

SEXUALITY AND LEADERSHIP

- Documenting the History

Received by the ASC in August 2009 (Minute 09.30)

The issue of sexuality and leadership has been a long standing and contentious one, having been before the Uniting Church for the past thirty years. This record of how the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) and Assembly have responded to it from 1982-2008 is provided in fulfilment of ASC minute 06.105.03 (b) which determined that the Assembly Standing Committee "provide a clear, readable and relatively brief summary of the debate about sexuality over the last thirty years;"

In March 1982 correspondence was received by the ASC from the Presbytery of Yarra Valley. The letter concerned the ordination of homosexuals, and was dealt with at that meeting.

The ASC responded "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 82.14).

Later that year the Synod of Victoria and the Presbytery of Yarra Valley asked the ASC to give further consideration to the ordination of homosexual persons. At the August 1982 meeting of the ASC it re-affirmed its previous resolution and provided a fuller response.

"The Standing Committee is fully aware of the significance of such an issue and would counsel the church as follows:

Recognising that the decision regarding a person's suitability for ordination belongs with a presbytery, the following matters should be kept in mind.

1. A decision by one Presbytery will have far-reaching implications for other Presbyteries, the candidate and for the whole church membership, but it belongs also within the privacy and integrity of the one person and the context of that specific case and should not therefore be seen as necessarily setting precedents for the future.
2. A decision for ordination of a candidate who is homosexual does not guarantee readiness of parishes to accept the ministry of such a person.
3. Such a decision will no doubt reflect the prevailing attitudes and divisions, often deeply and emotionally expressed, within church and community, even while endeavouring to consider the theological and moral background relating to the specific case. The present division and feeling within the community on this issue is acknowledged by the Standing Committee (ASC minute 82.101).

The Assembly Standing Committee, therefore, while not prepared to rule more explicitly on this matter, requests the Assembly Commission on Social Responsibility to provide materials on human sexuality, including homosexuality, in the light of the Gospel, that will assist to inform the Church both in councils and membership as to the arguments on the issues surrounding such decision-making and practice bearing in mind that:

1. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is all-inclusive, 'You are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians, Ephesians) and the Uniting Church declares in the Basis of Union, Para. 2, the belief 'that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ'.
2. Homosexuality is not a new phenomenon within the Church and community and current statistics would lead to the assumption that it also includes a percentage of members and ministers of the Christian Church.
3. Acceptance of the fact that sexual orientation is not a barrier to ordination does not imply approval of sexual promiscuity.
4. People considering suitability for ordination need to have in mind other behavioural questions, that may be equally as significant in their implications for ministry in the Church (ASC minute 82.101).

Correspondence from the Synod of Victoria and the Presbytery of Bourke concerning homosexuality and ordination was then sent to the ASC. At the March 1983 meeting of the ASC the following response was made.

"It was resolved that in response to the request for a study relating to the question of the ordination of homosexuals and recognising that the issue of homosexuality is wider than ordination:

1. a committee be established to undertake a study of the nature of homosexuality within the total framework of human sexuality with particular reference to:
 - biblical, theological, pastoral, physiological, psychological and legal issues;
 - whether practising homosexuals should be ordained to the Ministry of the Word;
2. The committee be requested to prepare a report for presentation to the Assembly Standing Committee with a view to assisting the Church to respond to the complex issues before it;
3. The president and Secretary be authorised to appoint the members of the committee, being Sydney based, giving due consideration to the kinds of expertise required" (ASC minute 83.15).

A committee was established with Gordon Dicker as the convener. The Committee then prepared a major report which was received by the ASC in November 1984. The ASC resolved to have the Joint Board of Christian Education publish it as a study guide for the church (ASC minute 84.52). The study, *Homosexuality and the Church*, was published in 1985.

The September 1985 meeting of the ASC agreed to extend the time for responses to the report *Homosexuality and the Church* to the end of November 1986. The Committee was also requested to prepare a further report based on the responses. In March 1987 the ASC agreed to publish the report along with the ASC position and responses (ASC minute 87.19).

