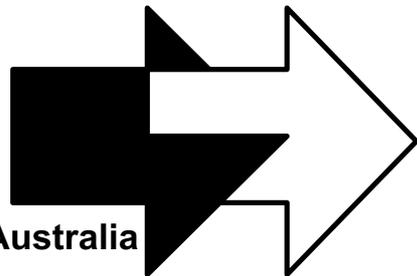


**Uniting
to reform**
**reforming
to unite**



**REFORMING
ALLIANCE**

Within the Uniting Church in Australia



Uniting to reform, Reforming to unite

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Where has this group come from? | 4 |
| 2. The Immediate Issue – sexuality and faith ... | 6 |
| 3. Other concerns | 8 |
| 4. What’s good about the Uniting Church? | 10 |
| 5. Short-sighted responses | 11 |
| 6. Aims of the Reforming Alliance | 12 |
| 7. Structure of the Reforming Alliance | 13 |
| 8. What action can we take? | 14 |
| 9. How do I become a partner? | 16 |
| Appendix 1: The Bible and Sexuality | 17 |
| Appendix 2: Resolutions of 1 st National Conference ... | 19 |

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1. Where has this group come from?

The Reforming Alliance Within the Uniting Church came into being on September 24th, 2003 in Newtown, NSW.

It emerged from an interstate "summit" of 73 concerned persons convened by a group called EMU (Evangelical Members of the Uniting Church). Only 34 were actual members of EMU, but all shared an evangelical¹ understanding of the Gospel and a growing concern about the health of the UCA.

The immediate stimulus for this action was the passing of Resolution 84 at the 10th National Assembly of the UCA in June 2003. This resolution "clarified" that there were no regulations preventing presbyteries from ordaining practising homosexuals.

Many people felt that by using a technical point to avoid ruling that this practice was contrary to the Christian ethic, the Assembly had tacitly given approval to same-gender sex. This was seen as a giant leap away from historic Christian tradition.

At the summit, while this point was being discussed, it quickly became evident that discontent about many other issues had also been smouldering for some years, particularly among people who held strongly to the primary authority of Scripture.

Moreover, the current unrest highlighted the fact that the system by which members are chosen for the Assembly appears to work against the views of people at the grass-roots being heard.

Delegates to the summit resolved to form an alliance of people seeking to recall the Uniting Church to loyalty to Christ as Lord and God, and to the Scriptures as the primary authority for our faith. In its first interstate press release, the Reforming Alliance said:

This group has witnessed with dismay the crisis created for many congregations, migrant ethnic churches, Congress (UAICC) and the strains placed on some of our ecumenical dialogue ... [by] the 10th Assembly's Resolution 84.

Since then, hundreds of members of Uniting churches across Australia have already sought membership in the RA. In addition, many congregations in every state have elected to be known as "Reforming Alliance Congregations within the Uniting Church."

At the same time, there have been reports of dozens of congregations splitting or departing en masse. The RA, however, cherishes many good things about the Uniting Church and seeks to work for reform from within the denomination in those areas where error and malfunction are seen to be present. This position was reaffirmed at the first national conference of the RA in July 2004. The resolutions of that meeting are reproduced in Appendix 2 of this booklet.

The need is urgent. Statistically, the Uniting Church has been declining steadily since union, and internal criticism has been mounting. But many people feel that this present crisis dwarfs all previous disturbances. This could be a defining moment.

We urge you to study the following pages with a view to seeing whether, in good conscience, you want to be a partner with us in this national effort to revive the Uniting Church.



¹"Evangelical" – a term identifying people who, believing the Bible to be a God-inspired and fully reliable record, accept its testimony to Jesus being the true God who came in human form, died for our sins, rose from the dead, and calls us to acknowledge his Lordship. In deciding what to believe and how to behave, evangelicals see Scripture as the primary authority, by which other guides such as church tradition, intuition, and reason are corrected.

2. The Immediate Issue – sex and faith

Since about 1982, the issue of what should be the church's attitude to homosexuality has been a matter of continuous debate. It was originally triggered by a request from one presbytery for a ruling on whether it could ordain a person who admitted to being a practising homosexual.

