



EDITORIAL

For Assembly 11,
it is the 11th hour

Only a few months before the Uniting Church's eleventh Assembly, the church's stance on sexuality a dangerously divisive issue for Australia's third largest denomination. Not that sexuality is the subject of keenest debate within church councils. Such bodies spend more time on how to maintain buildings; how to attract and then challenge youth; how to build congregations and structure Sunday worship, quite apart from larger questions of Christianity's place in the modern world.

But Resolution 84, which placed on Uniting members the onus of making up their own minds about the nature of sexuality without guidance from their church's governing body, is a legislative item that will not go away. Since the last Assembly, official policy has decreed that Christians may choose for themselves between two broad views of sexual identity and expression. That these views are diametrically opposed to each other, and are therefore contradictory, seems not to bother the supporters of R84. Indeed, silence on the issue shows that the official church hopes more than anything else that opponents of R84 will simply find the controversy too tiring, and give up.

That this will not happen is the aim of RA and EMU, and, as these two groups make clear in a letter to the Assembly standing committee, if the damage already done to the church is not remedied next July, there will be "far-reaching consequences" for the church.

The Assembly standing committee has not only ignored the groundswell of opposition to their policies; they have refused to take seriously the significance of their tinkering with the church's historic traditions. By pretending that 'all is well' in the church they are failing as leaders. Likewise, the synod journals have not done their duty. They present a Pravda-like propaganda line of hope based on illusion rather than reality.

Unfortunately, the national standing committee now faces a decision it is ill-equipped to make. The Assembly's history of inability to deal with questions of theology and ethics does not inspire *continued on p. 12)*

A DIRECT CHALLENGE TO ASSEMBLY

Debate issues raised
by Resolution 84!

Even before the national Assembly meets in Brisbane later this year there are signs that the church is approaching lasting and irremediable division. Every attempt at reconciliation between opposing viewpoints on sexuality has failed in nearly three years of discussion. Since the last Assembly hundreds of individuals, including ministers, and many congregations have severed long-term links with the Uniting Church. Latest research by RA shows that loss of members is approaching 7,000.

A letter from RA and EMU to the Assembly's general secretary, the Rev. Terence Corbin, on March 16, suggests that the Assembly standing committee continues to disregard the RA/EMU position and shows scant respect for those opposed to Resolution 84.

National chairmen Dr. Max Champion (RA) and the Rev. Stephen Esterby (EMU), asked the national standing committee to ensure that "the substance of the motion originally sponsored by RA is fully debated at the Eleventh Assembly". Using unusually strong words they expressed the hope that "the gravity of the situation is fully appreciated by the ASC."

The letter stated: "We are dismayed by recent attempts to misrepresent the recommendations which have been forwarded to Assembly by the Queensland synod and to downplay the authority of decisions referred to Assembly by presbyteries in four States.

"Should Assembly fail to engage in full debate about the theological, ethical and pastoral issues raised by these referrals it will be regarded by our large combined membership, and by the vast majority of members of the UAICC and the national councils of migrant ethnic congregations, as a fundamental breach of trust.

"If will be a sad and fateful day for the UCA if this matter of doctrine is subverted by clever manipulation of meeting procedures.

"If Assembly simply decides to reaffirm 'R84' without discussing the substantive issues of our creation as male and female in the image of God, as attested in Scripture, then many of our ecumenical partners in the National Council of Churches and Reformed churches in Asia and the Pacific will also be dismayed that the UCA has capitulated to the 'spirit of the age'."

The letter ends with the assurance of "our *continued on p. 4)*

Qld. Synod, four presbyteries send joint motion to Assembly

The Queensland Synod and presbyteries in Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia have forwarded a motion on sexuality to the July Assembly. The Reforming Alliance expects the response to the motion, which was sponsored through congregations and presbyteries, will determine the future unity of the Uniting Church. With discontent over Resolution 84 increasing, several lines of action are under consideration if the Assembly reaffirms R84 or makes no ruling on it.

Below is the text of the motion.

