Statistics, Assumptions and the Uniting Church
Peter Bentley

1. Introduction

I have long been intrigued by the use of statistics by some members (usually leaders) within the Uniting Church. It appears that if they do not like the statistics mentioned about a particular subject, then the usual tactic is to say, ‘we are not a church that is about numbers’. However, when statistics are found that seemingly support their case, then they are often used quite widely.

Like the rather bizarre pseudo post-modern decision known as Resolution 84, when it comes to using statistics it appears that in the Uniting Church you can have one’s cake when you like it, and throw away the whole cake when you don’t like it.

A recent example has been the Australia Institute report on homophobia. Was there a serious discussion about the applicability of the figures to membership and consideration of the relationship of identification to frequency of attendance? No, there was no adequate reflection because the figures were helpful for the liberal cause.

Another example concerns feedback to some of the leaders of the Uniting Church. It appears some leaders are quite happy to quote numbers if the letters or responses are more supportive of their case, but when the majority of responses come from a different point of view, then it is sometimes implied that the respondents or writers are crazed right wing fundamentalist conservatives, or as I heard once – “don’t pay any attention to them – that’s Queensland for you”.

I am personally not surprised that for some matters today, opinions proclaimed via letters, including letter pages in the church papers are more supportive of liberal theology, because most members now realise there is little point in writing letters affirming traditional viewpoints on sexuality to the Assembly at least, because they are either not answered at all, or you are patronised with a type of form letter reply.

One of the most prominent areas of concern at present is the future of the Uniting Church in terms of its membership. Over the last few years I have detected two main responses:

- ‘Don’t mention the war’. This means we do not discuss difficulties associated with the declining and ageing church, and certainly do not seriously consider the impact of the sexuality debate.
- ‘The Uniting Church has a wonderful future’. This puts the positive slant on the previous response, and is simply a form of propaganda designed to convince people that things will work out, and also seems to imply that if you ask a question or raise concerns, then you are actually to blame for what happens.

Certainly, I believe that the Church should not concentrate on the negative, but I also strongly believe that the Church needs to be aware of the challenges it faces. If a leader is asked questions about membership and congregational numbers they need to be able to answer honestly and not present a picture that bears no relationship to the real situation.
I find especially curious the idea that we should not critique the current state of the Uniting Church, or always say that there are no problems in the Uniting Church, especially when one considers that many liberal people believe that the Church should do away with, for example, belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, because they believe this belief to not be grounded in reality, and yet when it comes to our present day reality they are willing to be part of a myth about the future of the Uniting Church.

Members of the church need to understand that many leaders of the Uniting Church are not able to address the present situation in the church, or perhaps some are even too afraid to present a realistic picture because they know they simply do not have any answers. The situation has gone on for so long that a culture of survival now dominates, rather than a culture of vibrancy and growth. I remember when I first became secretary of a large city presbytery (in 1998), I conducted an audit of all the congregations, and presented this to the executive, but at the time it was regarded as potentially too depressing. I then embarked (with presbytery approval) on a process to find a mission officer, with the idea that the officer would work closely with ministers and congregations, and help people to realise their situation and their accountability to God for the resources that had been placed in their hands, or allow the Presbytery to help them ‘bequeath’ their resources to other congregations and groups and thus support these wider activities and development. It was also envisaged that groups would be helped to maintain their sense of worship and community, in effect as a form of chaplaincy.

2. **Statistics and the Ageing of the membership of the Uniting Church**

I had a letter published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (and other Fairfax editions) magazine *Good Weekend* (March 11, 2006) in response to an article by comic writer and satirist, Jonathan Biggins ‘Mr Biggins Goes to Church’ (*Good Weekend*, 18 February 2006). While Biggins was fairly caustic with each group he visited, I personally thought that to choose a small suburban Uniting Church (Merewether Central), when he chosen for other denominations, two cathedrals (St Andrew’s and St Mary’s, both in Sydney) and Hillsong was a little unfair in terms of comparison. Perhaps he could have gone to Wesley International Congregation for a reasonable numerical comparison. Seeing the Wesley Theatre nearly full of a variety of age groups, including several hundred people less than forty years of age may have caused him to re-write his stereotype.

