carers of people with disabilities need help and support from the Uniting Church and its agencies.

Homosexuality

What Does it Mean to be a Homosexual Person?

5.26. Sexuality is an integral part of our humanness for both heterosexual and homosexual people alike. We all experience sexual attraction and powerful desires to share and express our sexuality. Most of us are attracted to people of the opposite sex, some to people of the same sex and others again are drawn to both.

5.27. New understandings of sexual orientation and how it develops continue to emerge through medical, psychological and sociological research. There are many theories but no conclusive evidence to fully explain how sexual orientation develops.

'There is no one path to homo or hetero orientation just as there is no single outcome from a particular family dynamic or genetic make-up. Understanding a person's sexuality must involve understanding a person's unique history and...these dynamics are common to every man and woman - the longings in every heart for intimacy and respect, and a degree of ambivalence in all relationships'.⁴⁷

5.28. Most homosexual people come to an awareness of their orientation over many years. Some are aware of their 'difference' from quite an early age, even if they can't name it. Certainly this 'difference' becomes increasingly apparent through adolescence and young adulthood. 'Coming out' is the process by which a lesbian and gay person acknowledges their homosexuality not only to themselves but to others. Frequently this is met with hostility and rejection, sometimes even by family and the Church community. Sometimes the announcement is met with affirmation and support.

5.29. The Uniting Church experiences issues relating to gay and lesbian people in a variety of ways.

- There are and always have been lesbian and gay people who faithfully serve God and the Church as members, lay and ordained, displaying the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. Some accept their homosexuality as a 'given' part of their God-given personhood to be lived responsibly in ways that honour God. Some are beginning to be more open about their identity.
- Some gay and lesbian people hear God's call to ministry and apply to be accepted as candidates.
- In living as homosexual people some are chaste and celibate. Others live in loving, faithful relationships, believing that these relationships are consistent with Christ's call to discipleship and long for the recognition, blessing and support of the Church.
- Some lesbian and gay people, while acknowledging their orientation, believe that to live as a homosexual person is sinful and that sexual activity is contrary to the will of God.
- Some homosexual people seek healing and change through prayer, deliverance ministry and the pastoral support of a church community. Others seek cures

47. David M. Clark, 'A Bio-Psycho-Social Understanding of Sexual Orientation and Identity' in *Sexuality: Exploring the Issues*, p. 75.

through psychological counselling and behaviour modification therapies. Some are able to change and either remain chaste or live in heterosexual relationships. In some cases these changes are short term, while for others no change takes place.

- Some congregations welcome gay and lesbian people, offering deliverance ministry and healing. Other congregations declare themselves to be open and affirming of gay and lesbian people and welcome their participation in all aspects of the congregation's life accordingly.

5.30. The Task Group recognises that at their best, these different approaches involve a genuine search for a faithful way to honour God both in personal relationships and as Christian community.

Attitudes to Homosexuality

5.31. People's attitudes and feelings about homosexuality are formed through a complex mixture of 'messages' received in many ways; for example through family, peers, church, the Bible, school, legislation, the media or the arts. Responses to the Interim Report indicate that some stereotypes and generalisations continue to influence perceptions in the Church of homosexual people. Knowing lesbian and gay people will often save us from falling victim to these stereotypes.

5.32. Inaccurate and misleading generalisations heard by members of the Task Group in responses and workshops include:

- there is a gay life-style, common to all homosexual people, as seen in the Mardi Gras;
- homosexual people are mentally and emotionally unstable;
- gay men are predatory, promiscuous and molest children;
- homosexual people are anti-family;
- all homosexual people choose to be homosexual;
- homosexual people want to recruit others, especially children and young people to their life-style
- gay men are 'effeminate' and lesbians are 'masculine';
- 'you can pick them by the way they dress and act';

5.33. Many perceptions are simply untrue, while some may apply to some gay and lesbian people, but not to others. Christian people need to think carefully about their own attitudes. The damage done to homosexual people by perpetuating such myths is enormous, because it encourages the continuing violence, discrimination and injustice which homosexual people experience. Myths and generalisations 'bear false witness to our neighbour'. Only mutual respect and honesty will provide the ground for a constructive dialogue, worthy of the call to be the community of Christ.

Relationships and Sexual Activity

5.34. Among homosexual people the same range of relationships and sexual behaviour is to be found as among heterosexual people; from chastity through to committed relationships, to the promiscuous and perverted. Some gay and lesbian people live in loving, caring, stable, long term relationships. Others live in a constant search for an intimacy that continually eludes them.

5.35. Many responses to the Interim Report expressed a sense of revulsion towards homosexual activity, especially anal and oral sex. However, anal and oral sex are also engaged in by heterosexual people. Furthermore, anal sex is not engaged in by all homosexual men.

5.36. Quite apart from legitimate health questions regarding anal and oral sex a number of questions are raised in relation to sexual activity:

- on what basis do we make decisions about such sexual activity?
- why are anal sex and oral sex right/wrong?
- does the gender of the participants make a difference, if it does, why does it?

5.37. Many gay and lesbian people within the Church and wider community are looking to the Church to celebrate before God and their friends their faithful, long term relationships. This needs to be given careful consideration if the Church believes, as

do most Task Group members, that the appropriate context for genital sexual expression is a committed, long term, mutually faithful relationship. Behind this search for affirmation by the Church, is the call for some kind of structure which could support homosexual relationships. Heterosexual people have marriage as a structure to support their relationships, homosexual partners do not. Homosexual partners are very much on their own. Consequently the difficulties encountered in maintaining long term relationships for lesbian and gay people are enormous.

- 5.38. In responses to the Interim Report there was a range of views about lesbian and gay relationships. Many reflected the view that gay and lesbian people were fundamentally different from heterosexual people and therefore a different standard has to apply - namely, life-long chastity. Most members of the Task Group do not accept this view, believing that the same expectation is required of homosexual and heterosexual Christians alike; namely, living in right and just relationship before God.

The Bible and Homosexuality

- 5.39. The task of faithfully interpreting the Scriptures in relation to sexuality is an ongoing one. The diversity in understanding among scholars and in the Church is reflected in the Task Group. Members of the Task Group have struggled to understand and be understood by one another.
- 5.40. Many people who responded to the Interim Report expressed their frustration that the Task Group had not addressed the passages of Scripture which traditionally have been regarded as relevant to homosexuality.
- 5.41. The Task Group is not able to affirm one particular approach to these passages, however we offer some reflections. The Task Group believes that agreement about Biblical interpretation of these particular passages is not the central challenge for the Church. The continuing challenge is to understand that, in the light of our faith, the one duty we owe one another is the duty to love (*Romans 13:8-10*). It is in this context that we make our decisions.
- 5.42. While accepting the need to consider specific passages of Scripture the Task Group believes that they must be seen within the context of the Gospel. The New Testament declares that all have sinned and all are saved by grace, through faith in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The new life experienced in Christ begins the new creation, in which the goal of our whole life is to glorify God.

Particular Texts

- 5.43. It is clear to us that some of the passages frequently cited in responses to the Interim Report as relevant to the issue of homosexuality are, in fact, not helpful.
- 5.44. One such is the story of the attempted gang-rape in Sodom (*Genesis 19:1-29* and a similar account in *Judges Chapters 19-21*) since that was a case of heterosexual males intent on humiliating strangers by treating them 'like women', thus denying their masculinity. There is a surprising lack of disapproval expressed about Lot offering his virgin daughters instead, to protect the visitors. This brutal behaviour sheds no light on whether genuine love between consenting adults of the same sex is legitimate or not. In the Bible and other Jewish literature, Sodom stands condemned for its pride, wealth, failure to welcome visitors and fornication (*see Ezekiel 16:48-50*).
- 5.45. Likewise, Deuteronomy 23:17-18, is not directly relevant since it refers to male and female temple prostitutes and addresses a different question.
- 5.46. Several other texts are ambiguous. It is unclear whether 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 refer to sexual behaviour between 'passive' and 'active' same-sex partners, or to male prostitutes. That is, it is unclear whether the issue is sexual activity between same-sex partners, or promiscuity and 'sex-for-hire'.
- 5.47. The meaning of the word found in these two references - *arsenokoites* - is much disputed. The word seems to pick up the Greek translation of the Leviticus texts about 'men lying with men', but some argue that it carries the added connotation of male prostitution and economic exploitation of sex rather than 'homosexuality' as such. The other term used in the Corinthian text, *malakos*, means 'soft' or 'effeminate', and although it is used occasionally as the slang word for the 'passive homosexual partner' (who were younger men/boys in Greco-Roman culture where pederasty was common), it is also used of men who eat too much, read too many

books or engage in heterosexual sex too often!⁴⁸ Thus it may be argued that Paul is opposing exploitative homosexual relationships rather than opposing the possibility of a loving, long term relationship between two same-sex adults.