In September 1987 the ASC, after reviewing the work of the Committee on Homosexuality and the Church, resolved that the ASC:

1. records its appreciation of the study process by which members of the Uniting Church have been challenged to a deeper understanding of homosexuality and its significance for the church;
2. affirms that all baptised Christians belong in Christ's church and are to be welcomed at his table, regardless of their sexual orientation;
3. 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;
4. encourages church members to explore more fully their understanding of issues relating to human sexuality and the family, including homosexuality;
5. 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).

In September 1988 the ASC responded to a letter from Gordon Dicker. The minutes say: "The Rev Dr Gordon Dicker had written following the decision of the 5th Assembly (1988) to carry the previous question on the matter raised by the Presbytery of Bourke, calling on members of the church 'to live out their Christian calling through lives of fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness.' Dr Dicker proposed that a statement on human sexual relationships should be drawn up in the light of the gospel for the help and guidance of members of the church." In response it was resolved to set up a Queensland based committee to prepare such a statement (ASC minute 88.51).

A statement "Human sexual relations in the light of the gospel" was prepared by the committee and discussed at the November 1989 meeting. The ASC then invited Chris Budden, the Secretary of the Social Responsibility and Justice Committee, and David Merritt of the Joint Board of Christian Education to prepare a paper on sexuality to reflect the different Christian positions. In March 1991 the ASC received the just published resource paper "Making Decisions as Christians."

At the 6th Assembly (1991) it resolved to set up a Sexuality Task Group "to prepare a report on the way the Church should respond to changing patterns of human relationships and sexual activity in our society." The Task Group was requested to hold hearings, lead studies and encourage broad and

open discussions in the Church as part of the process of preparing the report. It was asked to present an interim report to the 7th Assembly (1994) and a final report to the 9th Assembly in 1997.

At the September 1991 meeting of the Assembly Standing Committee the General Secretary introduced a document consisting of a request from the Presbytery of Sydney together with six attachments in relation to a service of blessing of a covenant relationship between a same sex couple. After much discussion it was resolved:

1. to receive the request of the Presbytery of Sydney for comment on the service;
2. to thank the Pitt Street congregation, the Commission on Liturgy, the Commission on Doctrine, the Social Responsibility and Justice Committee and the Chairperson of the Commission of Women and Men for their comments;
3. (a) unanimously to reaffirm that our church's understanding of marriage is that it is a life-long commitment between a man and a woman in love and fidelity;
(b) that the service used at Pitt Street Church was inappropriate in parts, in that it resembled too closely the marriage service;
(c) to note that some members of Standing Committee commend the service as celebrating God's grace in Jesus Christ transforming the lives of two women, and as recognising their commitment to each other in love; and that other members of Standing Committee, believing that scripture teaches that homosexuality is sinful, cannot support such a commendation and regard the service as improper;
4. (a) recognising the issues are of urgent and far-reaching significance for the Church, to enter upon a process of prayer, study and reflection of the theological, biblical and pastoral aspects involved in the Church recognising a relationship between two persons of the same sex making a commitment to each other in love and fidelity;
(b) to request the General Secretary to consult widely, including the Presbytery of Sydney, the Commission on Doctrine and Commission on women and Men, about the matter referred to in 4(a), and report to the next Standing Committee meeting;
5. to recognise that in any event the issues will be taken up in the important study on sexuality which has been set in train by the Sixth Assembly;
6. to request the General Secretary to communicate these decisions to the Presbytery of Sydney (ASC minute 91.95).

In March 1992 the ASC was presented with a document by the General Secretary consisting of a summary of responses received from various bodies and members of the church, including responses from overseas churches and individuals, to the Standing Committee's request for comment on the "theological, biblical and pastoral aspects involved in the church recognising a relationship between two persons of the same sex making a commitment to each other in love and fidelity." Attached were responses from the Commission on Doctrine, the Commission on Women and Men, and the Presbytery of Sydney together with two individual responses. It was resolved that Standing Committee:

1. receive the report;
2. remind the church that Standing Committee at its meeting in September 1991 reaffirmed that the church's understanding of marriage is that it is a life-long commitment between a man and a woman in love and fidelity;
3. recognise the pain of those in the church who are disturbed, even outraged, at the thought of the church considering recognition and blessing of committed same-sex relationships characterised by love and fidelity;
4. recognise the pain of those in the church whose sense of identity and experience of healing through a faithful commitment to a person of the same sex has not been recognised and blessed by the church
5. recognising that the church throughout the world is already wrestling with these issues, ask the Commission on Doctrine:
 - to continue exploring the wider theological issues referred to in its communication to Standing Committee, in particular the nature of the authority of scripture in relation to doctrinal and moral issues; and
 - to consult with the Task Group on Sexuality as that group explores the wider issues of sexuality in our church and in our society;
6. urge ministers and Councils of Elders to continue to act with integrity in the pastoral care of all the people within their charge, channelling the healing love of Christ as is most appropriate to their particular circumstances;

7. advise ministers and Councils of Elders that recognising same-sex relationships in any service which resembles the marriage service is not appropriate (ASC minute 92.31).

In 1994 there was a request for advice from the Synod of Tasmania concerning applications from homosexual persons for candidature. The ASC responded by saying it was aware of a range of questions with regard to this issue. It referred to previous minutes in 1982 and 1987. Then it went on to say:

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 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' (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" (ASC minute 94.78.3).

As requested the Sexuality Task Group reported on its progress to the 7th Assembly in 1994. In May 1996 the *Interim Report on Sexuality* was released. It sold many copies and numerous responses were received as a result.

In March 1997 the ASC received a report from Alistair Macrae, the Chairperson of the Task Group, with a draft of the final report *Uniting Sexuality and Faith*. The Report was approved for release with a statement from the General Secretary and the Chairperson of the Task Group. A draft summary of the responses to the Interim report prepared by Peter Bentley was presented to the Assembly Standing Committee. It was agreed that the summary of responses be published at the same time as the final report. All responses to the Interim Report were retained and are still stored in the Assembly archives.

The Presbyteries of Frome and Northern Inland expressed concern as to the process for dealing with the report. Uniting Network requested representation at the coming Assembly. The ASC agreed that two people from Uniting Network be associated with the Assembly with the right to speak but not vote.

The 8th Assembly gave significant time to the sexuality issue. The media gave it prominence. People on each end of the issue spoke out in ways that were not helpful. The Assembly resolved to publish and distribute, through the synods, as soon as possible, its decisions regarding the final report of the Task Group on Sexuality. It included the following statements:

"to affirm the joys and responsibilities of God's good gift of sexuality;
to reject judgmental attitudes in sexual ethics and witness to the renewing grace of God in this as in all areas of human behaviour;
to recognise the importance of responsible sexual behaviour and that all practices of sexuality which are exploitative and demeaning are unacceptable and contradict God's purposes for us;

- (a) to recognise that the work of the Task Group on Sexuality is another step in the Church's exploration of issues of sexuality and that *Uniting Sexuality & Faith* is a resource for study, discussion and dialogue;
- (b) to acknowledge the diversity of human relationships in which Uniting church members are involved and the different Biblical, theological and cultural responses of groups within the Church to these relationships" (Assembly minute 97.05-08).

Following statements on Marriage and Separation, Divorce and Remarriage the Assembly went on:

"to 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;

recognising with sadness its inability at this time to reach further agreement in regard to outstanding matters arising from the report *Uniting Sexuality and Faith* and recognising also the commitment of the Church to be both multicultural and inclusive, to

- (a) commit the Church to a continuing dialogue on the matters as yet unresolved in the same spirit of openness and compassion that has prevailed during the meeting of this Assembly;
- (b) acknowledge the disappointment of those who were looking to the Assembly for greater clarity and direction in regard to these matters;
- (c) express deep regret to those whose personal pain remains unalleviated by its inability to reach further decisions at this time;
- (d) convey to the UAICC the Assembly's commitment to remain in covenantal relationship and to continue to dialogue about these matters;
- (e) note the decisions of the Assembly Standing Committee expressed in resolutions 82.14, 87.46, 91.95.3(a), 92.31 and 94.78.3 and that these policies remain in place;
- (f) not proceed with the remaining proposals relating to sexuality except for proposal 51 (see minute 97.31.16 discharge the Task Group on Sexuality with deep appreciation);
- (g) request the former Presidents Ron Wilson, D'Arcy Wood and Jill Tabart to consider how the Assembly might deal with the outstanding issues relating to sexuality following the Assembly, and report with recommendations to the Standing Committee" (97.31.14-15)

For cultural reasons the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and members of the Church's migrant congregations find it difficult to discuss sexuality issues and participate in open debates. They mostly have a traditional stance. It was recognised by the Assembly that their views need to be taken into account as part of being a multicultural church.