The issue was referred to congregations across the nation for comment, and an Interim Report on human sexuality and faith was drawn up and sent out for further comment. This was a timely and commendable initiative. Many other churches are still tending to sweep such matters under the carpet.

But the integrity of the consultative process which was set in motion at that time has been seriously questioned. A Task Group was set up in 1994, which recruited professional researcher Peter Bentley to summarise the many responses that came back from congregations. He estimated that the submissions represented 20,000, or almost a fifth of people attending Uniting churches (according to National Church Life Statistics). Of these, over 90% disagreed with the Interim Report's stance on same-gender sex.

The Bentley Report was kept back from the Christian public and largely sidelined by the 8th Assembly in 1997. Recognising the potential for a major split, that Assembly deferred the issue to accommodate a so-called "year of listening." The 9th Assembly in 2000 did not deal with the issue. Then, as we have seen, the 10th Assembly adopted a compromise resolution ducking the moral issue by appealing to the technicality that ordinations are the responsibility of presbyteries.

EMU conducted a petition immediately after the 10th Assembly. Despite the fact that many clergy and church councils suppressed it, the petition garnered 20,000 signatures in a fortnight, all protesting against Resolution 84. This appeared to have no effect, and the Reforming Alliance, immediately after its formation, conducted its own hurried survey. This met with similar resistance in many quarters, but nearly 90% of its 27,000 respondents disapproved of Res. 84 and affirmed their belief that same-gender sexual activity was contrary to the Christian ethic.

In January 2004, the NCLS reported the results of a professionally randomised survey of denominations, indicating that only 18% of Uniting Church members clearly approved of the ordination of practising homosexuals. It will be seen that all these various evaluations have tended to produce similar findings.

Meanwhile the Assembly Standing Committee, reversing an earlier decision, set up yet another consultation process. A workgroup has been charged with reporting back to Assembly 2006. In stage 1 of this process, responses were sought from congregations and a summary of these responses has now been made available. It reflects the statistical trends reported above.

Church members may be forgiven for wondering if this has just been another stalling tactic, given that the Assembly has already been given enough evidence that most UC members object to the implications of Res. 84, and there is general weariness at the thought of the debate dragging on for another three years.

It must also be said that Res. 84 has placed great strain on the Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress at a time when their communities and agencies are facing a number of crises. Many ethnic congregations are also deeply disturbed.

It would, however, be a mistake for congregations to just sit back and hope the issue will go away. It won't. **Minority rule relies on majority apathy.** It is important for dissenting members and congregations to continue registering their grave concern.

3. Other Concerns

It should be stressed that the Reforming Alliance is not a one-issue organisation. Other matters of concern have also surfaced.

Theological

First, many people are disturbed at what they see as theological drift. For example, the people see their leaders sponsoring theologically liberal visitors such as Bishop John Spong, in preference to featuring champions of the historic and apostolic faith.

Some UC theologians appear to hold views that question historic interpretations of Christ's divinity and resurrection and discount the reliability and clarity of the Bible as the primary authority for what we believe and the way we ought to live. These attitudes run counter to their ordination vows and the Basis of Union.

Similarly, there are concerns about the monopoly of liberal-critical views in many of our theological halls. This is particularly worrying when qualifications from other fully accredited institutions are not considered acceptable for ordination. The dominance of liberal theology has led many to believe that evangelism is a politically incorrect activity lacking respect for the other person's integrity. Only inter-faith dialogue is allowed, on the assumption that all faiths are equally valid. Most emphasis is placed on issues of social justice and environmental concern (which are certainly part of Christ's mission mandate, but not all).

The fact that a particular church claims to be evangelical does not guarantee that it will be a growing church, but it is ironical that most of the churches which are in fact growing in ministry and outreach tend to be evangelical in their view of the Bible and both evangelistic and socially concerned in their vision.

Moral

Another level of concern is a perceived moral drift, not only in the sexual area. Relationships generally are under strain, as the frequency of marriage breakdown underlines. Similarly, some of the church's counselling services are seen to be failing their clients through a deficient application of Christian beliefs and values. Again, the church's property management policies often put worldly wisdom ahead of ethical considerations. And so on. How then can we hope to be counter-cultural in our mission to a society adrift?