The point I made in the letter was that any church with an ageing membership has certain issues to confront, but that congregations of older people have a role to play in a community in which personal relationships are devalued and neighbourliness awareness is limited. Issues of an ageing church need to be considered sensitively, but not ignored. Uniting Church members are realistic people and they know what the situation is like on the ground because they have been active local members for many years and have seen the changes firsthand. Uniting Church members should not be patronised, and the issues should not be ignored.
For the future the following factors are important:

- Older members presently provide much of the ongoing services and finances for the majority of Uniting Church congregations, but as they become older and as their numbers decrease, more pressure will be placed on the remaining active members (who are usually slightly younger older long standing faithful members). There is a limit to how long this cycle can be maintained, and many congregations only have to lose a few key members and they will be effectively rendered non-viable.

- Older members usually have a more traditional belief and support for traditional understandings of sexual practice.

- Older members usually have a strong allegiance to the local congregation, but this should not be equated with allegiance to the denomination, simply because for older members, their primary experience and foundation was with one of the antecedent denominations.

- Older members are now increasingly likely to change congregations or leave the Uniting Church altogether, especially if they feel isolated, ignored or abused.

- Ministers often have different theological positions to members and the sexuality issue has become a prime area for conflict.

- There is a growing divide between rural and city congregations and between property rich congregations and property poor congregations. The average age of members in rural congregations is higher, and these congregations have even less opportunity to connect with younger members. The rural Church will suffer a much sharper decline over the next ten years.

3. Sources for Statistics

What is the real situation? Where do we find information?
There are four main areas of statistics that are commonly used in these discussions.

3.1 Internal Membership Records – Assembly Triennial Returns

I believe it is now difficult to make significant comparative analysis of membership statistics from the triennial statistical returns to the Assembly. Please read the reports presented to the 2000 and 2003 Assembly meetings to see detail of the issues. It is evident to me from my contacts in presbyteries, that the difficulty of providing reliable information is related to the overall difficulty that many churches (mainly church officer bearers) have in managing and responding to the request for information and maintaining information and a reliable membership record. Therefore many churches fail to fill out their form and as a result, estimates are increasingly made.
3.2 The National Census

The Census has basic questions on religion or no-religion in terms of identification. It provides an overview of religious affiliation in Australia. The next census is due August 2006. Apart from a small glitch in 1991, the percentage of UCA affiliates has decreased. I remember one leader in the Uniting Church proudly promoting the census statistics in that year (1991) as proof that the public were coming into the Uniting Church in droves. Apart from the fact that attendance records did not agree, this person had completely missed the point that the numerical increase had nothing to do with a love for the Uniting Church. Firstly all those who were still recording themselves as Methodist were now coded to the Uniting Church (from 1986), and secondly, some non-members had finally caught up with the fact that there was a Uniting Church and had sufficient enough knowledge to tick a box they thought may be closest to their antecedent church, though it could be argued that many of these could have been included in the statistics for continuing Presbyterian affiliation or continuing Congregational affiliation.

Table 1: Uniting Church affiliation in the National Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Affiliate Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>712 609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>1 182 311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>1 387 646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>7.52</td>
<td>1 334 917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>6.65</td>
<td>1 248 674</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Comment: What is clear is that between 1996 and 2001 the affiliation rate fell by 6.46%. This decrease occurred during a population rise in Australia of 5.73%. For comparison: Pentecostal affiliation rose by 11.37% (twice the population increase) and Baptist by 4.75% (nearly keeping pace with the population).

3.2.1 2006 Census – What will this reveal?
I believe there will be a further decline in the affiliation rate. Three main factors will have an effect here.

(i) Numbers who have left since 2003. While small in terms of affiliation the debate may also have affected non-members.

(ii) Continuing members of the Uniting Church who decide to not tick the Uniting Church box in the census form, and instead choose a general term such as Christian or write in another description. There are probably thousands of increasingly alienated UC members who do not wish to be identified anymore with the Uniting Church.