Leaders of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress met with some key leaders of the Assembly about the sexuality issue and agreed to consult widely and discuss it at their national conference in 1998. The ASC dealt with a number of responses from presbyteries and others following the Assembly. It was resolved that the President write a Pastoral letter to the church.

The former Presidents reported to the November 1997 meeting of the ASC and their report was then sent out. The report and the responses received were then discussed at the March 1998 meeting of the ASC. It affirmed the unifying focus of our faith as expressed in the 1998 Affirmation, which was adapted from the Basis of Union, and encouraged all congregations to use the Affirmation as a resource (ASC minute 98.25.03). It also noted the conclusion of the three former Presidents that "inviting church members to engage in a further process of studying and responding to reports on sexuality is not likely to be productive." So it resolved not to pursue the search for consensus on the different attitudes within the church regarding homosexuality and the participation of homosexual persons in leadership positions (ASC minute 98.25.04). It urged all members of the church as disciples of Jesus to speak and write always with courtesy and respect.

It reminded the church that the following policies remain in place:

- (a) "all baptised Christians belong in Christ's church and are to be welcomed at his table, regardless of their sexual orientation";
- (b) "that each Presbytery will select as candidates and approve for ordination only those whom it believes to be suitable for ministry" (ASC minute 98.25.07).

A Task Group on the "Understanding and Use of the Bible" was seen as necessary and urgent work that needed to be undertaken (ASC minute 98.25.08).

Responses to the Assembly were received from Uniting Network, Evangelical Members of the Uniting Church, Social Responsibility and Justice. Reference was also made to the Tongan and Indonesian National Conferences. It was agreed that some ASC members meet with representatives of Uniting Network, EMU and Social Responsibility and Justice.

At the November 1998 meeting of the ASC a report on the conversations was discussed. It approved the statement deploring abuse, harassment and vilification in the church. It requested the General Secretary to arrange for the publication of a resource to assist the church in its "continuing dialogue on matters as yet unresolved" in relation to sexuality.

The President, John Mavor, also proposed a series of Synod Diversity Retreats and a National Diversity Retreat to bring together people from a wide cross section of the church in a time of worship, prayer, listening and reflection. Some Synod Retreats and a National Diversity Retreat were held in 1999 and a proposal was prepared by participants in the National Diversity Retreat for presentation to the Assembly meeting in 2000.

At the 9th Assembly, several proposals on sexuality were presented, but it was resolved not to consider any of these, apart from adopting the following Statement on Unity and Diversity, which was based on the proposal from the National Diversity Retreat.

"We celebrate

- that the church's faith is in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that the church's work and unity are built upon the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ;
- that in the Uniting Church we have already agreed on and affirmed important matters regarding marriage, marriage preparation, marriage counselling, divorce, re-marriage, sexuality and sexual ethics (Assembly minutes 97.31.5-97.31.13);

We affirm

- the authority of the Scriptures as defined in the Basis of Union, acknowledging that within the church there is a range of views on questions of Biblical interpretation on various matters of Christian faith and practice;
- we are bound together by Christ, and because we love the Uniting Church as part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church we will continue to work together in our diversity as servants of the living God;

We acknowledge

- that issues regarding committed same sex relationships and ordination were unresolved by the Eighth Assembly in 1997 and the Ninth Assembly in 2000 and remain unresolved;
- that the diversity of viewpoints and the lack of resolution of these issues have resulted in tension within the life of the church;

We regret

- that some people have felt hurt or offended because of the church's acceptance of diversity;
- that some people feel excluded from exercising their gifts of faith and ministry in their local Congregations;

We reject

- all forms of vilification and harassment within the life of the church;

We pray

- that God will continue to bless and use the diverse gifts of all church members as we seek to work together to make known God's love and salvation" (Assembly minute 00.25.03).