Structural

A third level of concern is structural malfunction. Many clergy and churches feel oppressed by the ways in which the councils of the church operate. There are flaws in the processes for selecting representatives for the higher councils, which is all the more serious when they are then given discretion to vote contrary to the views of those who elected them. There is an overweighting at Assembly of *ex-officio* people with full-time non-parish appointments. We applaud the fact that since 1997 congregations have been declared primary sites of the church's mission, but many feel that our governing structures have yet to reflect this affirmation.

.....

The above comments indicate why the RA feels the need for reform on a wide scale. Census and NCLS statistics reveal that the denomination now has half the number of active members it had at the time of union. Membership, and the proportion of young people to old, have both been steadily declining at a faster rate than that of any other mainstream denomination.

A natural reaction would be to say "Why bother staying with it?" Exactly! Many are leaving. But the Reforming Alliance is also conscious of the many godly people in UCA churches who continue to serve the Lord, and it is time to turn the page and see what can be said on the other side of the ledger.

4. What's good about the Uniting Church?

Three great traditions joined hands at Union - Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian. Each was indebted to the Reformation rediscovery of biblical Christianity and the faith of the apostles. Each had developed ministries of evangelism, social welfare, and advocacy for the poor and the oppressed.

The Uniting Church inherited these emphases. The Basis of Union re-affirms them. Our wide range of caring services continues to lead the field nationally. Many people in outback areas of the continent have received pastoral care. Until the 10th Assembly (where the vote on Resolution 84 greatly offended the Congress and many ethnic representatives), we had a proud record of working for Aboriginal Reconciliation and promoting a multicultural church.

More recently, Uniting church members have been prominent in efforts to support refugees. Our advocacy on behalf of the oppressed has even earned political rebuke, as it did for Jesus.

Similarly, in the spirit of Jesus and the early church, the UCA has recognised the gifts-ministries of all believers, lay as well as clergy. In particular, women are given equal roles in contrast to most other denominations. Again, the rite of baptism is administered with more pastoral flexibility than in most other traditions. We cherish such strengths.

Also, though the general profile of congregations is ageing, there are some large and vibrant Uniting churches around Australia whose Spirit-filled ministries are worth celebrating. Typically, they are evangelical in their teaching, contemporary in their worship, active in evangelism, and noted for many other caring ministries. They show it can be done! We should study them.



5. Short-sighted responses

Some people are reacting to controversies in the wider church by saying that since their own local church seems to be functioning well, they will ignore the larger picture and do their own thing. This is contrary to our constitution, which affirms the value of balancing national, regional and local authority.

We are all strengthened or tainted by what our leaders say and do. Unsound central rulings like Res. 84 can hamper the credibility of local witness. For example, many chaplains in state schools are members of the Uniting Church. Some have reported that interdenominational partners have questioned the wisdom of supporting their work with children and youth are questioning whether to go on doing so, given what appears to them to be the UCA's attitude to same-gender sex.

Similarly, central committees of synods still play a big part in the appointment of ministers to churches. Congregations can be overruled in their choice of minister by panels with a different theology. The Reforming Alliance seeks to minimise such mismatches.

An alternative reaction on the part of people dissatisfied by the way the leadership is operating is to look for another church or denomination. But no church is perfect. A supposedly evangelical denomination may, for example, have a sub-biblical attitude to women. Another may have a guru model of leadership which stunts team-work. Some have a very legalistic attitude to baptism, or neglect teaching on the Holy Spirit. House churches tend to lack long-term viability. And so on. Leaving a church is never without pain and risk, and should only be seen as a very last resort.

But for some, going elsewhere has been their last resort. Part of the Reforming Alliance's ministry is advising such people on how to disengage with minimum distress or loss of resources.

6. Aims of the Reforming Alliance

So what are the intentions of the Reforming Alliance. The initial aims publicised in Dec. 2003, read as follows.