(iii) Ageing of affiliates
3.3 The National Church Life Survey
For statistical purposes, the NLCS survey is now probably the most important resource for
the Uniting Church. Since 1991, the survey has been held every five years, among a variety
of Anglican and Protestant congregations, and since 1996 the Catholic Church has been a
partner. NCLS Research is sponsored by many smaller groups and agencies, but the largest
groups providing support have been the Uniting Church NSW Board of Mission,
ANGLICARE (Diocese of Sydney) and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.
The next survey will be held (mainly) in August 2006, though the Queensland Uniting
Church will apparently undertake the survey in July 2006.

When comments are made about the NCLS survey you should check what statistics are being
quoted, the year and consider the purpose. The latest research is 2001.
For example, a person could quote 2001 NCLS attendance statistics in the context of
commenting on RA and EMU comments about people who have left the church over the
sexuality issue, without fairly admitting that the RA figures in particular address mainly the
situation post 2003, so the use of the 2001 figures is not a fair comparison. It is sad that so
many leaders in the Uniting Church have ignored the obvious changes that have occurred in
the last three years at least, and the substantiated impact on at least one hundred
congregations since the start of the present sexuality debate. Why have leaders ignored the
pain of so many people?

The latest NCLS Occasional Paper No. 8 (referred to below) is a very important new paper
and contains interesting comparative material (with other denominations), which should be
widely considered, particularly the differences in decline and change due to the age of church
members, and the general remarks about the future in terms of the declining pool of switchers
for the overall mainstream churches. The NCLS material provides a very affirming and
encouraging way of helping mainstream denominations consider their situation. While it
notes present difficulties, it presents the view that change is still possible. This NCLS paper
provides an image of the UCA position in 2001, which could be taken by some people to
mean that there will be a more positive future simply because there was a slight decrease in
the decline between 1996 and 2001. The NCLS material does not detail the present (2006) or
beyond, and as I have mentioned before, most people I have spoken to in the last two years
from congregations throughout the whole of Australia, are sadly not able to report a positive
future, especially in rural areas.

Table 2: Information on Newcomers 1991 - 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NCLS</th>
<th>1991-1996 (%)</th>
<th>1996-2001 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newcomers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NCLS Occasional Paper No. 8

Yes there have been newcomers (arrived in last five years – no previous church), and an
increase according to the NCLS for the period 1996 – 2001. What is important is also the
local context. NCLS has conducted a raft of research and has identified twelve core values
applicable generally (many congregations would have seen the NCLS Connections for Life
reports in connection with their own congregation). I am particularly interested in specific
details, like which local churches have grown and what is their theological orientation?
Examining other data in the 1990s (National Social Science Survey – see 3.4), reveals that the Uniting Church failed to keep those who have grown up in it, or attract significant numbers of people under the age of 40 into a variety of congregations to make up for the numbers who have exited the church (see the NCLS estimate of decrease: Table 5), or will exit in the next fifteen years. I believe this exit has increased in the period 2001 - 2006. Those who believe the tide has completely turned are either sincerely deluded or have another agenda which is difficult to comprehend.

Table 3: Information on Young Adult Retention 1991 - 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NCLS</th>
<th>1991-1996 (%)</th>
<th>1996-2001 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New 15 – 19 years –</td>
<td>3 (4)*</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Adult Retention</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* Note: the slightly different figure recorded in brackets for young adult retention is from the NCLS Research 1996 Survey on the NCLS website: www.ncls.org.au, and referred to in Chapter 7, of NCLS Publication Build My Church.

Comment
Yes, the figures are similar for young adult retention, and there are still young people in the church. What the Uniting Church needs to do is arrange to publicly release all available statistics and detail so that people can truly understand the context for some comments by leaders. Which Synods have more young people and which have fewer? What is the theological orientation of the larger congregations with younger age profiles? I understand it is clearly evangelical, and this is throughout Protestant and Anglican circles. Over the last few years I have been constantly amazed at the number of evangelical members I have met, who have told me that their children have left the Uniting Church for another denomination. Many members have told me that their particular local Uniting Church did not provide a strong message of personal faith and commitment. Their children were attracted to other churches which presented clear messages, and often ended up marrying into that particular denomination, thus making the next generation also members of that denomination.