At the August 2000 meeting of the ASC it was agreed that the President and General Secretary consult with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress over the next two years regarding diversity and sexuality.

In July 2001 the ASC considered the question of whether a Minister is free to conduct a ceremony that blesses same sex couples. It was referred to the General Secretary, Polity and Doctrine groups to consider and report back. The report was delivered in July 2002. At the November 2002 meeting it was decided not to make any decisions regarding sexuality given that the previous Assembly decided not to consider such proposals.

At its meeting in March the ASC received a request from the Evangelical Members within the Uniting Church (EMU) seeking clarification of the position of the church in relation to the placement of Ministers living in a committed same gender relationship. The ASC was aware that there were a number of proposals on the issue that were coming to the 10th Assembly. In response to this request from EMU the ASC requested the General Secretary to convene a meeting of a representative group

of people, including persons from EMU, multicultural groups, Unity and the ASC for a one day consultation with regard to sexuality issues. This meeting was held in Adelaide.

The terms of reference for the meeting were:

03.31.02 request the Working Group, following the consultation, to develop a proposal to bring to the Assembly, to stand alongside other proposals that may be brought;

The clear outcome from the meeting was that all participants agreed that if the Assembly was going to address itself to this issue again that it would be helpful to have a clear understanding of the position of the UCA. The EMU participants were not willing to support the particular proposal that was developed as they considered that the Church should have a different position on the presenting issue. A proposal was drafted that sought to document the position of the church.

At the 10th Assembly what became known as proposal 84 was passed. The media gave the sexuality issue a great deal of publicity. Again there were unhelpful statements made by a number of persons that held different opinions on the decision of the Assembly.

Following the Assembly there was a huge response to what had been reported especially through the media. EMU prepared a petition, placed it on its website, and publicised a series of large gatherings which were held across Australia. The petition stated that the Assembly had endorsed 'right relationships' as well as traditional sexual ethics as expressed by the phrase 'celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage'. Approximately 24,000 members and attendees signed the petition which was collected by EMU for presentation to the August 2003 meeting of the Standing Committee.

At that meeting the Assembly Standing Committee received the petition and devoted a significant amount of time considering a response to the concerns expressed about proposal 84. It acknowledged with deep regret their spiritual and emotional dismay and concern. However, it also strongly rejected assertions within the petition and affirmed that:

- (i) "the concept of 'right relationships' was neither adopted nor recognised by the Assembly;
- (ii) the Assembly has not placed the Uniting Church outside of the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church;
- (iii) the Assembly has acted faithfully in accordance with the Basis of Union;
- (iv) the leadership of the Assembly did not mislead the Assembly;
- (v) those who adhere to resolution 84 have not separated themselves from the Uniting Church" (03.65.01.02).

It stated that "proposal 84 did not introduce new policy for the Church (03.65.02).

The General Secretary was requested to contact as many individuals as possible who signed the petition and provide them with a short pastoral letter picking up the Assembly Standing Committee responses to the petition, referring them to the website and advising them of the Assembly Standing Committee action regarding proposal 84.

The Assembly Standing Committee, acting under the powers granted in Constitution clause 47 and Regulation 3.6.26, varied proposal 84 including removing some clauses that had proved to be the most confusing to members of the Church so that the wording became as follows below.

CLARIFYING PROPOSAL 84

"Notes that 'Celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage' and 'Right relationships' referred to in parts 2 (ii) and (iii) of proposal 84 were intended to illustrate some differing views held by church members and have never been endorsed or approved by the Assembly or its Standing Committee (ASC minute 03.69.01).

Celebrates that in the Uniting Church we have already agreed on and affirmed important matters regarding marriage, marriage preparation, marriage counselling, divorce, re-marriage, sexuality and sexual ethics (Assembly minute 97.31.5-97.31.13) and we have adopted the Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice which gives clear guidance about the appropriate conduct and accountability of ministers (ASC minute 03.69.02).