"In obedience to the living Word of the scriptures and the Basis of Union, our aims are:

- to offer hope and encouragement to those who feel disenfranchised by Resolution 84.
- to call the Assembly Standing Committee to refer this resolution to congregations and other councils of the church for concurrence. [Ed's note: This has now happened].
- to give continuing voice to the concerns of the 20,000 people who unsuccessfully petitioned Assembly Standing Committee.
- to seek constitutional reform to make Assembly membership more representative and to enable congregations and presbyteries to secure mandatory referral of Assembly and ASC decisions vital to the Church's life.
- to rebuild relationships with our sister churches.
- to honour the convictions of Congress (UAIACC), ethnic congregations and their parent churches on marriage and sexuality.
- to provide opportunities and resources that enable people to rediscover our Reformed, Evangelical and Catholic heritage and to challenge views based too heavily on contemporary experience and culture.
- to address issues in theological education in the UCA.
- to foster evangelism and renewal.
- to support and seek justice for those who in conscience feel they must leave the UCA.
- to rebuild unity within the UCA."

7. Structure of the Reforming Alliance

The RA has prepared a constitution which will be put to an Annual General Meeting later in 2004. Meanwhile an executive Committee with representatives from all states is managing donations and activities. The national chairperson is **Rev. Dr Max Champion**. Max is minister at St John's Uniting Church, Mt Waverley (Vic). He is married with four children, has chaired various commissions in the Synod of Victoria, and survives media interviews well!

The RA offers support to people in three categories. **Strand 1** caters for concerned UC members trying to work within existing structures. **Strand 2** seeks to support those who want to stay within the church, but who at the same time feel the need to work for reform through alternative financial and pastoral structures. **Strand 3** offers pastoral advice and support to people who feel they have to leave, and seeks justice for departing congregations. Co-ordinators are:

Strand 1: **Rev. Dr Ian Breward**, Emeritus Professor of Church History in the Uniting Church Theological Hall in Melbourne.

Strand 2: **Rev. Phil Marshall**, Newtown Mission UCA, Sydney.

Strand 3: **Rev. Dr Gordon Watson**, retired Head of Systematic Theology at Trinity College, Brisbane.

Other executive members confirmed at the first national RA conference in Brisbane (16-17 July, 2004) are: Rev. Steve Estherby (NSW), Mrs Mary Hawkes (SA), Emeritus Professor Brian Hill (WA), Rev. Rod James (SA), Rev. Ivan Kirk (Qld), Mrs Thelma Pendlebury (NSW), and Mrs Lyn Marshall (RA administrator, NSW).

8. What action can we take?

-  When major policies and central bureaucracies are involved, change is hard to achieve, which is why it is important for individuals to band together. The first step, therefore, is to bond with people who share your convictions.

Joining the Reforming Alliance is one way of doing this, and of being encouraged by what is being achieved in other places. It also provides you and your congregation with an early warning system of proposals from more removed councils that may compromise your mission and witness.

This also enables the RA to estimate (and quote) how many people it speaks for. Some people in the present debate want to promote the view that the RA speaks for a small minority. We already know from statistical surveys that this is the total opposite of the truth, but we do need your personal expression of support.
-  Also, consult the national website and/or administrator frequently. Already there is a steady information flow, underlining how seriously the church is being destabilised by the current turmoil. Don't let people tell you the RA is causing division. Divisions already exist, and have been widening ever since union. The RA's goal is to restore unity on the basis of the good news of Christ's Lordship, and the holy living to which he calls us.
-  Thirdly, participate in discussions at congregational and church council meetings. Joining the RA will enable you to be better informed about the true situation around the nation. The irony is that some church people virtually make a career of getting on committees (which is also the route to higher committees), while others with a strong sense of mission and ministry avoid them. This is a recipe for minority rule. It needn't be an either/or choice. Plan your church involvement in a balanced way that allocates time for activism in ministry settings alongside involvement in the decision-making levels that determine the quality of your congregation's life and ministry. In general, evangelical members have often been so disillusioned by the power-plays that can occur at council, presbytery and synod meetings that they have tended to boycott them. That is counter-productive. In part, it is what has led us into the current hiatus.
-  Fourthly, draw together from time to time with other RA members in your congregation to pray for the church, and for people under particular stress. Share views on the issues raised by the RA. If you are conscious of irregular conduct on the part of any of your leaders, consult your state RA contact person on how to proceed. Sometimes there may be a need for legal advice which the RA can obtain for you.
-  Propose that your church council appoint someone to be its RA contact person, passing on any news that the congregation and church council ought to know about.
-  If you sense that your congregation is in general sympathy with the reforming agenda of the RA, propose that it become a congregational member, and that it describe itself in its publicity as "a Reforming Alliance Congregation Within the Uniting Church." Many people are already finding that this reassures friends outside the UCA who have been alarmed by the current official stance of the church on homosexual practice.
-  Vigorously support initiatives in personal evangelism, care ministries for people in need, and prophetic protest at unethical and oppressive practices in society. If your local church has relapsed into maintenance mode, help it to review its priorities and switch to mission mode.