Non-English Speaking Background Members and Congregations
For the Uniting Church it would also be helpful to have detailed statistics on our NESB congregations as from my experience these congregations are usually larger than the average ESB congregation, and have different issues in terms of young adult retention (many still attending as family groups, but second general issues are appearing more significantly).

Over the years I was more formally involved in the councils of the Church (1989 – 2004), I came to understand that for many leaders in the Uniting Church, the theological and spiritual orientation of many of the larger congregations does not fit into what they believe the Uniting Church really stands for, and while these leaders may be pleased to have the overall numbers, they are not pleased where the numbers reside. Does the hierarchy wish to acknowledge these congregations?
The NCLS Occasional Paper No. 8 explains the inflow and outflow model (I have summarised here):

**Three Inflow measures:**
* Switchers In: people arriving from other congregations in last five years
* Young Adult Retention: people aged 15 – 19 years who were attending the denomination five years ago (see Table 3).
* Newcomers: people who joined within the last five years and did not belong to a church previously (see Table 2)

**Three Outflow measures:**
* Switchers Out: People leaving for other congregations
* Deaths An estimate based on Australian Bureau of Statistics figures applied to the current age profile of the denomination
* Drift Out: An estimate of the number of people who drifted out.

**Net Attendance Change:** This is the Inflow group minus the Outflow group.

For a fuller discussion and explanation of the terms used see *Occasional Paper 8*, ‘Inflow and Outflow Between Denominations: 1991 to 2001’.

Table 4: Information on Inflow and Outflow 1991 - 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected NCLS data</th>
<th>1991-1996 (%)</th>
<th>1996-2001 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Switchers In</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimate Switchers Out</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimate of Deaths</td>
<td>11 (10)*</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimate of Drifted Out</td>
<td>10 (11)*</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** *NCLS Occasional Paper No. 8*

*Note:* the different figure recorded in brackets for deaths and drifted out are from the NCLS Research 1996 Survey on the NCLS website: [www.ncls.org.au](http://www.ncls.org.au), and referred to in Chapter 7, of NCLS Publication *Build My Church*.

What does the NCLS survey mainly outline for attendance in the Uniting Church? Significant attendance declines are now being experienced, with the NCLS recording a decrease for the Uniting Church of 22%, between the period 1991 - 2001. As you will see from the table below, there was a very slight decline in the decrease between 1996 and 2001, but anyone who believes this now means a revival is happening needs to have more contact with local congregations and members on the ground.

Most of the decline (1991 – 2001) and future decline is related to the ageing of the Uniting Church. The 2001 NCLS survey found that 36% of the membership was over 70 years. (A comparison with Pentecostal groups - 5%.

In 2001 56% of Uniting Church members were aged 60 years or over.
In 1996 48.7% of Uniting Church members were aged 60 years or over.
What will 2006 reveal? The average age of membership may be around the mid 70s.
Table 5: Uniting Church Attendance 1991 - 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Estimated attendance</th>
<th>Change in numbers and percent</th>
<th>Percentage of Census Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>162 830</td>
<td></td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>142 900</td>
<td>19 930 (-12.2%)</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>126 600</td>
<td>16 300 (-11.4%)</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources for references: (From NCLS published material: see - www.ncls.org.au)
‘2001 Church Estimates’, *NCLS Occasional Paper No. 3*, John Bellamy and Keith Castle, February 2004, NCLS Research, Sydney and
‘An Accurate Look at Attendance Trends in Australian Churches’, *Pointers*, June 1999, Vol. 9, No. 2. (From NCLS published material) and

It is not the responsibility of the NCLS to outline specific future scenarios in an overview paper like *Occasional Paper No. 8*. NCLS has focussed on the results from the 2001 Survey and the statistical base that this provides for comparison with previous surveys. The next NCLS survey (2006) will be helpful as it will provide a fifteen year comparison.