- 5.48. There remain three references which are unequivocal in their condemnation of sexual activity between same sex partners.
- 5.49. 'You (masculine) shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination' (*Leviticus 18:22*). The second adds the penalty: 'If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them'. (*Leviticus 20:13*)
- 5.50. Why was such an act regarded as an abomination? The ancient Hebrew understanding was that the male semen contained the seed of life and woman's role was that of incubator. The spilling of semen for any non-procreative purpose - *coitus interruptus*, male same-sex sexual activity or male masturbation was considered tantamount to abortion or murder. (*Genesis 38:1-11*) This perhaps explains why sex between females is not mentioned at all in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- 5.51. Furthermore, such were the gender boundaries, that when a man acted like a woman sexually, male dignity was compromised. It was a degradation not only of himself but for every other male. The patriarchalism of Hebrew culture is revealed in the very formulation of the commandment since no similar stricture was formulated to forbid same-sex activity between females. According to rabbinical sources, sex requires a penetrator, identified with the role of the male who is also assumed to hold other forms of societal power, while the penetrated partner, was identified with the role of a disenfranchised female. A sexually passive male threatens such gender boundaries.⁴⁹
- 5.52. Whatever the reason for their formulation, these texts leave no room for discussion. Persons committing sexual acts with same-sex partners are to be executed. This is the unambiguous command of Scripture. (*Leviticus. 20:13*)
- 5.53. We need to acknowledge that there are significant difficulties if we try to derive a position on homosexuality simply on the basis of these Hebraic texts since they are part of the purity codes which Jesus continually confronted, including the menstruation rules (*Mark 5:21-43*) and the food/washing laws. (*Mark 7*)
- 5.54. It is somewhat arbitrary to emphasise the laws about homosexuality but ignore those regarding clean and unclean foods (*Leviticus 11*), women and menstruation (*Leviticus 12*) and Sabbath observance (*Leviticus 23*). Certainly we would affirm unequivocally many of the Levitical laws, such as the prohibitions on child sacrifice and incest. However, as stated in chapter 2, we have to evaluate each part of tradition based on the revelation of God through Jesus Christ.
- 5.55. Paul's clear condemnation of sexual activity between same-sex partners in Romans 1:26-27 is central to any discussion on the Bible and homosexuality. It contains a reference to men-lying-with-men and includes perhaps the only Biblical reference to women having sex with women. We have already described the wider context for these verses in chapter 2.
- 5.56. The wider context shows that Paul is not prescribing ethical standards in Romans 1-3 so much as describing what he sees as the fallen condition of humanity. Most scholars agree that Paul reflected the traditional Jewish opposition to homosexual acts.
- 5.57. We don't know whether Paul was aware of the distinction between homosexual orientation and activity. He seemed to assume that those to whom he referred were heterosexuals who were acting contrary to their nature.
- 5.58. Likewise the relationships Paul describes are heavy with lust; they are not relationships between consenting adults who are committed to each other as a faithful heterosexual couple. Paul admits here that he is arguing from nature; therefore new knowledge of what is natural is relevant to our thinking.

The Wider Theological and Scriptural Context

- 5.59. Apart from studying the particular texts which specifically refer to homosexual acts faithful to the approach to Scripture outlined in chapter 2, we need also to consider the wider canonical context. This is important in order to counter views of Scripture which deal with isolated passages without an overall theological connectedness.

48. Keith Dyer, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, Unpublished paper, Whitely College, Melbourne. Used with permission.

49. M. L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: The Rabbinic Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1995, p. 221.

- 5.60. Much Biblical reflection on sexuality begins with the creation narratives in which God created man and woman for each other. 'Sexuality of course is basic to gender but gender has a wider connotation and, as a 'given', defines the human as in relationship with the other in its relationship to God as God's image. Here it is not a question simply of relationship, per se, to God, but the specific relationship of gender, male and female.'⁵⁰
- 5.61. Karl Barth gave this perspective on why God created the complementarity of the sexes: 'If Eve were only like Adam, a repetition, a numerical multiplication, his solitariness would not be eliminated, for such a creature would not confront him as another, but he would merely recognise himself in it'.⁵¹
- 5.62. Here, it is argued, our sexual desires rightly and for many, exclusively, find fulfilment within heterosexual marriage. Thus the Jewish tradition in which 'good sex' was never simply the pursuit of pleasure; rather it is the 'one flesh' union of a man and a woman that expresses commitment and covenant made with vows and carried out in fidelity. This vision is violated in many ways: by sexual intercourse without commitment to continuity, adultery, divorce and homosexual behaviour, to name a few.
- 5.63. The argument above, based on the creation of man and woman, assumes an ideal creation in which male and female have mutual attraction for each other. To account for the fact that some people are sexually attracted to members of the same sex the language of 'disorder' is invoked. 'Homosexuality cannot simply be put on the same level with the normal created order of the sexes, but rather it is a habitual or actual distortion or depravation of it'.⁵² From this perspective, homosexual genital relationships are seen to fall short of God's purposes. While they may express genuine love, faithfulness and companionship, yet they remain part of the disorder of a world that is in rebellion against God and therefore cannot be endorsed by the church.⁵³
- 5.64. The implications drawn from the creation narratives are by no means uncontested. Some argue that it is precisely not sexual differentiation and complementarity which images God: '...the distinctiveness of humankind is not that it has been created 'male and female' and enabled to reproduce Itself. Precisely in these respects, humankind is like every other created species and unlike God'.⁵⁴
- 5.65. If we acknowledge that differentiation is not to be exclusively associated with our being either male or female and complementarity is not exclusively expressed in our co-humanity as male and female, then we can recognise that differentiation and complementarity signify a mutual loving of the other as another in their own right.⁵⁵
- 5.66. The belief that Genesis 2:18-25 is simply about monogamous marriage reflects the way that modern western society has limited affectionate relationships to domestic life. At the heart of the creation stories in Genesis 1 & 2 is the social nature of humanity. This does not of itself preclude the possibility that certain people in a society may not fit the general pattern and may respond in a different way to the mysterious duality of gender.⁵⁶
- 5.67. Jesus uses the vision of Genesis 2 to expose the contempt for women implicit in the Pharisaic approach to divorce (*Mark 10:2-12*). Certainly the New Testament does not treat the domestic ideal of marriage as the goal of human aspiration. 'It is precisely the passage in which Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24 that he commends the renunciation of marriage! The main emphasis is the creation of an affectionate community of friends. (*c.f. Mark 3:14-19, Luke 8:1-3, 1 Corinthians 9:5, Romans 16:1-23*)⁵⁷
- 5.68. The position of Gentiles in the early church is similar to that of homosexual people in our Church today, where engaging homosexual activity is still regarded by some as sinful.
- 5.69. We now know from the story of Peter (*Acts 10 8-11*) and through Paul's encounters with the various churches, that the Gentiles were not 'justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ...' (*Galatians 2:16*). Once more we are being reminded that the core of our identity as Christians is Jesus Christ. We are who we are because of him.
- 5.70. **Violence Against Homosexual People**
The Task Group has a deep concern about the violence that is expressed towards

50. Gordon. Watson, *God's Compassion and the Question of Homosexuality*, The Auburn Report, Vol. 8., No. 5., October 1996., p. 12.

51. Karl Barth, 'A Doctrine of Creation', *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 3, T and T Clark, Edinburgh, 1936, p. 290.

52. Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, Vol. 3, Sex, Eerdmans, 1964, p. 283)

53. Keith Rayner, *Human Sexuality: A Christian Perspective*, Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, 1994, p.17.

54. V. Furnish, 'The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in context', in J. Siker (ed.), *Homosexuality and the Church: Both sides of the Debate*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994, p. 21.

55. G. Scott, 'When Relationality Takes Centre Stage: Sexuality, Homosexuality and Self-Transcendence', in *Sexuality: Exploring the Issues*.

56. M. Vasey, *Strangers and Friends: A New Exploration of Homosexuality and the Bible*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1995, p. 117.

57. Vasey, pp. 116-117.

lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Tragically such homophobia can be fuelled by long standing prejudices and some theological beliefs.

5.71.

Homophobia can take many forms such as:

- focussing on the sexual activity of gay men and lesbians rather than seeing them as whole persons;
- being suspicious of two men or two women living together;
- discriminating against lesbian and gay people in jobs and housing;
- harassment in the form of jokes and innuendo;
- parents disowning children;
- violence, such as bashing, rape and even murder.

5.72.

Such discrimination is closely associated with a heterosexual view of the world by people who believe that male-female relationships are inherently superior. The result in society and in the church is the invisibility, silencing and oppression of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Bisexual people

5.73.

We cannot assume that we understand the complexities of being a bisexual person, nor what this means in terms of sexual behaviour. It is crucial to listen to bisexual people's understandings of their identity . Bisexual feelings, like heterosexual feelings, can be quite distinct from sexual behaviour. It is unjust to claim that all bisexuals are people who have sex with people of both genders and are necessarily unfaithful to their partner.