9. How do I become a partner?

There is no charge for membership of the Reforming Alliance, though donations from those who can afford them are very welcome and much needed. The important thing is to fill in a membership form (available on the website) and send it to the national administrator. This will enable you to receive regular information from the national office.

The national administrator in turn will let your state's executive member know of your support for the RA. That person can then send you more local information about RA doings.

For further details of people and policies, see the RA website, www.reformingalliance.org.au.

Appendix 1: The Bible and Sexuality

The 10th Assembly failed to deal with the moral issue of same-gender sex, leaning on the technical point that ordinations are the business of other councils. It then failed to refer Res. 84 to other councils for comment, as required by clause 39 of the constitution.

But the moral and theological dimension of the question is surely the Assembly's business, as the body responsible for holding the denomination to its Basis of Faith. This brief study lays out the case for demanding that the Assembly face up to its constitutional responsibility to define doctrine.

THE BASIC ISSUE

The Basis of Union affirms that Scripture is our primary authority for judging what to believe and how to behave. In both Testaments, Scripture clearly condemns the practice of same-gender sex (e.g. Lev. 18: 22; Rom. 1: 26-27). Therefore the Assembly should have taken a stand in principle against the practice and ruled that it was contrary to the standards expected of ministers.

RESPONDING TO COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

1. *Private sexual behaviour between consenting adults is not an issue central to matters of faith.* But it is! In the wider context of Christian ethics, it is one of several sins directly identified (e.g. 1 Cor. 6: 9-11) as contrary to the "holy living" to which we are called once we have accepted the rule of Christ in our lives (Eph. 5: 1-5). The Assembly's permissiveness mocks the authority of Scripture.

2. *It is as natural for people of homosexual orientation to seek same-gender sexual relationships as for heterosexuals to engage in opposite-gender sex.* But to base ethics on what feels "natural" is to legitimate any consensual deviation (cf. group sex, bestiality) and remove moral restraint. The biblical perspective is based on God's revealed intentions for creation (e.g. Gen. 2: 18-24), not the motivations of a fallen species. Only one kind of lifelong sexual relationship is endorsed by Jesus and the apostles.

3. *People interpret the Bible differently.* This of course is true. But the Reformation tradition in which our church stands affirms that the central truths stand out clearly. Attempts have been made to explain away passages which give clear rulings on the wrongness of same-gender sex, but many significant scholars agree that these texts mean what they

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are needed to see this picture.

plainly say. Nor can it be argued that people in biblical eras were unaware of the homosexual experience. In this as in other respects, Greek and Roman cultures in particular were notably promiscuous, attracting strong biblical condemnation.

4. *Literalists only quote what suits their case; e.g. although the Bible endorses the death penalty for adultery (Lev. 20:10) even literalists don't demand it.* Evangelical biblical scholarship has always recognised that biblical revelation is progressive. Thus the New Testament in some respects supersedes the Old, and the words and works of Jesus are the measuring rod for understanding both. This argument is an attempt to discredit core passages that clearly condemn specific forms of sexual immorality.

For example, the pharisees once set a trap for Jesus, with Lev. 20 in mind, dragging before him a woman taken in adultery (Jn 8: 3-11). In telling the woman he did not condemn her, he was not condoning her conduct, for he said "leave your life of sin." But at the same time he applied the higher law that forgiveness is freely available to those who repent. This principle is as true for homosexually oriented people who lapse into same-gender sex as it is for heterosexuals who, like this woman, get into extra-marital affairs.

5. *Opponents of Resolution 84 are "homophobic, ignorant and prejudiced."* Possibly a few may be. Some people are instinctively prejudiced against all people with a homosexual disposition, sometimes because of ignorance or because they are unstable in their own sexual identity.