That the Assembly reaffirm the sexual teaching and practice of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, as attested in Scripture, by adopting the following confessional statement:

- a. We believe that God created us as male and female to live in freedom and unity with each other by being faithful to our male or female gender. (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:18-24)
- b. We believe that sexual intercourse should be expressed solely within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, which God ordained and which is confirmed by Christ and honoured by its unique likeness to Christ's relationship to the Church. (Gen. 2:24; Mat 19:4-7; Mk 10:6-8; Eph.5:25-33)
- c. We believe that people who engage in homosexual practice are acting contrary to the clear witness of Scripture to our creation by God as male and female (Lev. 18:22; Lev. 20:13(a); Rom. 1:24-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-20; 1 Tim. 1:8-11)
- d. We believe that people who engage in homosexual practice harm the eucharistic fellowship of the Church as the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 5-6)
- e. We believe that the Church's solidarity with the world in sin (Rom. 3:23) and gratitude for the reconciliation of the world in Christ (2 Cor. 5:16-21) commits her:
 - i. To speak Christ's word of mercy and friendship to any person who is tempted by homosexual practice (John 8:1-11), and to offer them counselling and pastoral care when they experience temptation, hostility, illness or bereavement (Galatians 6:1-6)
 - ii. To invite people practicing homosexuality to experience Christ's freedom by abandoning behaviour which is contrary to the clear witness of Scripture (Galatians 5:16-25).
- f. We believe that the Church should not normalize homosexual practices within the Church by:

- i. Ordaining, commissioning or inducting into the ministries of the Church those practising homosexuality.
- ii. Solemnizing or blessing homosexual unions.

THE RA/EMU CONFSSIONAL STATEMENT

In unresolved conflict with a church's disordered theology

The Confessional Statement below outlines the theological and biblical position of those bodies in relation to the RA motion to this year's Assembly. It was adopted at a combined meeting of RA and EMU on February 27 this year.

Preamble

This meeting of the National Executives of the Reforming Alliance and EMU on 27-28 February 2006 takes place at a point of crisis of faith in the life of the Uniting Church in Australia. This is a perilous time for the church and we are constrained by the witness of the Old and New Testaments to Jesus Christ to make this confession of faith before the church and all people:

1. *We believe in Jesus Christ*, witnessed to in the prophetic and apostolic testimony of the Old and New Testaments who is the one Word of God whom we must hear, trust and obey in life and in death.
2. *He who is the Truth* declared that from the beginning God has ordered creation so that a man should leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh (Mark 10:6-9; Genesis 2:24).
3. *We reject* the unsubstantiated claim made in the name of diversity that other understandings of sexuality can be accepted alongside that of the apostolic testimony in the Scriptures and followed by the Catholic Orthodox and Evangelical church over the past two thousand years.
4. We therefore find ourselves in *unresolved conflict* with the Assembly's declared permission to ordain practising homosexual persons living in "right relationships" on a case-by-case basis (The so called 'Resolution 84.'). We believe the ordination of a person in a same gender sexual relationship is irreconcilable with the faith and order of the Church.
5. By accepting the implications of Resolution 84 the Uniting Church has determined to incorporate into the church's order what the Old and New Testament and the tradition of the universal church holds to be a sin. By this decision the church has set itself apart from the universal tradition of the church and the clear teaching of the apostolic witness to Christ and has thus become a disordered and apostate church.

6. We plead, therefore, with our sisters and brothers in the Uniting Church to heed the warnings from our sister churches (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Lutheran) which will impact on the progress towards unity. Further, we affirm that as members of the Uniting Church our prior loyalty is to Jesus Christ the Word of God as attested in the Holy Scriptures and the Faith of the Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical Church.

7. *We join in the prayer* of paragraph 18 of *The Basis of Union* that 'the People of God on the way' 'through the gift of the Spirit will be constantly subject to correction of all that is erroneous in the church's life; that it will be brought into deeper unity with other Churches, ...'