5.74.

The Task Group acknowledges with regret that it has been unable to devote much time and energy to the unique experiences of bisexual people. Some members have met and talked with bisexual people and have been privileged to hear their stories. Much of what we have said in relation to gay and lesbian people applies equally to bisexual people.

Transgender people

5.75.

As the church begins to relate to our members who experience what it means to be a transgender person, we will find that they challenge the traditional understanding of sexual identity and in particular what it means to be male and female. A number of parishes have transgender members. In offering pastoral care to them, issues may arise such as their experience of sexual identity, gender identity, gender dysphoria, sex reassignment, and cross-dressing.

5.76.

That many transgender people have overcome massive trauma and change and live productive, fulfilled lives is a tribute to their belief in their own identity and their need to bring together that inner reality with their physical gender make-up. This is usually achieved after a huge struggle, not least because of many people's scepticism and outright hostility.

5.77.

The Task Group affirms that transgender people are God's precious children and our brothers and sisters in Christ equally with gay, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual people.

Marriage

5.78.

For Christians, *what makes a marriage is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of a man and a woman to live together for life.* Marriage is a unique sign of the unity which is promised us in Christ. Responses to the Interim Report indicate that Uniting Church people believe strongly in the centrality of marriage.

5.79.

To date the Uniting Church has not made any direct policy statement on its understanding of marriage. Except for several ecumenical discussion documents⁵⁸ and the guidelines contained in the 'Marriage Service'⁵⁹ very little discussion has taken place. Judging from the dearth of publications over recent years, the subject has received very little attention from the theologians of the church. Consequently there has been a lack of opportunities for Church members to understand marriage in its contemporary context from the point of view of the Christian faith. Our understanding of 'marriage' has therefore suffered from a kind of 'taken for

58. *Stages on the Way and Minutes of the Fifth Assembly 1988, Appendix III, Report of the Ecumenical Affairs Commission*

59. 'Marriage Service' in *Uniting in Worship*

granted' attitude. The Church has simply assumed the importance of marriage, but has not given any positive clarification to this assumption. Those who choose to marry may well have to work harder than their parents, if their relationship is to grow. This signals an important challenge to the Church.

- 5.80. It is essential, however, to recognise the historical interrelatedness and complexity of both social and religious understandings of marriage. Social understandings of the role of marriage have not been static. In different cultures and times marriage has:
- conferred control over the fertility and sexual activity of partners;
 - supported domestic and economic functions of family groups;
 - been a means of controlling and transferring property;
 - been a means of establishing alliances between family groups;
 - legitimised and defined the partnership of a man and woman to the legal and social satisfaction of society;
 - been used to maintain and consolidate the subordination of women. (eg loss of rights to property, employment opportunities and little or no access to divorce).
- 5.81. The Christian understanding of marriage considers marriage to be a central symbol of God's gift in creation. Traditionally there has been a great emphasis on procreation as one of the purposes of marriage. More recently the church has recognised the importance of the couple's emotional relationship. Human beings created in the image of God are relational creatures: 'It is not good that the man should be alone....therefore the man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.' (*Genesis 2:18 & 24*). Marriage is one of the means by which the human need for mutual companionship, help and comfort may be expressed.
- 5.82. In Ephesians, the writer likened the marriage relationship to that of Christ's relationship with the church (*5:21-32*). While some may read this passage as a justification for the submission of women to men within the church and relationships, others see it as a statement for the equality of women and men in marriage.⁶⁰ The key to the passage is in verse 21;
- 'Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ'.
- 5.83. Within the context of these few verses, the writer takes the customary understanding of his day about marriage, namely that it is a relationship in which wives are to be subject to their husbands, and transforms that understanding in the light of the coming of Christ. Instead of the emphasis being on wives being subject, it is now that
- 'Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body'. (*Ephesians 5:28-30*)
- 5.84. The writer then goes on to quote Genesis, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' (*Genesis 2:24*). In doing so he is speaking primarily of the mystery of Christ's relationship with the church (*Ephesians 5:32*). While we may never understand the mystery of Christ and the church, Christians who marry, have this central symbol as a guide to how they understand and live out their marriage relationship.
- 5.85. Marriage for Christians derives its essence from God's faithful covenant with God's people, which is modelled again through Christ's commitment to the church. While marriage for many may be seen simply in romantic terms, for the Christian, marriage gains its meaning from God's grace in Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that marriage is 'not to be entered upon lightly or selfishly, but responsibly and in the love of God'.⁶¹
- 5.86. Marriage is to be seen as part of the new creation of reconciliation. This is part of the reason why the marriage ceremony is a public act, carried out in the community of faith. While marriage is a private expression, it is also a public witness to the reconciling work of God, something which enables us to reach beyond the self to the Christian community and the wider society. Yet another reason why it should be entered into with care and responsibility.

60. Bruce Barber, 'Marriage and Christ' (unpublished sermon); used with permission.

61. 'The Marriage Service' in *Uniting in Worship*, p. 381.

- 5.87. Everything that has already been described in this report with regard to friendship and just relationships applies to marriage. Marriage is a choice that people make when they believe they are now ready for the kind of lifelong commitment it demands. Being married is no guarantee that the relationship will reflect the fruits of the Spirit⁶² but it does provide a valuable structure in which they can be nurtured.
- 5.88. Marriage can provide an ideal structure in which to nurture children and family life. The covenant of life-long commitment at the heart of the marriage relationship provides a stability that is not always possible when such a commitment is lacking. Marriage and family life are greatly strengthened by support from a wider network of family and friends. The growing isolation of the nuclear family in contemporary Australian society is a huge challenge for the Church in its efforts to build Christian community, 'communities of character'.
- 5.89. In Australia nearly four out of every ten marriages will end in divorce. Figures also indicate that those who remarry are no more likely to succeed a second time. On average the greatest number of divorces occur among those in their early thirties. Alongside these figures indications are that people are marrying later and more are choosing to live together without being married, or else as a preliminary to marriage. The reasons for these trends are complex and this report is not the place to explore them in detail. The later age for marrying may well be seen as a positive, given that the highest breakdown of marriage occurs among those who marry before they are 20 years old.⁶³
- 5.90. That people 'fall in love' and marry is not in itself a sufficient basis for a just or workable partnership. The divorce figures witness to that. Instead of looking to the meaning of marriage as based on human love, we need rather to see it as based on God's love for us. At its heart marriage gains its focus from the model of God's love for the church. Hopefully learning what love is in marriage, may also spill over into the whole of our lives. Practising reconciliation and with it the fruits of the Spirit within the marriage relationship, also may provide the community with a firm foundation.
- 5.91. Some questions have been raised as to whether it is appropriate for the Church to perform marriage services on behalf of the state. This has often been seen as a compromise by the Church in regard to its high concept of marriage. For others maintaining the present arrangement provides opportunities for outreach and pastoral care which would not be always possible if the state provided the service only through secular celebrants. More consideration needs to be given to this matter.
- 5.92. 'Changing social patterns, higher expectations of marriage and increased life expectancy gives new meaning to "till death do us part". We need to reflect afresh on both our heritage and the contemporary context of marriage, so that we can minister more effectively to the remarried, the newly married and those who opt for other forms of male and female partnership, as well as to those who choose singleness or solo parenting. Our members are vulnerable to the social, physical and emotional pressures in Australian society which can deepen marriage and family life, or lead to its disintegration'.⁶⁴
- 5.93. The Uniting Church, while still holding a high view of marriage, considers it important to reach out with compassion and understanding to support those who have endured the pain of marriage break-up.. Prior to union the Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist Churches made strong statements affirming the ideal of marriage yet recognised the need to deal with the reality of divorce.⁶⁵ The Church

62. Chapter 4

63. Australian Bureau of Statistics.

64. Raymond K. Williamson (ed.), *Stages on the Way - Documents from the Bilateral Conversations between Churches in Australia*. (Faith and Order Commission of the Australian Council of Churches), JBCE, 1989, p. 252.

65. William Tabbernee (ed.), *Marriage in The Australian Churches*, Victorian Council of Churches, Faith and Order Commission. 1982.

Divorce and Remarriage

seeks to stand alongside people in their brokenness and through grace enable them to rebuild their lives.

Divorce as a breakdown of Marriage

- 5.94. Given the theological understanding of the nature of marriage, as a mutually faithful life-long union blessed by God, a breakdown in marriage needs to be regarded seriously. Divorce is a break with the commitment to be together for life. For the people involved, it is often an experience of human failure and brokenness. It is difficult for those outside the situation to estimate the pain suffered when this happens, not only for the couple themselves, but also for the children and other close family members. It is often accompanied by guilt, bitterness and despair, while in some circumstances it can often be destructive. This adds to the sense of loneliness and failure on the part of those involved with possible negative effects on individuals, their self esteem, and their ability to trust their partner in future relationships. In some cases the rush to remarry without reflecting on the broken relationship can lead to another failure.