Commentators like myself, can give an opinion now, based on observation of the church in general and the different statistics available:
I believe five points will become clearer in 2006 and beyond:

- The future is very dim for overall congregational life in Synods which have a significant liberal orientation.
- Drifting out: this group will increase, especially among the older members of the church, but many people may technically remain on the membership roll (see the comments in Point 2 in this paper)
- Attendance decline has continued to increase. Overall, the Uniting Church will probably fall to fifth place in terms of attendance, behind the Pentecostals and Baptists
- The general attendance decline due to the ageing church will have been significantly accentuated by the exodus of members due to the sexuality debate, especially in certain Synods and Presbyteries.
- Large evangelical Uniting Church congregations with a strong sense of corporate and community life, and which did not suffer a significant split after the 2003 Assembly will have grown. The majority of young people in the Uniting Church will attend these congregations and thus worship within a local tradition that promotes chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage.
3.3.1 Specific NCLS Material on Sexuality
The NCLS has asked questions about sexuality in both recent surveys. Only a random sample of people answered these questions (that is only a sample received survey forms with these specific questions), and produced two relevant reports for the Uniting Church. While slightly different questions were asked, the reports allow a comparison, and indeed the second report clearly and succinctly outlines this basis. The first report on 1996 'Thinking about sexuality - Results from the 1996 NCLS', is summarised in the Occasional Paper from the 2001 Survey.

Table 6: Uniting Church Attenders and attitude to leadership by homosexual people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NCLS</th>
<th>1996</th>
<th>2001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affirm practising homosexual leaders</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No to practising homosexual leaders</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or Allow if non-practising</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This clearly shows that the majority of the Uniting Church attenders were opposed to having practising homosexuals in leadership in 2001 (65%), though this is less than 1996 (72%). It also illustrates the increasing uncertainty among a section of the church, as well as a slight growth in those who support practising homosexual leaders. The group supporting practising homosexual leaders is still substantially smaller than those who do not support practising homosexual leaders.

Growing uncertainty should be expected as there are more theologically liberal leaders and ministers now, especially in rural areas. The relentless ‘normalisation’ approach that the Uniting Church has adopted has also weakened the resolve of many ordinary members to present an opinion.

There is a difference between the sample sizes in 1996 (333 attenders) and 2001 (461 attenders) which could have had an effect on the change, but it is likely that attrition is a significant factor. Also, though the NCLS Research paper notes that there was an over-representation of women in the sample group for the 2001 survey, they do not believe it to be significant. It is actually a 9% difference compared to the overall UCA attenders group, and I believe this was likely to produce a slightly more liberal result for the time, though it is probably a similar percentage now given the exodus of many evangelicals over the last two years.

What would have been more interesting, but perhaps too politically charged, is a detailed study outlining rural and city regions and Synod differences.
3.4 Other Major Surveys or Studies and Sexuality Issues

3.4.1 The National Social Science Survey (NSSS).
A survey conducted by the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian University in which the Christian Research Association arranged for questions on a variety of topics during the 1990s. “Unlike church attender surveys, such as the NCLS, it tells us the attitude of a random sample of the whole population” (See Pointers, December 1993, Vol. 3, No. 5, p.2). It also allows for comparison with attendance because questions about attendance are included. If people want a more detailed examination of this material in the context of sexuality see Peter Bentley ‘The Practice of Homosexuality’ (Uniting Church Studies, August 1997). A copy can also be found on the Reforming Alliance Website. The Christian Research Association publication: Australian Life and the Christian Faith: Facts and Figures (1998) is also helpful for later material.

