

WORKING GROUP ON DOCTRINE

REPORT ON THE SECOND CONSULTATION ON SEXUALITY & LEADERSHIP

12th November 2008

This report of the day consultation has been prepared by the Revd Dr Wes Campbell, convener of the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine (WGD), and is an agreed statement by those who participated in the day. This report will be sent in appropriate form to the Assembly Communications Unit, Synod Secretaries, UCA Synod newspapers and presbyteries. The papers from this Consultation will be made available to the wider church.

The First Consultation on 4-5th February 2008 was held in the Chevalier Centre, Kensington (Sydney), NSW. The Consultation was one response by the Working Group on Doctrine to the resolution of the Eleventh Assembly in 2006:

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. (resolution 06.41)

Following that consultation a full report was presented to the Assembly Standing Committee in March 2008.

The First Consultation, which addressed the broad question of 'Sexuality and Leadership', identified two major theological issues as being of particular importance and two papers were commissioned:

1. **On Biblical Hermeneutics** (Revd Prof. William (Bill) Loader (in consultation with others)
2. **Human Persons and Sexuality: A Theological Account** (Revd Dr Christiaan Mostert with Revd Rod Horsfield and Revd Dr Wes Campbell).

The First Consultation agreed that we were dealing with matters of the Church's doctrine, and the subsequent clarification requested because of decisions taken by previous Assemblies on the matter of 'Sexuality and Leadership'. The commissioned papers were the focus of a second Consultation held at the Chevalier Centre, Kensington, on 13th October, 2008. This was the specific focus, rather than the broader theme of 'Sexuality and Leadership'.

The second one-day consultation was convened in order to further the doctrinal discussion, seeking to clarify the doctrinal issues, and to provide further advice to the Working Group on Doctrine. Invitations were sent to those who had participated in the first consultation. The six theologians who presented at the first consultation were in attendance. The facilitator for the day was Mr. Les Stahl, a person with wide experience in church and community organisations.

The main purpose of the consultation was to consider the two commissioned papers (**Biblical Hermeneutics**, and **Human Persons and Sexuality: A Theological Account**) to provide advice to the WGD based on that discussion. Other papers were received and tabled from the Assembly of Confessing Congregations (*Statement on Sexuality, 13-14 October 2006* and *Confessing Statement, 13-14 October 2006*), and from Uniting Network (*Daring to Celebrate Relationships, 9-12 June, 2006*). A brief report of a conversation between Revd Drs Ian Breward, Andrew Dutney and Wes Campbell on 'apostasy', as it bears on this matter, was also tabled.

This report provides a summary of the day's findings.

The challenge before the UCA concerns membership in the one holy catholic and apostolic church, as a community that adheres to the living Word Jesus Christ and the witness of Scripture. As a church we are committed to the authoritative witness of the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, and therefore worship the Triune God through the one Lord Jesus Christ. A most

pressing question is what it means to be committed to the ‘apostolic witness’ and to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ when significant doctrinal changes are proposed or made.

The most painful result of the work of the consultation is an acknowledgment of the unresolved character of the doctrine around same-sex relationships in the life of the church, deriving from the *incompatibility* of the positions expressed in the papers which claim the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the recognition of such relationships and the views held by some present at the consultation. It was clear that people committed to the apostolic witness of the church interpret our call to faithfulness fundamentally differently, arising from basic differences of theological hermeneutics, ie the way in which the interpretation of Scripture is applied to this issue.

While agreement on matters of biblical interpretation and theological framework were expressed, there remain unresolved key questions of the nature of homosexuality and interpretation of Scripture. Informing our hermeneutical work is a variety of views on the nature of homosexuality itself. For some people, homosexuality is a condition which may be changed, a sign of the brokenness and sinfulness of humanity; for others it is a matter of unchosen identity, the way a person is ‘created’.