The Bible on Divorce

- 5.95. The earliest recorded words about marriage and divorce in the New Testament are in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. Paul claims the authority of 'the Lord' when ruling that: 'the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband) and that the husband should not divorce his wife' (*1 Corinthians 7:10-11*). There is no similar provision for the husband. To this principle of no divorce Paul added his own judgement for exceptions: in the case of a couple in which one of the spouses is an unbeliever, it is good if they remain together if they can without dissension; otherwise they should separate (*1 Corinthians 7:12-14*). It is important to note that Paul made a distinction between his authority to make such dispensations compared to the authority laid down by 'The Lord'. (*1 Corinthians 7:12*)

- 5.96. In the gospels we find Pharisees asking specific questions about divorce. Jesus answered them with the strong statement affirming the Genesis statement about God creating male and female for marriage. In the process a husband and wife come together in one flesh union. This union was seen in terms of God's gift of sexual intercourse within the context of the creation of a new family unit. Therefore 'what God has joined together let no one separate'. Jesus said that 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery'. (*Mark 10:11-12*)

- 5.97. In this passage and a parallel passage (*Matthew 19:3-9*) Jesus proposed an ethic that treated men and women equally and expected the same standards from both with respect to the high view of marriage as a lifelong faithful relationship. This served to raise women's status by giving protection to women from unfair dismissal, forcing them to become outcasts. However, the additional texts show that Jesus' permitted divorce in the case of an adulterous wife (*Matthew 5:31-32*). There is no reciprocal openness in the case of an adulterous husband. When these same standards are applied today, they can be used as a form of control and a way to keep people in broken and abusive relationships. For this reason the Church has been willing to re-evaluate the Gospel record.

The Remarriage Experience

- 5.98. Since its formation, the Uniting Church has allowed divorced persons to remarry, including divorced clergy. Ministers are expected to use their discretion in such circumstances. This has enabled divorced couples to find both acceptance and support as they seek to build their lives again. It is hoped that the Church is a place where people can experience forgiveness and reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

- 5.99. While pastoral sensitivity is essential, the Task Group believes there is a place for more *liturgical resources* as a way of assisting those who divorce and remarry. While the Declaration of Purpose in the present Marriage Service⁶⁶ applies equally to those who are being remarried and those entering into marriage for the first time, there is room for some recognition in the Service in cases of remarriage. There is, however, a need to consider liturgical forms to assist people going through divorce, whether they remarry or not. The new Anglican Prayer Book provides such a form as do a number of ministers and parishes.⁶⁷ The Task Group believes that such

66. *Uniting in Worship*

67. Dorothy McRae-McMahon, *Echoes of our Journey: Liturgies of the People*, JBCE, Melbourne, 1993, pp. 78ff.

developments need to be encouraged and asks the Commission on Liturgy to provide some guidance.

- 5.100. Such liturgical support will not only assist the respective couples but will also provide the opportunity for the family, friends and community to take a constructive part in the grieving and renewal process.

Changed Circumstances and Sexual Expression

- 5.101. The uncertainties of human life can in themselves challenge many of our preconceived notions of a satisfying sexual life.
- 5.102. We have already referred to people who have been widowed or separated who are suddenly without mutual sexual experience. Yet even within marriage or a committed relationship circumstances change because of illness, disability, temporary incapacity or separation. It may change also because of the changing circumstance of the marriage, such as the arrival of children, ageing, or some other crisis which affects the nature of their intimacy and their sexual needs and responsiveness.
- 5.103. Within a mature relationship of marriage a couple may have the resources to deal with such changed circumstances, through their ability to communicate and work through the issues. For others it may require some outside professional assistance.
- 5.104. Whatever the case, it may be a time when they need to be more vulnerable to each other, to be more open to exploring other ways of making love, such as through massage, mutual masturbation and other physical stimulation. Just as relationships need to change and grow in time, lest they die, so does our need to explore other ways of expressing our sexual affection with each other. Sometimes changed circumstances and crises challenge us with very positive results. Ideally it would be less painful if couples were able to grow and broaden their sexual intimacy without the crisis. Whichever way it happens, it is often a challenge to our preconceived notions of what is a satisfying sexual experience.
- 5.105. For those who, because of widowhood or divorce, are deprived of a sexual partner, the situation is different. Having become accustomed to giving and receiving sexual affection, its absence can be a lonely experience. In these circumstances people sometimes become embarrassed and frustrated by their sexual desires and needs. Often feelings of guilt arise when they resort to masturbation as a means of satisfying their need, especially when such actions were previously regarded as unacceptable. Some surprise their family and friends, when they quite openly seek out a new sexual partner.
- 5.106. This issue takes on added complications in the case of those in aged care residential services. They too experience the need for some sexual satisfaction. Those who are carers in such services are familiar with such situations. Few find it easy to deal with, some would prefer not to know about it. Clearly the Church has a responsibility to explore further how such situations can be met, not only for the sake of the older person in need, but also the carers and families in their responsibilities.

68. Marie M Fortune, *Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us*, Continuum, New York, 1995, pp. 121f.

Masturbation

- 5.107. Contrary to the way many of us were brought up, *masturbation* is an important part of childhood and adolescent discovery and sexual development. It should not be stigmatised. Parents can help children understand the nature of the activity as belonging to a private time and place.
- 5.108. While in many cases masturbation can only be a 'substitute' or 'second best', for others it may be the only way to deal with their desires, the release of tension and exploration of sexual dysfunction. For many, it is frequently a healthy way of discovering their sexuality. In other words masturbation can have a positive role to play. When it is accompanied by guilt, then its usefulness is spoilt. In saying this the Task Group is well aware that masturbation may well become destructive, particularly when it is compulsively out of control. That is not however a reason to forbid it.⁶⁸

Summary of the Task Group's Framework for Considering These Issues

5.109.

This chapter has considered a number of very complex issues. The following summary may help to provide a framework for the discussion.

- We are made friends of God through the justifying grace of Christ and invited to be friends of God and one another. (*John 15:15-17, Luke 10:25-39*)
- We are called to live as a community of Christ as a sign and foretaste of the Reign of God. A basic element of this community is friendship, i.e. living in right and just relationship with one another in order to glorify God and witness to God in the world. (*Matthew 5:13-16, Acts 1:8*)
- The expression of our sexuality in relationships is likewise to glorify God and reflect the Good News and its message of new life.
- The Church community lives within the Australian culture which exhibits values such as strong individualism, personal gratification, materialism and acquisitiveness. Many of these values are hostile to community and the growth of intimacy.
- We are shaped in the church in understanding who we are and how we are called to live by the Scriptures, the tradition of the church, reason and experience.
- The Bible as the story of our covenant God and God's covenant people, points to Christ, the 'living Word' whose grace invites us into a life of communion with God and which models a way of life and relating whose purpose is to glorify God.
- The model of relating for the community and in personal life could be described as seeking, in the Spirit's power, to live in just and right relationship with God and one another.
- Contemporary understanding of sexuality and homosexuality has changed. The Biblical writers appear not to have made the distinction between sexual orientation and practice.
- The Scriptures address certain sexual acts which are not exclusive to homosexuals and interpreted those acts in the context of keeping Israel separate and removed from the excesses of pagan religion and idolatry.
- The lived experience of gay and lesbians today is no different from that of heterosexual people in that all are part of Christ's community seeking to glorify God.
- There are homosexual people in whom we see the gifts and fruits of the Spirit, gifts in ministry and leadership.
- Some homosexual people live in loving, faithful, long-term relationships.
- All people sin and fall short of the glory of God. All of us are 'saved by grace through faith.'

69. *Assembly Standing Committee Minutes, Appendix II.*

5.110.

The Church is divided on these questions, but the Task Group is unanimous on the following:

- the Bible is silent about homosexual orientation;
- being homosexual or heterosexual is not, of itself, morally good or bad. It is not our orientation but what we do with our sexual nature that constitutes right or wrong
- heterosexual and homosexual people are brothers and sisters in Christ;
- all are welcome in the Church community;
- all are welcome at the Lord's table;
- all who believe in and wish to follow Christ are welcome in membership of the Church.⁶⁹

5.111.

Some members of the Task Group believe:

- homosexual acts are contrary to the will of God as expressed in the Bible;
- while homosexual relationships may express genuine love, faithfulness and companionship, they remain as part of a disordered world that is in rebellion against God and therefore should not be endorsed by the Church.

5.112.

Some members of the Task Group believe:

- the same standards apply to both homosexual and heterosexual relationships;
- that loving, faithful, long-term homosexual relationships can be blessed by the Church.

Chapter 6

'Living as God's people'

In this chapter we explore:

Characteristics of being a Christian community.

The nature of leadership in the Uniting Church.

The gifts and graces of leadership.

How the Uniting Church discerns the call to leadership.

The concerns Uniting Church people have about the ordination of homosexual people.