3.4.2 Analysis of the responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality (February 1997)
It is clear from the material collated in what has become colloquially known as ‘The Bentley Report’ that this report was not based on a survey, but one only had to look at the numbers who responded, particularly the local church councils to know this was a substantial response that should have been considered. (Peter Bentley, ‘An Analysis of the Responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality for the Assembly Standing Committee’, 1997).
As I have previously stated:

“When asked to comment as to whether the responses were representative of the church, I commented, basing my opinion on my knowledge of National Church Life Survey material and National Social Science material. I believe that in the broad sense they were representative of the church, though I believe that both the affirming and negative response rates were slightly above what a random survey would have revealed at the time. Also, the responses revealed a much smaller group of people who fitted into the ‘don’t know’ category. Respondents usually expressed a strong opinion, no doubt prompted by the orientation and seemingly non-partisan nature of the Interim report.” (‘Liberalism, Sexuality and the Future of the UCA’ (Part II), An address by Peter Bentley to the open meeting organised by the Reforming Alliance and EMU held during the September 2004 NSW Synod. Posted on the Reforming Alliance website)

3.4.3 Reforming Alliance Survey on sexuality: 2003
In January 2004, the Report on the National Survey on Sexuality of the Reforming Alliance within the Uniting Church was released. Approximately 27000 Uniting Church attenders completed the survey in late 2003. While comprehensive in its attempt to reach all Uniting Church attenders, it was not a random survey simply because it is evident that the wider church did not co-operate with its distribution, and also some unknown number of congregations and ministers refused to participate, or even allow individual members of their local church access to the survey.

Should a commitment to celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage be a requirement for those exercising leadership in the UC?

Yes 88.6%, no 6.3%, undecided 3.8%, no answer 1.3%.

Should people living in a same gender sexual relationship be ordained in the UC?

Yes 6.5%, no 88.8%, undecided 4.0%, no answer 0.7%.

Is the ordination of people living in a same gender sexual relationship an issue on which members of the UC should be directly consulted?

Yes 87.6%, no 7.7%, and undecided 3.5%, no answer 1.2%.

Comment: The results were in keeping with the usual orientation to a conservative position on these matters, though, clearly a much smaller percentage of respondents were undecided or unsure than in random surveys. The survey authors estimated this represented nearly a quarter of current attenders based on more contemporary projections of attendance (allowing for a decrease in the NCLS 2001 figures primarily due to ageing)

3.4.4 The Splitting of the Uniting Church in Australia
Dr Howard Bradbury conducted a major survey and prepared a report for the Reforming Alliance, ‘The Splitting of the Uniting Church in Australia Due to the Issue of Homosexuality in Leadership’ (May 2005, Canberra). Howard had wide contacts and sources throughout the whole of Australia, and this clearly shows the impact of the sexuality debate on the Uniting Church, but unfortunately it has been one of the most neglected sources of information. It is estimated that at least 6 500 attenders have left since 1997, with three-quarters of these leaving since the 10th Assembly in July 2003. Over one hundred churches have been seriously affected.

3.4.5 ‘Mapping Homophobia in Australia’
A more recent report of interest was produced by The Australia Institute. ‘Mapping Homophobia in Australia’, a report by Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton was published by The Australia Institute in July 2005. It outlines some information about Australians who believe homosexuality to be immoral. The study used a large database compiled by Roy Morgan Research using self-completion interviews with 24,718 respondents aged 14 and over. Religious affiliation was asked in the survey. About one-third of the Uniting Church affiliates thought homosexuality was immoral. One should be cautious about the applicability of this general research to the current situation in the Uniting Church in terms of beliefs of the members and regular attenders, and the specific questions related to leadership in ministry. As I have mentioned, because of the very diffuse sense of identification for the Uniting Church, unless there is some other correlating factor it is difficult to interpret. One possible correlating factor is interesting. The survey reported that 62% of those identified as ‘evangelicals’ agreed that homosexuality was immoral. It would be worth knowing if it is position to correlate Uniting Church affiliates with those chose evangelical.
4. Uniting Church congregations and the Future

What are the types of Uniting churches which are more likely to survive the next ten - twenty years given the current context, and the likelihood of the status quo being maintained in the sexuality debate?

4.1 The Property Rich Denominational Church (Uniting Churches that identify explicitly with the Uniting Church ethos)

Some church commentators believe that the denomination is dead or dying. I believe that while the older institutional denominations will certainly become smaller, some denominational style churches will remain. They will be fewer in number, but will include:

- ‘Niche market’ city or regional churches
- Wealthy middle class suburban churches
- Alternate communities, linked to welfare centres or groups.