8. *But we warn* that if the Uniting Church continues in its present course *it will result in schism*. As the distinguished Lutheran theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg declares;

"For a church that would permit itself to be pressured to no longer understand homosexual activity as a deviation from the biblical norm and to recognize homosexual partnerships alongside marriage, such a church would no longer be based on the foundation of Scripture, but, rather in opposition to its unanimous witness. A church that took this step would cease to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."
Pannenberg in *Christianity Today* (Nov. 11, 1996; pp.34-38).

9. The false teaching present in the Uniting Church Assembly's decision has not originated in the living Word by which the Church's faith and obedience is nourished and regulated, but has its origins in the developing secular culture of a more permissive attitude to sexual behaviour in the Western world.

10. The confessional statement which follows is based upon the apostolic witness in which we hear the Word of God, and the Faith of the Church as understood in the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Our Confession

We confess our faith in God the Creator who endows human life with the gift of sexuality whereby female and male partners are joined in one flesh.

The apostolic witness of the New Testament follows a clear path of reasoning. Jesus, when challenged by the Pharisees on the grounds for divorce *invokes neither the law nor right relationships* based on love. Sexuality is set at a more basic level of human existence. Jesus cites the creation stories in Genesis. God made humans male and female. (Mark 10:8)

In the Genesis account (Gen 1:26-27) humans' likeness to God is not spelled out in terms of the human creature's rationality, creativity, moral consciousness, free will or any other distinctive feature that distinguishes humans from animals. It is the fact of gender which distinguishes human beings

in their personal and relational likeness to God.

Whereas the world of animals is 'created according to its' kind' or species, humankind is not so classified into various species of race or culture or other kind of diversity, but simply by way of gender. Gender is not a species. Humans' co-existence as male and female, the basic form of their humanity, is the expression of their likeness to God. The sanctioning of homosexual relationships countenances another species of human being which is contrary to God's word.

In the same way Paul argues the case for relationships using the doctrine of 'the body' and the language of the creation story. In condemning prostitution he cites the same passage (Genesis 2:24) using the Greek word for 'clinging' to Christ rather than 'clinging' to a 'prostitute' (I Corinthians 6:12-20) and invokes 'the two shall be one flesh'. *Paul sets the body relationship in the redemptive language of the Trinity: since we have been bought by the Father with a price our bodies are meant for our Lord Jesus Christ; our bodies are the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit.*

Like Paul's emphasis on the one flesh unity of husband and wife, the author of Ephesians invokes the dual connection of Christ's love for the church (5:25) and his tender care for the church 'because we are members of his body.' (5:30).

In a dramatic way, he invokes the Genesis passage, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.' (5:31-32). Thus the death and resurrection of Christ is tied to the 'members of his body' and, for the Christians, that unity is sacramentally linked to the bodily unity of husband and wife becoming one flesh.

Therefore we confess our faith in God the Creator and Redeemer whose will and purpose for man and woman revealed in the giving of Christ's body in love for the Church is that they should become one flesh with Him as members of His Body. We honour those who are called by Christ (1Cor 7 Cf. Matt 19:12) to the celibate life for the sake of their discipleship to Christ.

Homosexuality condemned in Scripture

With matching clarity and consistency the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis 19:1-29, Leviticus 18:22, 20:13a.) and the Apostolic Witness (Romans 1:26-28, I Corinthians 6:9-10) reject all other forms of sexual activity. Paul affirms that 'fornicators male prostitutes, sodomites' (among others) will not inherit the kingdom of God.' and this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.'

We confess anew our faith in Christ who 'died for our sins' (I Cor 15:3) in order that we might be forgiven; reconciling us through his death, and making us part of his new creation. Consequently, the nature of

God's will and purpose for human life and its negation through sin is central for the understanding of faith, the proclamation of the Gospel and 'the new order of righteousness and love.' (paragraph 3 *The Basis of Union*).

We therefore confess our faith in Jesus Christ whose compassion and love is directed to all people. Since all have fallen short, God calls all to repentance to receive the gift of forgiveness through faith, bestowing the Holy Spirit and calling humans to obedience.