The misuse of power in leadership.

The centrality of Christ in dealing with differences in the faith community.

Characteristics of the Christian Community

- 6.1. We noted in Chapter 1 that the Church is a unique way of being in relationship with God and with other people. It is called to be a distinctive form of human community characterised by mutuality, interdependence, forgiveness and friendship. It is to be a foretaste of the Reign of God and it seeks to express in its life and work, the signs of that Reign.
- 6.2. From the experience of the early church we learn that there are many ways in which the Reign of God is manifested. Throughout its history and in our own day the Christian church has exhibited very different understandings of the faith, and this has led to struggle within the faith community. Yet despite such differences we remain within the unity of the one Body of Christ.
- 6.3. Many of these differences have been concerned with the ordering of the church and the ways in which the gifts of its people are discerned and exercised.

Gifts and Graces of Ministry

- 6.4. 'The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ'.⁷⁰
- 6.5. God gives gifts in order to build up the church (*Ephesians 4:11-13*). Unlike the world where people are chosen to fit slots in the organisation, God provides the gifts and graces in order to shape the church and facilitate its mission. We can only wonder at the variety of those gifts through the history of the church.
- 6.6. We believe that God gives a variety of gifts to clergy and laity alike but acknowledge that the Uniting Church has need of specified ministries.

'The Uniting Church from inception will seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to recognise amongst its members women and men called of God to preach the Gospel, to lead the people in worship, to care for the flock, to share in government and to serve those in need in the world.'⁷¹
- 6.7. The ordering of the Church seeks to reflect who we are as the Body of Christ: a community called to manifest that quality of love in its relationships which has its source in Christ's love for us.
- 6.8. Jesus himself drew attention to the kind of leadership which is required. 'You know the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant' (*Matthew 20:25-26*). And the picture of Jesus washing the disciples' feet stands as a reminder to the whole church of how ministry is to be exercised in his name.
- 6.9. In the Uniting Church we believe that we are best able to discern God's will through

70. *Basis of Union*, 13.

71. *Basis of Union*, 14.

the working of the Holy Spirit in the councils of our Church. Decisions are made through inter-related councils rather than by individuals. Thus an individual who believes that they have been called by God for designated leadership needs to have that call confirmed by the community of faith.

- 6.10. The Uniting Church Regulations⁷² set out the formal qualifications for those who would be ministers of the Word, Deacons and Youth Workers. Key elements for each ministry, apart from special gifts, are:
- the clarity and sense of call;
 - evidence of maturity in the faith;
 - the ability to work within the community to build up the body of Christ. This requires the ability and willingness to engage in relationships which model the characteristics of Christian friendship and love outlined in Chapter 4.
- 6.11. Applicants for candidature, ordination or commissioning as minister of the Word, Deacon or Youth Worker, must undergo rigorous examination by people who know them well, and then by others in the councils of the Church before they are selected.
- 6.12. The Task Group is not proposing any changes to the process for selection and training of candidates, but wants to emphasise the important role that parish elders councils and presbyteries play in this process.⁷³

Standards of Behaviour

- 6.13. The Uniting Church does expect high standards of behaviour from its designated leaders. In requiring a special kind of maturity of faith and the capacity to reflect clearly the characteristics of Christian friendship and love described in Chapter 4, we are asking a great deal of them. We also recognise that they are human, and at times will, like the rest of us, fail to live up to that high expectation. Paul was sympathetic to that when he acknowledged that all Christians are on a journey of discipleship and there are times when we will falter. (*Philippians 3:12-16, Romans 7:14-25*)
- 6.14. The Uniting Church also expects high professional standards of its leaders in pastoral matters because these positions carry considerable power. In the past, some ministers have betrayed this trust and abused their position through various forms of sexual abuse. There has been a growing awareness of the need to have clear and effective guidelines and procedures for dealing with situations where sexual abuse has occurred.
- 6.15. The kind of sexual abuse which is of concern includes 'sexual assault (not limited to sexual intercourse) and any unwelcome sexual behaviour, or any threat thereof, which makes a person feel threatened or afraid'.⁷⁴
- 6.16. In 1994 the Assembly approved procedures in this regard and they currently operate within the synods. They are procedures which apply to all Ministers of the Word and Deacons, lay pastors and chaplains, youth workers, synod secretaries and presbytery ministers.
- 6.17. At the time of writing this Report, the Assembly Commission on Women and Men is also compiling a code of practice for ministers and other designated leaders, in order to prevent abuse and inappropriate behaviour occurring in the future.

Church Leadership and Sexuality

- 6.18. In the Year of Listening and in response to the Interim Report of the Task Group, a number of different concerns were expressed with regard to church leadership and sexuality. These concerns focussed on issues of:
- homosexuality;
 - celibacy and chastity in unmarried clergy;
 - the effect of marriage break down on ministry;
 - the appropriateness of questions about sexuality in the candidature procedure.

Homosexuality

- 6.19. The Task Group has no reason to believe that a person with a homosexual orientation is less fit for ministry than a heterosexual person. Nor have we any reason to believe that a person with such an orientation is more likely than anyone else to damage the

72. 2.2.1, 2.3.2, 2.9.2

73. Regulations 2.2.1-15; 2.9.2-17.

74. Regulations 7.7.5.

- credibility of the ministry by the kind of inappropriate behaviour referred to previously.
- 6.20. Therefore the Task Group re-affirms the decisions of the Standing Committee and the UCA, namely that there should be no prohibitive categories for membership or leadership in the church based on gender, marital status or sexual orientation. Each application for candidature needs to be dealt with on an individual basis.⁷⁵ Given the Uniting Church government of inter-related councils this means that many safeguards are built into the selection of suitable applicants.
- 6.21. The Task Group members believe that each council of the Church will seek to make faithful decisions regarding the suitability of applicants for specified ministries, whether they are married, single, divorced, in a second marriage, gay or lesbian.
- 6.22. In the Task Group we are aware that there is general acknowledgment that lesbian and gay people are welcomed within the fellowship and membership of the Uniting Church, but that there are a number of concerns being expressed in connection with their ordination.
- 6.23. We have described homosexuality as a deep seated sexual orientation. It is clear that there are people with that orientation who decide to live a life of chastity. There are others who choose to give sexual expression to that orientation within the context of a committed long-term and faithful relationship. There are others who enter sexual relationships with several partners. In other words, as with heterosexuality, there are a number of different ways of living with the orientation. In the case of homosexuality however, society and the church give no endorsement to the long-term committed relationship.
- 6.24. Responses to the Interim Report indicate that some the councils of the Church would not be comfortable selecting someone who is gay or lesbian for a leadership position, because of their orientation. Others may select a suitable applicant who is lesbian or gay on the understanding that they remain chaste. Still other councils might select as a candidate a person who is in a committed long-term relationship with someone of the same sex. Each of these positions can be held with integrity within the Uniting Church.
- 6.25. Those who are convinced that homosexual orientation is in itself contrary to God's will, may believe that this makes leadership within the Church inappropriate regardless of any other gifts and graces.
- 6.26. Those who accept homosexual orientation as a given component of some people's lives may reject homosexual activity on the basis of Biblical prohibitions, or because of their understanding of the natural order as represented in the creation stories, yet welcome leadership from someone who chooses a life of chastity. They may believe that such a person has a special experience which can enrich our Church by being an appropriate role model for others who find that they have a homosexual orientation.
- 6.27. Those who choose to select a candidate who is in a long-term committed relationship or has the hope of such a relationship, may do so because they are convinced that that person has brought their sexuality into the context of the Gospel. Consequently they have the capacity in their sexual relationship, as in other relationships, to 'model the characteristics of Christian friendship and love' which we have described.
- 6.28. There are others who have reservations about ordaining homosexual people in that it might place an obstacle in the way of future moves into closer union with other churches, or undermine unity with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress or the ethnic congregations with whom we are linked.
- 6.29. In making decisions about lesbian, gay, divorced people or single sexually active heterosexual people it is important to remember that we are not talking in the abstract, but about real people for whom Christ lived and died, who are offering their gifts in the service of the Uniting Church.
- 6.30. As stated earlier what we do in the Uniting Church must be based on the kind of community we believe God wants us to be. Trusting the councils of our Church to make appropriate and faithful decisions in particular cases is consistent with this. We believe strongly that homosexual people, already in ministry who have been chosen in this way, must have their position and ordination respected.