These churches will be diverse in theology, with an orientation to a more liberal perspective.

**Comment:** There are some members of the church who believe that the Uniting Church will have a flood of new members when the church fully adopts a liberal theological basis. Sometimes people will highlight the beliefs of non-attending Uniting Church affiliates and note the similarity with liberal social beliefs, and raise the expectation that a truly liberal church will attract these people to worship. I acknowledge that some may be attracted, but it will be a small number in reality and they will mainly attend niche market churches which can afford to maintain ministry, perhaps due to their location or property income.

For many liberal churches, the social message is the primary concern, but today there are many quasi-religious social activist groups who are far more active and one could say even more evangelistic in their recruiting zeal. Most denominations will not gain many members from a strong liberal based theology. People do not readily join churches which have vague and amorphous ideas. If you are looking for certain ethics and values, then you are more likely to find the type of ethics and values you want outside the church, and most humanists are actually quite honest about their lack of interest in the ‘trappings’ of the Christian church.

4.2 The Migrant-ethnic or NESB Church

While there will be increasing strain on these churches due to sexuality issues and also generational and language issues, the network of family and historical connections will continue to provide a strong base for continuity. These churches will continue to be mainly evangelical in their outlook, and though they will mostly not support the Uniting Church position on sexuality, they will remain reliant on the Uniting Church for property access, and unless more radical decisions are made, most (but not all) will at least remain ‘under the technical umbrella’. The influence of ministers and members of other churches, and perceived position in their particular migrant-ethnic community will have a significant impact on their decision making, especially if there are reasonable alternatives for their own members. Some churches may adopt names that do not publicly identify their ‘brand’ as a Uniting Church, and this may be the first step to moving out of the Uniting Church.
4.3 The House Type Church
These are presently small churches, mostly with lay leadership. They are able to maintain basic services and worship and are not reliant on large offerings or property income. They are also remote and removed from the experience of the public workings of the denomination. An increasing number will be in the cities as people move to explore closer connections with their community and seek a non-denominational setting. Many will be in rural areas, and if they have become a non-Uniting fellowship, may even meet in church buildings which have been abandoned by the denomination or rented at a peppercorn rent. These churches will be mainly evangelical in their outlook.

4.4 The Mega Church
The most visible example of the mega church is the independent or network linked church. Essentially the church makes its own decisions and has little personal connection with the denomination, apart from fulfilling legal and statutory requirements. The autonomous nature of these (usually) individual churches also makes the denominational identity more diffuse. Mega churches attract people from different regions, usually a whole city. These churches are openly evangelistic and attempt to attract people to worship and to make a commitment to Jesus Christ. Clearly, these churches will be evangelical in their outlook.

4.5 The Regional Church
The regional church will also have a life of its own and may have an identity distinct from the denomination. Like the mega church, it will attract people to worship from within the denomination and outside of the denomination, but it will also be of sufficient size to promote a sense of community within an area. Regional churches will be particularly helpful in large rural or coastal areas as the population shift continues and small towns are simple unable to sustain paid ministry and worshipping congregations. These churches will be mainly evangelical in their outlook.

5. Conclusion
There is a great myth operating in the Uniting Church at present. This is the myth that congregations and members will remain in the Uniting Church no matter what happens. It appears that sometimes migrant-ethnic communities are button-holed in this way. It is the corollary to Resolution 84 and provides a seductive sway to stay. It appears that members are told ‘you will be okay in your local church or group - just hang in there and it will be alright.’ Interestingly, this type of argument promotes congregationalism and may actually foster further problems in the Uniting Church in the future. I believe it is clear from present trends that the most likely churches to develop within the Uniting Church are churches with a more overt evangelical foundation. If however, these churches and members are increasingly alienated by more radical decision-making, then over time, members will leave and some congregations will effectively end up disbanding. This will have an impact on the whole viability of the Uniting Church as a congregational enterprise.
What will happen in the future? Will evangelical congregations stay in the Uniting Church no matter what decision is made concerning sexual practice and leadership?

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