We believe that the Church's solidarity with but not conformity to the world (Rom 3:23), and its gratitude for the reconciliation of the world in Christ (2 Cor 5:16-21) commits her:

- To speak Christ's word of mercy and friendship to any person who is tempted by homosexual practice, and to offer them counselling and pastoral care (John 8:1-11) when they experience temptation, hostility, illness or bereavement (Galatians 6:1-6).
- To invite people practicing homosexuality to experience Christ's freedom by abandoning behaviour which is contrary to the clear witness of Scripture (Galatians 5:16-25).

We accept our obligation to love all people welcoming them to worship and providing them with pastoral care.

We affirm the naming of sins which stand in the way of being made whole in Christ. This is not for condemnation but for salvation (John 3:16-17). We therefore reject attempts to affirm any form of homo- or bi-sexual practice in the name of 'justice or 'compassion'; we find no basis for this view in the Old and New Testaments.

Willing to be corrected

With the Scots Confession of 1560 we would plead that if any should note in this confession anything contrary to God's word in the Old and New Testaments they would of their Christian charity make us aware of it in writing.

We promise that if we are proved to be amiss by the Holy Scriptures we shall acknowledge such and make amendment. Until then our consciences are bound to God's word whose witness confirms our hope in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Truth to whom we must cleave and whom we must obey.

Amen.

Debate issues raised by Resolution 84! (continued from p. 1)

continuing prayers for you and the ASC as you face this difficult issue. Be assured, too, that if Assembly fails to undo the damage caused by 'R84', the UCA will have severed her relationship with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, as affirmed in the Basis of Union. The consequences will be far reaching for the UCA."

The Poverty of Resolution 84

Peter Bentley

Peter Bentley is the RA administrator, and author of the 'Bentley Report' commissioned by the Assembly. The report is a study of UCA members' reactions to the Interim Report on Sexuality, and was withheld by the Assembly when it showed the church membership to be opposed to the drift of official church policy on sexual behaviour.

There are many reasons why Resolution 84 was a poor decision that has led to an increasingly impoverished church. While it is clear that the most important and relevant reasons are related to doctrine and scripture, there are other matters of importance for a church with a polity of inter-related councils, a church founded in an ecumenical context, and one often appealing to the need for participation from local members and issues of justice. I include twelve more reasons to illustrate why a council of the church can err. ¹

1. The Assembly Standing Committee did not consider the report

The Standing Committee did not properly oversee the process for one of the most significant resolutions in the history of the church. The background discussion paper to Resolution 84 was not considered by the March 2003 Assembly Standing Committee. For such an important matter to not have been first considered by the Standing Committee meeting before the Assembly, in order for preparations to be made for its consequences, and appropriate referral for legal advice and wider church opinion, is so incredible that one would find this fact simply beyond belief.

2. Too little time was allowed for preparation by members

The discussion paper was delivered too late to members for adequate consideration and consultation. As a member of the Assembly I received the papers for this matter nine days before the meeting, well after other papers and by then like most members, I had much to read and I also had my own paid work to complete before the Assembly. There was little time to discuss with colleagues and my local church before leaving for the Assembly, and time was needed to appreciate the very subtle underpinnings of this interesting document.

It is worth noting that for the 2006 Assembly, the Standing Committee introduced a cut off date for proposals - 31 December 2005, in order to allow for earlier distribution and consideration of material.

3. Resolution 84 was not passed by consensus at the Assembly

I still find it extremely worrying to meet people in the church who believe everyone at the Assembly voted in favour of Resolution 84. There was a clearly defined mechanism to force a move to formal voting. It was unfortunate that this was before a lunch break, and in order to finalise the matter and maintain momentum, the session time was extended for 15 minutes. This also gave the unfortunate impression that this was to help the media which was present in abundance, and give them the opportunity to wrap up the story. Again, Standing Committee has recognised this mistake and the recommendation to the Business Committee is that secular media not be permitted to record, either sounds or pictures, of business conducted during sessions of the 11th Assembly.