75. Assembly Standing Committee Minutes 82.12, 87.46, 94.78.3 in Appendix II.

- 6.31. However for all people, whether homosexual or heterosexual, real questions will arise in regard to their fitness for ordination if they engage in sexual behaviour which threatens the fabric of the community of faith.
- 'Celibacy in Singleness and Faithfulness in Marriage'**
- 6.32. The Task Group has concerns about this statement. This is not so much because we disagree with what is being advocated in such a standard. We are concerned that it underestimates the complexities of human sexuality and about the way in which it might be used unjustly against certain people. As indicated in Chapter 5, the Task Group wishes to uphold chastity (which we assume is implied in the word celibacy), as an honourable and valuable decision for a Christian to make. Likewise we are clear in our support of marriage as central within the Christian community and our belief that faithfulness is basic to it.
- 6.33. If the Church had only seven words in which to describe the demands of Christian discipleship in the area of genital sexual expression, then 'chastity', 'faithfulness' and 'marriage' would be key words. However the complexity of the nature of human sexuality and the changes we see in society require more of us if we are to be faithful to the Christian Gospel. After five years the Task Group is still struggling with some of the questions and the appropriate words. Meanwhile 'chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage' does not deal adequately with the issues which confront the members and leaders of the Uniting Church. We have already indicated some of the issues faced by men and women with homosexual orientation. Similarly women and men of heterosexual orientation who have not yet found a partner to whom they feel able to commit themselves in marriage are also in a difficult situation.
- 6.34. While there are serious differences between us on these issues within the community of faith, we believe that for all of us there is something more central to our lives than our sexual orientation or sexual relationships.
- 'As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.
- See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.
- Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God. (*Colossians 2:6-19*)
- 6.35. We may all be captive to a human way of thinking, but in the end we no longer look at anyone from a human point of view. We know that 'in Christ God is reconciling the world to himself', and that we are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (*2 Corinthians 5:16f*). Our lives are directed towards the fulfilment of that promise.
- 6.36. The way in which our lives, our relationships and our Church might become signs of God's reconciling purpose will be perceived differently by different people. However we must seek to grow together, so that each different member can play their part and the whole body can be built up in love. (*Ephesians 4:11-16*)

The Way Forward

- 7.1. The experience of the Sexuality Task Group over the last five years has been one of growth and increased understanding. Throughout our journey together, the Bible and the Church have been central to our life. As well, there has been a developing joy and celebration of God's good gift of sexuality to the human family. Friendships have been established, a strong sense of unity nurtured and a feeling of an exciting adventure and positive group experience has been affirmed. Though members of the Task Group have not always agreed, in fact, have sometimes disagreed significantly, the grace of God has enabled and strengthened us to persist for the sake of hearing what the Spirit is saying to the Church.
- 7.2. Some of the reasons for this can be found in the commitment to one another in love and prayer and in our commitment to God in worship. We have endeavoured to honour the prayer of Jesus for unity throughout the various stages of our work. This work has required good grace, good humour and reliance on our understanding of what it means to be the Body of Christ together.
- 7.3. We find ourselves now at the point of being able to recognise some fundamental differences between us, but also, and more importantly of seeing the great love of God flowing from our various personal positions. We have found a liberating joy in being able to express our opinions, knowing that they are heard and respected, though not always agreed with. This has happened over a long period of time. It has been a journey of risk, but it has been risk taken in the Spirit of Jesus.
- 7.4. This journey has left the Task Group with questions which have wide ramifications for all members and friends of the Uniting Church in Australia.
- *Is it possible for us to go forward together on the basis of our common commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ?*
 - *Can we trust one another enough to allow the making of decisions about our life and ministry in congregations, councils and presbyteries, when some of those decisions will be ones with which we cannot agree?*
- 7.5. It is good to remember that the Uniting Church was not formed through a chance coming together of Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian denominations who found that they had something in common in their reformed tradition. It was a commitment more like marriage. We undertook to continue to look together for our unity in Christ. It surely is time to recommit ourselves to that.
- 7.6. Paul's writings to the Romans address problems of how Jewish and Gentile Christians can live together in one church, providing insights for our own situation. Paul's advice is to humbly accept one another as members in the one body, each with gifts and graces, given by God, which are to be contributed to the whole. By the mercy of God, we are encouraged, to present our entire selves to God as a living sacrifice. This can only happen through a renewing of the mind which will release us from the self understandings and ways of the society from which we have come.
- 7.7. We can also learn from Paul's counsel to support one another and act according to our conscience without putting stumbling blocks in the path of our brothers and sisters. By learning to serve and welcome the other, despite differences, as Christ has served and welcomed us, we will be turning from disunity to the heart of our faith.
- 7.8. As we go forward, moving together with God's Spirit and celebrating God's gift of sexuality, the following considerations are before us.
- Recognition**
- 7.9. All members of the Church hold strong personal convictions. These enrich our lives, but sometimes frustrate us and cause deep division. The unity of Christ is our highest concern. However, an appeal to the unity of Christ can sometimes serve to mask our differences. In the discussion about sexuality, our unity is held in tension with our diversity.
- Reconciliation**
- 7.10. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to repentance and forgiveness and to the process

of being reconciled one to the other. The grace of God empowers us in this through the Holy Spirit. We all claim to be faithful to the Gospel and committed to the Basis of Union. However, our deep differences in understanding how the Bible informs and directs our lives and in how we understand sexuality have put our unity at risk. Only a renewed commitment to understanding one another and our faith through the various filters we bring to the Bible and sexuality can take us forward.

Prayer

- 7.11. The whole Church has spent much time in prayer during the history of the Assembly Sexuality Task Group. This has been a healthy beginning. There is need for committed and ongoing prayer, not only for a Church that is divided on these issues, but for the people in our Church as they struggle with and discover their sexuality. Part of this prayer is the joyous thanksgiving for the gift that God has given us in sexuality.

Bible Study

- 7.12. There has been a substantial return to a focus on Scripture during the life of the Task Group and across the whole Church. This has been reflected in the thousands of responses to the Interim Report. The Church should continue to encourage the study of Scripture, not only on issues of sexuality, but also on the broad range of issues before the Church. It is important that appropriate resources, particularly for the study of questions about sexuality and marriage be developed.

Pastoral Care

- 7.13. There are many of our members hurting and bewildered by the raising of the questions about sexuality. Still others have been similarly affected by the long standing silence on these issues. Our ministry one to another in bringing healing and wholeness is crucial. In our ministry to one another we remember that healing is an act of love, not an issue of power. People of every theological and sexual understanding are experiencing pain and the Church has a Gospel mandate to bring healing. There is great concern for our ethnic and Aboriginal members and congregations, arising out of the sexuality discussion. The impact on these brothers and sisters could be quite considerable. Therefore the Uniting Church needs to find ways of continuing dialogue and meaningful care.

Ordained and Specified Ministries and the Church

- 7.14. Our ministers are vulnerable and open to tremendous pressure to hold a particular theological position or to change from a position. Our ministry is ordained to serve all members of the Church and not narrow or specified theological and philosophical attitudes alone. The struggle for ministers and specified ministries, as the Church determines various appointments and settlements is apparent. Wisdom and pastoral care is required to help the whole Church to work with this tension.

Ecumenical Relationships

- 7.15. There are few, if any, Christian denominations not touched by the important questions presently being raised about sexuality. The Uniting Church remains committed to ecumenical engagement and cooperation, and in many ways is doing a servant task for the whole church. Risking the way of Jesus requires us to explore issues of concern to our Church, keeping in mind the unity of the churches, but not allowing that unity to hold us back from responding to the needs of the Australian community in faithfulness to the Gospel.

Education

- 7.16. This process of exploring sexuality has just begun. Educational resources for ongoing discussion are necessary if our church is to come to a point of understanding all aspects of sexuality, as they impact on individuals and on the Church.

Relationship Enrichment

- 7.17. We can do better as a Church in sustaining our people and helping them to find deeper levels of commitment, love, trust, intimacy and joy in their relationships. As part of the educational process, programs of relationship enrichment are a constructive step forward, declaring the intention of the Uniting Church to encourage and bless those in committed long term relationships.

Moving on Together

- 7.18. The Task Group has been heartened by the number of accounts from parishes of discussion of the Interim Report where people have been able to be open to one another in new ways, to listen non-judgmentally to different points of view. These parishes are eager to continue what they have found to be an exciting journey of faith.
- 7.19. We are moving forward. We are a people on the way. We are a people, seeking to live faithfully in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our differences can be used to expand our understanding of how the Bible informs and directs our lives and how we understand sexuality. As God's pilgrim people, we journey together, sometimes joyfully, at other times with deep concerns, acknowledging our pain and promise together, interpreting all that we do and all that we are in the Spirit of love, given to us in Christ by God.

