

**RA 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly E-News**  
**Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> July**

Dear Friends

The Assembly has started. At this stage only the preliminary sessions have been held. There has already been some media coverage. I have included below the article from *The Australian* (5<sup>th</sup> July). Another report was in *The Age*. RA Chairperson, Max Champion, was interviewed for ABC TV news (probably only Queensland).

On Wednesday afternoon, formal matters were considered and the agenda adopted. Steve Estherby raised a question about the arrangement of the agenda. You are hopefully aware of the format for discussion on sexuality issues on Friday. After the introduction of the proposals the agenda presently says that the Assembly then considers **the question: *Do we need one policy for the whole church? Why/why not? (45 minutes of brief comments and then move straight to community groups)***

So, rather than having any initial question or debate, this question becomes perhaps unwittingly, the focus before the Assembly moves to consider sexuality issues in the community groups (Small groups). Steve has asked for this question to be considered later in order for the process to start with open questions and discussion of all the proposals. Steve's request was noted and will be considered by the Business Committee, which had not yet met.

The installation of the President (Gregor Henderson) was held last night at the Assembly site at the University of Queensland. The 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly website news has a report and I note below an excerpt from this news:

*"Mr Henderson said while debates about what was essential or not essential to the faith were healthy, disagreements over theology and pastoral issues like sexuality and leadership (that sometimes descended into personal denigration and abuse) hurt the church's mission to engage with God's world and people.*

*"These are shameful behaviours, not worthy of Christians," he said.*

*Instead, the church should remember the 17<sup>th</sup> century German Reformation principle: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love."*

I am pleased to report that the RA prayer team and support group have settled in well to our residential college, and Anne Hibbard has organized a program of times for all the prayer intercessors. If you are in Brisbane you can call in for the nightly prayer times (8 pm – late). The prayer times and vigils are held mainly in the chapel near the visitors parking at King's College. Our hospitality room is the Grimmert Room, King's College. Go up the first set of stairs as you enter the main entrance of the college (the room is on the left). We have already had a few Assembly members visit. We plan to have supper time each night, though last night, people were so enthusiastic in prayer that supper was not the priority!

Today at the Assembly there is a time of renewal of the covenant with the Congress and also Holy Communion. After morning tea there are various reports including an introduction to the Jewish – Christian statement.  
Join in prayer for members at the Assembly.

Blessings in your service  
Peter Bentley  
For RA

**REPORT in The Australian Wednesday 5 July 2006**

**Jill Rowbotham, Religious affairs writer**

REBEL Uniting Church members are likely to propose a split unless the three-yearly assembly that begins today in Brisbane outlaws gay clergy.

The Australian understands that unless there is a change in policy over sexuality in the ministry, the rebels will propose a breakaway on July 12, the day after the assembly ends. The group considered several options to deal with the issue but is believed to have settled on the split.

On the eve of the 250-member assembly, the national spokesman for the conservative Evangelical Members of the Uniting Church, Reverend Steve Estherby, said he was praying for a miracle. "I hope what we have planned we do not have to use," he said. He would not confirm that the group would call for a split if the assembly opted to continue allowing the church's regional decision-making bodies, the presbyteries, to choose ministers for congregations, rather than making this a matter for the national body. At present, some presbyteries may oppose appointing as ministers people who lead an openly gay life, but others can do so.

Mr Estherby and the dissidents have been campaigning for the change, saying if they are not happy with the assembly's outcome, they will stage a public meeting to air "contingency plans".

It emerged last night that there was only one proposal to go forward.

"We are going to gamble everything on one throw of the dice," Mr Estherby said.

The rebel faction claims church membership has sustained major losses over the gay clergy issue for years.

The Uniting Church leadership argues that while the sexuality issue may be one reason people have left the church, the main reason is demographic - ageing congregations have a high death rate.