But most have considered reasons for their views. It is important to distinguish between having a disposition and engaging in a practice. The second involves moral choice. For example, most people have a heterosexual orientation, but it is not inevitable that they will commit adultery. To value people who have a homosexual orientation while passing moral judgment on same-gender sex is not homophobic. Many have special gifts of sensitivity and artistic skills that can enrich a church community. The UCA welcomes all persons who seek to learn and follow the way of Christ.

5. *You are basing your case on proof-texts.* The claim is that evangelicals simply pluck out texts that suit their case. (The word "Fundamentalist" is often used to describe this sort of person). But there is a great difference between choosing isolated texts to support your own opinions, and quoting particular texts that usefully summarise the general message of Scripture. As the Reformation reminded us, we should compare Scripture with Scripture, judging all passages by their position in its grand narrative of salvation, and most of all by Christ's words and works.

The Bible tells a progressive story of how God made his will clear to rebellious humanity. The creation ideal was for man and woman together to reflect God's image (Gen. 1:27). Polygamy, though accepted in earlier biblical times, was superseded by the standard of monogamous faithfulness proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles (cf. Mk 1: 6-7; Eph. 5: 31). Further, the church was charged to teach the ideal, but also to teach and offer God's forgiveness to those who fall into sin and afterwards truly repent (Acts 2:38-40).



THE CHALLENGE

All persons are called to turn to God, repenting from their sins, and offering their souls and bodies as "living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God ... not conforming any longer to the pattern of this world" (Rom. 12: 1-2).

Appendix 2

Resolutions of 1st National Conference

Brisbane, July 17-18, 2004.

Jesus Christ, as He is revealed in the prophetic and apostolic testimony of the Old and New Testaments is the one Word of God whom we must hear, trust and obey in life and death.

Jesus Christ says, "I am the truth". We, therefore, reject the false teaching that there are other powers and authorities in our culture and history to whom we must listen and obey.

Jesus Christ says that from the beginning God ordered creation so that a man should leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. We reject the false teaching that there are other orders of self chosen human sexual relationship which oppose this divine purpose.

This meeting of the Reforming Alliance within the Uniting Church, meeting in Brisbane in July 2004, calls upon the people and leaders of the Church to receive anew in penitence and thankfulness the gift of God's life-giving purpose for humankind and to turn from the acknowledgments of the other lords and spirits of this age.

We declare that Reforming Alliance within the Uniting Church will pursue, with God's help and every means at our disposal, the recovery of the Church's identity within the reformed, catholic and evangelical tradition. We will seek to achieve the following short and long term objectives in fulfilling this purpose:-

1. We continue in our resolve to recall the Uniting Church to the faith of the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic church by
 - a) rescinding Resolution 84 of the 2003 Assembly, and
 - b) adopting the Queensland Synod statement on sexuality (including Res. 91:117 of the Queensland Synod, reaffirmed by a Special Synod on 7-9th November 2003).
2. We resolve to seek to establish orthodox presbyteries in as many Synods as necessary, affirming the vital work being done in South Australia to allow congregations to group together in presbyteries based on a common theological confession.
3. We will seek arrangements whereby reformed, orthodox and evangelical theological education will be available for applicants for specified ministries and other members of the UCA.
4. We direct the executive to develop proposals for constitutional reform in the UCA that will ensure that Presbyteries and Synods can require that matters they deem to be vital to the life of the Church be referred to them for endorsement prior to those matters being given effect by the Assembly.
5. We resolve to encourage and support its members as candidates for positions of leadership in Congregations, Presbyteries, Synods and the Assembly and to that end will develop a national structure which will recruit and nurture leaders with reformed, orthodox and evangelical faith. The Reforming Alliance empowers its National Executive to amend the budget should they believe it necessary to the implementation of this motion.
6. We ask the executive to work toward a contingency plan for amicable separation should it be determined, following the 11th Assembly in 2006, that Uniting Church has not returned to the gospel of Christ as testified in the unique witness of Scripture and reflected in the Basis of Union.
7. We will provide a clear, written and public response to the forthcoming Assembly booklet and other publications in relation to sexuality and Resolution 84.
8. As we struggle to maintain the faith of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church, the Reforming Alliance continues to affirm the crucial importance of ecumenical relationships for ourselves and the Uniting Church.