April 1997

Appendix 1

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for the Task Group as clarified by the Assembly Standing Committee in March 1992 are as follows:

1. To prepare a report on the way the Church should respond to changing patterns of human relationships and sexual activity in our society, with a view to promoting healing and wholeness in human relationships. It is recognised that consensus is probably not possible and may not be desirable. The report should provide suggestions on how to minister to those struggling with issues of sexuality, rather than provide a set of rules.
2. The process used in preparing the report should assist the Church to;
 - Analyse the changes which are occurring;
 - Consider the framework for discussing the issues, including:-
 - a) the witness of Scripture concerning human relationships and sexual behaviour; a variety of ways in which Scripture is interpreted including the way it is interpreted by conservative evangelicals and people of other theological persuasions; and a consideration of how Scripture may act as a resource for the Church on these issues.
 - b) a discussion of various ways of arriving at ethical decisions - eg through natural law, situational ethics, ethics of community, as distinct from making decisions by applying moral laws.
 - Consider questions of sexuality and spirituality.
 - Consider how the church should handle pastoral issues related to human relationships and sexual activity.
3. To include in its considerations recent church reports including:-
 - The United Church of Canada reports.
 - The Presbyterian Church in the USA Report (1991).
 - The Report of the House of Bishops of the Church of England (1991).And the responses of the churches to those reports.
4. To hold hearings, make available study material, lead studies and encourage broad and open discussion in the Church, including face to face conversations between people who hold different opinions on their experiences, as part of the process of preparing the report. This process should be such as to enable members of the Church community to hear the breadth of convictions held in good conscience by others in the Church.
5. Ask the Task Group to concentrate over the next two years on a process of listening, study, discussion and consultation throughout the Church.
6.
 - a) Authorise the expenditure of up to \$4000 from the Assembly Fund for costs of the Task Group's work in 1992.
 - b) Request the General Secretary to consult with the Development Committee with a view to including provision for the costs of the Task Group's work in Assembly budgets from 1993 onwards.
7. Request the Task Group to report to the March 1994 meeting of the Standing Committee.

Appendix 2

Applications from homosexual persons for candidature for Minister of the Word, Deacon, and Youth Worker

Minute 94.78.3 of the Assembly Standing Committee September 1994

"It was resolved, in response to the request of the Synod of Tasmania, to approve the following as clarification of earlier resolutions:

1. Standing Committee is aware of a range of questions concerning the way the Church responds to applications from homosexual persons for candidature for Minister of the Word, Deacon, and Youth Worker. Standing Committee notes that previous guidance has been offered to Church councils on the matter of ordination and homosexuality, in 1982 and 1987 (see the minutes in the attachment).
2. Standing Committee acknowledges that doctrinal matters are among the issues which underlie the question of the suitability and acceptance of homosexual persons as candidates. Given the range of deeply-held convictions within the Uniting Church on the scriptural and theological issues and on the understanding of human sexuality generally, Standing Committee is of the view that the Church is not ready to make declarations through the Assembly on the doctrinal matters. It believes that this is a time for listening, meeting and discussion, and that this may best be done in presbyteries as members of the Church meet to respond to particular people and their search for a place in the ministry of the Church.
3. Standing Committee reminds Church councils and members that the Uniting Church is in the midst of a process of listening through the work of the Task Group on Sexuality. Following receipt of the Task Group's report in 1997, the Assembly may be in a position to offer further guidance to the Church on the suitability and acceptance of homosexual applicants for candidature, but Standing Committee notes that the terms of reference of the Task Group state "the report should provide suggestions on how to minister to those struggling with issues of sexuality, rather than provide a set of rules" (Standing Committee minute 92.26.3).
4. Within the polity of the Uniting Church, decisions on applications for candidature are made by presbyteries. Standing Committee believes that presbyteries are to assess applicants on an individual basis, according to the provisions of the Regulations. It is appropriate for the presbytery, in fulfilling its responsibilities under Regulations 2.2.4(d) and 2.2.8, to take into account the way in which all applicants express their sexuality.
5. Standing Committee in 1987 referred to "the Church's expectation that its ministers will adhere to the standards of celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage"(minute 87.46(c)). This statement of expectation was based on responses received to the 1985 publication "Homosexuality and the Church" rather than on a formal decision of any council of the Church. The 1988 and 1991 Assemblies declined to vote on motions which sought to make such a statement a requirement or necessary condition for ordination. Minute 87.46(c) is therefore not a policy statement of the Assembly but presbyteries may choose to take it into account in assessing the suitability and acceptance of applicants for candidature."

Assembly Standing Committee Minutes 1982 and 1987

The Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) addressed the question of the ordination of homosexual persons in both 1982 and 1987, as well as in 1994. The relevant minutes are:

1. In 1982, on the receipt of correspondence from a presbytery, the ASC resolved:
"that Standing Committee advise the Presbytery that in its view the sexual orientation of a candidate is not and has not been in itself a bar to ordination. A decision on the suitability of a candidate may of course depend among other things on the manner in which his or her sexuality is expressed." (ASC minute 82.12)

2. In 1987, after reviewing the work of the Committee on Homosexuality, it was resolved that the ASC:
"affirms that all baptised Christians belong in Christ's church and are to be welcomed at his table, regardless of their sexual orientation;
notes that there is a range of deeply held convictions within the UCA about significant aspects of the debate, particularly touching on the interpretation of Scripture and the understanding of human sexuality generally;
encourages church members to explore more fully their understanding of issues relating to human sexuality and the family, including homosexuality;

in the matter of ordination:
 - a. affirms that existing procedures provide adequate opportunity for Presbyteries to exercise their responsibility in discipline and pastoral care;

 - b. believes that each Presbytery will select as candidates and approve for ordination only those whom it believes to be suitable for ministry;

 - c. notes that the report Homosexuality and the Church: Responses helps to clarify some of the issues involved, including the church's expectation that its ministers will adhere to the standards of celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage."

(ASC minute 87.46)

Appendix 3

Church Reports on Sexuality and Human Relationships

Most of these reports are unavailable through church bookshops in Australia. Where they are available they are marked with an asterisk (*). File copies can be viewed in the Assembly Office, Sydney. Some titles would be available from synod offices and Theological Faculty libraries.

Anglican Church of Australia

Report on Homosexuality, Social Questions Committee, Diocese of Melbourne, 1971.

Human Relationships, Ruth Shadford & Ken Harrison (eds), Anglican Submission to the Royal Commission on Human Relationships, AIO Publishing, Sydney, 1975.

The Church, Homosexuality and the AIDS Crisis, Report of a Working Party, Social Questions Committee, Diocese of Melbourne, 1985.

A Christian Discussion on Sexuality: A Position Paper, Anglican General Synod Doctrine Commission, General Synod, General Synod Paper Number 3, Sydney, 1989.

Anglican Church of Canada

A Study Resource on Human Sexuality, James Reed (ed.), Committee on Human Sexuality, Anglican Book Centre, Toronto, 1986.

Our Stories/Your Stories. A Resource by the Working Group on Gays and Lesbians and the Church, Human Rights Unit, 1990.

The Human Rights Principles Proposed by the Anglican Church of Canada, Prepared by John Bird for the Human Rights Unit, Toronto, 1992.

Homosexuality - Is It Wrong? Prepared by Brian Dench for the Unit on Human Rights, Toronto, 1992.

British Council of Churches.

God's Yes to Sexuality, Rachel Moss (ed.), Report of the Working Group, Fount Paper Backs, Collins, London, 1981.

Church of the Brethren

Statement on Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective. Annual Conference, Elgin, Illinois.(undated)

Church of England.

Homosexual Relationships: A Contribution to the Discussion, Including Working Party Report, General Synod Board for Social Responsibility, 1979.

Osbourne Report to the House of Bishops on Homosexuality, Working Party of the Board for Social Responsibility. c1987/88.

Issues in Human Sexuality: Statement by the House of Bishops, General Synod, Church House Publishing, London, 1991.

Issues in Human Sexuality, Statement by the House of Bishops, General Synod - Summary of the Report, Council for Social Responsibility, Diocese of Chelmsford, 1992.

Something to Celebrate: Valuing Families in Church and Society, Report of a Working Party of the Board for Social Responsibility, Church House Publishing, London, 1995. *

Church of Scotland

Report of the Group on Sexuality, Extract from the Report of Social Responsibility, Edinburgh, 1983.

Family Matters, Extract from the Report of Social Responsibility. Edinburgh. 1992.

Human Sexuality. Extract from the Report of the Board of Social Responsibility, Edinburgh, 1994.

Episcopal Church of America

Human Sexuality, Extract of Report of the Human Affairs Commission to the 79th General Convention, 1991.

Continuing the Dialogue: A Pastoral Study Document of the House of Bishops to the Church as the Church Considers Issues of Human Sexuality, c 1992.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Church and Human Sexuality; A Lutheran Perspective, First Draft of a Social Statement. Division for Church in Society, Department for Studies, Chicago, 1993.

Human Sexuality: Working Draft. A Possible Social Statement Developed by the Division for Church in Society and its Writing Team, Chicago, 1994.

Methodist Church in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Human Sexuality and the Church, Methodist Publishing, Christchurch, 1991.

Homosexuality, Faith and Order Committee, For circulation to synods and parishes, 1994.

Human Sexuality, Faith and Order Committee, For circulation to synod and parishes, 1994.

Methodist Church (Great Britain)

A Christian Understanding of Human Sexuality, Working Party, Division of Social Responsibility and the Faith and Order Commission, 1980.