In order to clarify the meaning of proposal 84 in accordance with the rationale presented to the Assembly, determines to act under its powers stated in Constitution clause 47 and Regulation 3.6.26 to vary proposal 84 as follows (ASC minute 03.69.03):

note the following extracts from Assembly minute 00.25.03:

- (a) we celebrate that the Church's faith is in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that the Church's work and unity are built upon the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ;
- (b) we affirm the authority of the Scriptures as defined in the Basis of Union, acknowledging that within the Church there is a range of views on questions of Biblical interpretation on various matters of Christian faith and practice;
- (c) we affirm we are bound together by Christ, and because we love the Uniting Church as part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church we will continue to work together in our diversity as servants of the living God.

noting that:

- (i) within the Church people of faith have wrestled with integrity to interpret Scripture in relation to the issue of Christian sexual ethics and have on some issues come to mutually exclusive positions;
- (ii) membership of the Uniting Church is open to all persons subject only to the guidance of the Basis of Union, the Constitution, the Regulations and policies of the Assembly,

call upon members of the Church to seek to live together in peace as people of faith, notwithstanding differing views in the matter of same gender relationships.

remind Presbyteries of the decisions of previous Assemblies that:

- (a) in considering issues related to candidature, ordination or commissioning for specified ministries, and the placement of persons in specified ministries, decisions should only be taken on a case by case basis; and
- (b) a decision on the suitability of an applicant or candidate depends upon a wide range of criteria and may include consideration of the manner in which the applicant's or candidate's sexuality is expressed.

to provide guidance for Congregations and Presbyteries on how to conduct discussions on contentious issues in ways that comply with the Church's policy on vilification and harassment;

- (a) to seek advice for the Church on the legal implications of the relevant legislation, eg. anti discrimination legislation, anti vilification legislation, etc; and advise councils of the Church of this advice; and
- (b) to amend, on the advice of the Legal Reference Committee, Regulation 2.7.16(l) to make more explicit the role of presbyteries in the placement of people in specified ministries" (ASC minute 03.69.03.01-04)

informs the Church that congregations and councils of the Church who wish to state a sexual ethic may elect to do so after prayerful consideration and study of the Scriptures providing that

- there is respect for and acknowledgment of those who hold a different view;
- such statements do not prevent the consideration on a case-by-case basis of individuals related to candidature, ordination or commissioning, and placement, according to proposal 84.3" (ASC minute 03.69.04).

At the November 2003 meeting of the ASC responses from Synods to proposal 84 were received. A process was put in place to clarify the doctrine of the church regarding people in committed same-gender relationships being in leadership roles, including ordained ministries, with a view to making decisions at the 11th Assembly in 2006. Step 1 was responding to the requests of synods and presbyteries. Step 2 was to have a period of Biblical and theological study throughout the church. Step 3 was to prepare a report in order to resource synods and presbyteries as they prepared for the 11th Assembly.

At its meeting in July 2004 it was reported to the ASC that there was significant division in the UCA on the sexuality issue. While some congregations found the aftermath of the 10th Assembly to be a positive missional opportunity, for many there was distress and loss of energy for their ministry and in some cases loss of members. The majority of opinions expressed through petitions and correspondence indicated opposition to ordaining persons living in committed same gender relationships. Most members would have preferred that the matter be brought to a close, although there were different views as to how this could be achieved. A report to the Church was approved with a request to the General Secretary that he prepare a cover letter which acknowledged some of the pastoral and theological issues. *Sexuality and Leadership* was the document that was produced and distributed widely across the church.

The 11th Assembly (2006) once again considered the issue of Sexuality and Leadership and made the following statement.

Preamble

"In the struggle to be the Uniting Church in Australia, we affirm that our unity is our oneness in Jesus Christ; we acknowledge a variety of theological perspectives and biblical understandings which we maintain in tension within our life as a church, recognising that variety is a gift to the Church which allows most people to find a spiritual home amongst our many congregations and faith communities;

1. to acknowledge and lament that even though the decision of the 10th Assembly regarding Sexuality and Leadership (Assembly Minute 03.12.04, varied by Assembly Standing Committee Minute 03.69.03) was made prayerfully and in good faith and according to UCA polity, it was a catalyst for the deep concern and disquiet present in some parts of the UCA.
2. to express its regret that following the 10th Assembly there were some faithful ministers and members of the church who believed that because of the decision of the 10th Assembly regarding sexuality and leadership (Assembly Minute 03.12.04, varied by Assembly Standing Committee Minute 03.69.03) they had no option but to withdraw from the Uniting Church altogether.
3. to express its regret that faithful Christian gay and lesbian people, on whose lives the Assembly deliberations have impacted, have continued to experience pain in our church.
4. to declare that the matter of Sexuality and Leadership is at heart a matter of faith and concerns our humanity in Christ.