Issues that were discussed but remain a source of fundamental disagreement and contention include:

- the status of the unified witness of Scripture to Jesus Christ and the relevance of experience and scientific knowledge with regard to homosexuality;
- the designation of homosexual or ‘same sex’ relationships: eg. homosexual practice, relationships entailing same-sex intercourse, etc;
- an assessment of the evidence regarding Scriptural attitudes opposing same-sex relationships and practice;
- the *theological* nature of the dispute over hermeneutics and its relevance for whether a change in the church’s doctrine is justifiable and compatible with the witness of Scripture and the apostolic tradition;
- crucial discussion about the character or ‘core values’ of the Gospel;
- the meaning of humanity as male and female created in the ‘image of God’ (*imago Dei*) in relation to the whole witness of Scripture, particularly in Colossians and Genesis.
- How claims to guidance by the Holy Spirit are tested by the Church.

In identifying three continuing matters for theological discussion the consultation acknowledged that the issues raised by the two papers remain unresolved. There was no agreement about whether further consultations should be held.

1. theological method or theological hermeneutics, i.e. the way in which scripture is used as a source for theology alongside the other sources (tradition, reason and experience) within the framework of the apostolic witness;
2. the doctrine of creation and specifically the place which the creation of male and female has within the created order; and
3. the doctrine of the new creation and specifically the nature of the new person in Christ.

Varying approaches to each of these theological issues have different implications for thinking theologically about committed same sex relationships.

It remains, then, that one view insists there can be no change in the church’s traditional teaching and practice with regard to same sex 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 same sex relationships. There was significant discussion about the nature of sexual intimacy in relationships, including disagreement concerning sexual intercourse in same-sex relationships. The consultation also discussed the possibility of accepting that the Apostle Paul rejected same sex intercourse, while now drawing different conclusions for our own day. Further, there was exploration of the way in which the early church dealt with circumcision and the inclusion of Gentiles, and the more recent acceptance of divorce. Such discussion indicates the serious theological task before the church, and poses the question of how the church should now address the formation of the church’s teaching (*doctrine*) here.

The consultation also recognized that hurt and pain is shared by those who take different stances on this matter, and that relationships with the Congress (UAICC), the Uniting Church's ethnic congregations and ecumenical partners, remain crucial.

Concerning the question of the *process* that the Assembly now needs to undertake, some expressed the view that because the decisions taken by the previous Assemblies represent a doctrinal change to the church's traditional understanding and practice, with its pastoral implications for the membership of the UCA and its ecumenical partners, there is an urgent requirement that a succinct doctrinal statement should be prepared by the Working Group on Doctrine for the forthcoming 2009 Assembly, to resolve the matter of doctrine for the church. This same view judges that the church is unable to function coherently while incompatible views on sexuality and leadership continue to be held in the UCA in the name of inclusiveness.

During the consultation, it was acknowledged that there has been change in the church's understanding, viewed by some as doctrinal change, leading to incompatible views co-existing in the UCA on this matter. Others did not agree that the Assembly is in a position to resolve this matter in 2009, and expect such resolution to take a further significant period of time.

The Consultation accepted that this report would be agreed to by all participants.

In conclusion, the purpose of the day consultation was initiated by the Working Group on Doctrine to seek a response to the ongoing doctrinal discussion, in the form of the two papers. Based on that consultation the Working Group on Doctrine will consider next steps and report to the Assembly Standing Committee.

The consultation concluded with prayer and a reading from Colossians chapter 1, with its powerful affirmation that in Jesus Christ, the fullness of God has chosen to dwell, and in him all things hold together. This affirmation is not spoken to disguise the seriousness of the fundamental differences, and the decisions which are at stake, but as a reminder of Jesus Christ's costly reconciliation of humanity estranged from God (1:20-21) and the new life in Christ (3:11).

In the face of the disagreements we are experiencing, that affirmation must also be our prayer.

Wes Campbell
Convener, Assembly Working Group on Doctrine
12th November 2008

The participating theologians on 4-5th February and 13th October were: Revd Dr Ian Breward; Rev Dr Max Champion; Dr Rosalie Hudson; Revd Prof. William Loader; Revd Dr Anita Monro; Revd Dr Christiaan Mostert.

Other participants of the One Day Consultation on 13th October were:
 Revd Carol Bennett, Revd Glenda Blakefield; Revd Dr Wes Campbell; Revd Dr John Hirt; Rev Peter Hobson; Rev Rodney B. Horsfield; Revd Carolyn Thornley; Revd Dr Chris Walker; Revd Gregor Henderson; Revd Apwee Ting.