A Christian Understanding of Human Sexuality, Statement presented to the Conference 1982 by the Division of Social Responsibility.

A Christian Understanding of Family Life, the Single Person and Marriage, Joint Working Party of the Faith and Order Committee and the Division of Social Responsibility, London, 1989.

Report of the Commission on Human Sexuality, Presented to the Methodist Conference 1990, Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough.

Human Sexuality, A Study Guide and Report Presented to the Methodist Conference 1991, Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough, 1991.

A Christian Understanding of Family Life, The Single Person and Marriage, Joint Working Party of Faith and Order Committee and the Division of Social Responsibility, Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough, 1991.

Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa/New Zealand

An Issues Paper. Special Committee to explore issues regarding Homosexuality and the Church: 1994.

Report of the Special Committee to Explore issues Regarding Homosexuality and the Church. Presented to the Assembly, 1995.

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Report on the Work of the Task Force to Study Homosexuality, General Assembly 1978.

Body and Soul, Human Sexuality and the Church. Church and Society, Social Justice and Peacemaking Unit, the General Assembly Council, Louisville, Vol. LXXX, Number 2, Nov/Dec., 1989.

Keeping Body and Soul Together: Sexuality, Spirituality and Social Justice, General Assembly Special Committee on Human Sexuality, 1991.

Minority Report of the Special Committee on Human Sexuality, 1991.

Study Guide for the Minority Report of the Special Committee on Human Sexuality, Special Task Group on Sexuality, 1991.

Reconciling the Broken Silences: The Church in Dialogue on Gay and Lesbian Issues, Sylvia Thornton-Smith (ed.), Christian Education Area of the Congregational Ministry Division, Louisville, 1993.

Reformed Churches of the Netherlands

Homophilia: A Report on the Biblical Data, Commission for Church and Theology, 1981.

Reformed Ecumenical Synod (Netherlands)

Report No 9, Committee on Homophilia, 1987

Roman Catholic Church in (USA)

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Religious Society of Friends (Great Britain)

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Faith and Sexuality, A Spectrum of Theological Views in the United Church of Canada, General Council, 1981.

Homosexuals and the Church in Dialogue, Issue 27, Division of Mission, December 1982.

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Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry, Report of the Division of Ministry, Personnel and Education on the Ordination and Commissioning of Self-Declared Homosexual Persons, Toronto, 1984.

Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality, A New Statement by the 32nd General Council, 1988.

Towards a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation, Lifestyles and Ministry, Recommendations and Report to the 32nd General Council, by the Division of Ministry, Personnel and Education and the Division of Mission, 1988.

United Church of Christ (USA)

Human Sexuality: A Preliminary Study. Board of Homeland Ministries, United Church Press, New York, 1977.

United Methodist Church (USA)

Guide to the Study Document on Human Sexuality, Discipleship Resources. Nashville. 1983.

Report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality. To the General Council of Ministries for consideration at the Council Meeting, 1991.

The Studies Homosexuality: A Study for United Methodist Groups, Based on the Report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality, General Board of Discipleship,. Cokesbury, Nashville, 1994.

Papers for Discussion on Human Sexuality, 1995.

United Presbyterian Church (USA)

The Church and Homosexuality, Advisory Council on Church and Society, Presented to 190th Assembly, 1978.

United Reformed Church.(Great Britain)

Towards a Christian Understanding of Human Sexuality: A Study Guide,. David H Dale(ed.), Ministry of Healing Committee, London, 1984.

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Homosexuality and the Gospel, Group for Evangelism and Renewal (GEAR), Southampton, 1993.

Speaking for Ourselves, Reflections by Lesbian and Gay Christians in the United Reformed Church, United Reformed Church, London, 1995.

Papers for Discussion on Human Sexuality, Mission Council on Human Sexuality, London, 1995.

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World Council of Churches

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Living in Covenant with God and One Another, Robin Smith (ed.),A Guide to the Study of Sexuality and Human Relations using Statements from Member Churches, Family Education Office, Geneva, 1990.*

Note. The Task Group viewed a number of documents and reports on human sexuality produced by synods and agencies of the Uniting Church, particularly those surrounding the study of Homosexuality and the Church. It was aware of, and in some cases viewed, a number of reports produced by assemblies and conferences of the uniting denominations, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian. We have chosen not to list them because most were produced prior to 1970 and resources did not allow us to be comprehensive in our search.

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Uniting Church in Australia

Task Group on Sexuality

Recommendations to Eighth Assembly
- July 1997

That the Assembly:

1. Affirm the joys and responsibilities of God's good gift of sexuality.
2. Recognise that all practices of sexuality which are exploitative and demeaning are unacceptable and contradict God's purpose for us all.
3.
 1. Recognise that the work of the Task Group on Sexuality is another step in the Church's understanding of issues of sexuality and encourage the use of this Report as a resource for study, discussion and dialogue.
 2. Request Uniting Education to gather and develop other resources to assist the Church to continue reflecting on issues of sexuality and faith.
4. Request the Standing Committee, following consultation with the Commission on Doctrine, to appoint a group representative of the different perspectives in the Uniting Church in Australia, to prepare and make available material on ways in which the Church understands and uses the Bible in seeking to live in faithfulness to the Gospel.
5. Approve the following policy Statement on Marriage:
The Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia declares that:
 - *Marriage for Christians is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of a man and a woman to live together for life.*
 - *It is intended to be the mutually faithful, lifelong union of a woman and man expressed in every part of their life together.*
 - *In marriage the man and the woman seek to encourage and enrich each other through love and companionship.*
 - *Where sexual union takes place the partners seek to express mutual delight, pleasure and tenderness thus strengthening the union of their lives together.*
 - *In the marriage service the woman and the man make a public covenant with each other and with God. It is an act of worship which, in the company of family and friends, affirms their trust in each other and in God and supports their determination to grow together.*
 - *In marriage, children may be born and are to be brought up in love and security, thus providing a firm foundation for society.*

Separation, Divorce and Re-marriage

 - *An inability to sustain the marriage relationship breaks the commitment to be together for life and may be painful for the couple, the children in their care, as well as for parents, friends and the Church community.*
 - *In cases of the irretrievable breakdown of marriage, the Church acknowledges that divorce may be the only creative and life giving direction to take.*
 - *The Church has a responsibility to:*
 - a) *care for people, including children, through the trauma of the ending of a marriage;*
 - b) *help people where appropriate to grieve, repent, grow in self understanding, receive grace and forgiveness;*
 - c) *support them as they find God's call for new life.*
 - *The grace and healing of God are available to people who are divorced thus freeing them to marry again.*

6. Establish the policy that Uniting Church marriage celebrants strongly encourage couples seeking marriage to undertake appropriate preparation.
7. Encourage Uniting Church couples to take advantage of appropriate relationship enrichment and education programs.
8. Encourage synods and presbyteries to identify suitable resources for individuals and couples for professional counselling, recognising the special needs of those who have experienced divorce or abuse.
9. Request the Commission on Liturgy to facilitate the development of liturgical resources both to recognise the end of a marriage and assist in the process of grief, repentance and moving on in God's grace.
10. Request the Standing Committee to appoint a group which includes gay and lesbian members to consider and bring recommendations to the Ninth Assembly on how the Church may respond to lesbian and gay people who wish to have their commitment to a life-long faithful relationship affirmed by the Church.
11. Affirm the 1987 decision of the Standing Committee that 'all baptised Christians belong in Christ's church and are welcomed at his table, regardless of their sexual orientation', (ASC Minute 87.46) and declares therefore, that sexual orientation is irrelevant to eligibility for confirmation, membership and participation in the life and mission of the Church.
12. Affirm the principles in the Standing Committee decisions in 1982, which states that:
 1. 'Standing Committee advise the Presbytery that in its view the sexual orientation of a candidate is not and has not been in itself a bar to ordination. A decision on the suitability of candidate may of course depend among other things on the manner in which his or her sexuality is expressed'. (ASC Minute 82.12)
 2. Therefore advise all ministers, parish elders councils, presbyteries and synods that applicants and candidates for ministry of the Word, ministry of Deacon and Specified Ministry of Youth Worker are to be assessed on an individual basis. (Regulations 2.2.1(a)(ii), 2.2.3(b), 2.2.4(d), 2.2.8, 2.2.11, 2.3.1(b))
 3. Advise presbyteries and synods that because all applicants and candidates for ministry of the Word, ministry of Deacon and Specified Ministry of Youth Worker are to be assessed on an individual basis in accordance with the Regulations, it is invalid for any presbytery or synod to establish or maintain policies which prevent certain categories of people from having their suitability for ministry considered in the specified way.
13. Request the Standing Committee to prepare guidelines on how the councils of the Church can more sensitively and effectively handle the application and processing of those standing for leadership positions in the Church, including the way in which people understand and express their sexuality.
14. Discharge the Task Group on Sexuality.

April 1997