The 11th Assembly

5. to acknowledge:
 - a) that Assembly members are not of one mind regarding the issue of the acceptance into the specified ministries of those living in committed same-gender relationships; and
 - b) that some members of the Assembly adhere to the traditional teaching and practice of Reformed and Evangelical churches in this matter, while others who also adhere to the Reformed and Evangelical tradition believe that God may be leading this tradition to a different understanding and practice; and
 - c) and therefore, notwithstanding the hopes of many in the Church, that the 11th Assembly, having prayerfully sought to discern God's will and after much deliberation, is not prepared to exercise further its determining responsibility in this matter.

The Next Steps

6. Pursuant to clause 38 of the Constitution, to advise Synods and Presbyteries;
 - a) that congregations who resolve that they are unable in conscience to receive into ministry placement a person living in a committed same-gender relationship, shall not be compelled to do so; and
 - b) to respect the decision of a congregation indicating its willingness to consider calling a minister in a committed same-gender relationship.
7. To encourage congregations:
 - a) to be aware that within many Congregations there is a diversity of belief on matters of sexuality and leadership and that some members do not feel free to express their beliefs;
 - b) to become safe communities where people may hold diverse beliefs on these matters and work together as the Body of Christ; and
 - c) to recognise that the possibility of living with difference is a gift which Christ offers to the world.
8. To encourage the whole church:
 - a) To commit itself to continue to grapple with the implications of the gospel of God's grace for our humanity, the church's life, and participation in God's mission in the world;
 - b) To call on all members of the church who hold different views to work at living together in peace as members of the Body of Christ; and
 - c) To hope, pray and work for that common mind in faith which is Jesus Christ's gift and will.
9. To request the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine to engage in further work that assists the Church in our ongoing consideration of the theological diversity of the Church on this issue and to authorise the Assembly Standing Committee to determine the terms of reference for such work.
10. To acknowledge:
 - a) that the Uniting Church is committed "to bear witness to that unity which is both Christ's gift and will for the Church" and
 - b) that Christ continues to feed us with word and sacrament as we wait on God's living Word; and to call the Uniting Church to re-commit itself to its primary purpose of "worship, witness and service" (Quotes are from the Basis of Union par 1).
11. To request that the President consult with the Moderators in relation to a pastoral letter to the whole church" (Assembly minute 06.41).

At the November 2006 meeting of the ASC the Doctrine Working Group was asked to address the referral made by the Assembly in minute 06.4, part 9 and was provided with terms of reference. In response the Doctrine Working Group organised two consultations in 2008. Two papers were written: "Approaching the Bible on Issues of Homosexuality and Leadership" and "Human Persons and Sexuality: a Theological Account." A report of the consultations was provided. While agreement on matters of biblical interpretation and theological framework were expressed, there remained unresolved the key questions of the nature of homosexuality and the interpretation of scripture. For some people homosexuality is a condition which may be changed, a sign of the brokenness and sinfulness of humanity while for others it is a matter of unchosen identity, the way they were made. One view therefore insists there can be no change in the church's traditional teaching and practice with regard to same gender relationships. An alternative view allows for the possibility that new understandings of the nature of human sexuality may be leading the church to change its teaching and practice with regard to such relationships.

At the November 2008 meeting of the ASC, after receiving the report from the Doctrine Working Group, it was noted "that the consultation concluded without any agreement on the way forward because on the central question of same-gender relationships fundamental theological differences of opinion remain" (ASC minute 08.98.02).

Note

See also Terence Corkin's paper, *Summary of the Current Position of the Uniting Church in relation to Sexuality and Leadership* September, 2007.