There was a day set for the passing of Resolution 84, and I knew it beforehand. The media had already reported that proponents had the numbers, but I happened to be behind a certain Assembly member in the coffee queue when another member asked this person, how they were going to get the proposal through, and it was clearly outlined to this person that procedures were in place to move to formal procedures and wrap the matter up.

I believe the curtailment of discussion, which while technically correct under the manual for meetings, actually illustrates how the manual for meetings can be used to advantage by those with the majority at that time. The Uniting Church may publicly promote the notion of waiting on the Spirit, but in the end the same parliamentary style of decision making actually quenched the Spirit and the ideal of a consensus. There should have been continued discussion, because there were many people ready and wanting to speak. They were not simply wanting to hold up a decision, they had genuine questions and comments that perhaps could have helped, but they were denied the opportunity.

It also has to be acknowledged that the decision was hasty because in actual fact, Resolution 84 which we work from now, is not actually the resolution of the 2003 Assembly, but a resolution modified by the Standing Committee. Never before has the Standing Committee had to clarify a decision to this extent, but for me this illustrated the level of confusion that was operating at the Assembly. Clearly people did not know the implications of what they were voting for. I am aware that there have been other actions by Standing Committee in the past (for example – community ministry), but I believe the way this was done and the style of the change, including deletion of sections, and providing an apology, to be unique. When I have mentioned this fact to officers of other denominations, it is this aspect that has astounded them in some ways more than the final decision.

Our credibility as a denomination has been severely shaken by the confusing and damaging processes.

4. Resolution 84 was considered vital before being passed, and not vital after being passed

During the debate to pass the resolution, several speakers highlighted how vital this proposal was for the church, but when it came to discussing whether the proposal was vital and should be referred to other councils of the church, the interest in its vitality ceased.

5. Resolution 84 was not referred for consideration

I believe much of the heat of the matter would have dissipated if Resolution 84 had been referred for concurrence according to the Basis of Union or at least Clause 39 of the Constitution.

CLAUSE 39: On matters which, by a two-thirds majority vote, the Assembly deems to be vital to the life of the Church, the Assembly shall seek the concurrence of Synods and/or Presbyteries and/or Congregations as the Assembly may determine.

In a similar debate in 1997, a mechanism of provisional approval was formulated for any decisions on matters which were made by formal majority. Before the Assembly concluded, the Assembly had to then determine which decisions (if any) were referred for concurrence, and by which councils as well.

Certainly this procedural mechanism would have been helpful in taking the heat out of the matter. There should also have been a debate in 2003 focussed on which councils were needed for concurrence because of the effect on the other councils of the church, especially the presbyteries, so I wish to now place myself on record as strongly disagreeing with the interpretation provided at the Assembly which effectively cut off the debate about whether concurrence should be sought with Synods/and Presbyteries and/or congregations before it even started, because the consideration of the clause was deemed to be limited to the matter of vitality, and the other part was thus effectively not considered.

6. Ecumenical matters were not considered before the passing of Resolution 84, and are still not being taken on board

Because the matter had not even been to the Standing Committee, there had been no time to discuss with our dialogue partners issues related to any decision, and as a result damage has occurred to our primary dialogue relationships, and the development of ecumenical relationships has taken a sideshow position in a church called a Uniting Church.

7. Migrant-ethnic concerns were not and are still not adequately considered

Having been secretary of a presbytery with 36 NESB congregations I can assure you that there is a high level of concern, and this has also been confirmed by resolutions at several of the annual National conferences of the migrant ethnic groups concerned, some of which are included in the Assembly booklet. There are issues of justice for the lay members of these congregations in particular, as in most cases they have not had the opportunity to present their voices and opinions in an open and 'safe' environment without domination from politically conscious Anglo ministers and members. There now seems to be an attempt within the Uniting Church to 'manage' the statements of migrant-ethnic conferences and overall opinions of individual members. I hope this campaign will not give the impression of implicit support for a position that our migrant-ethnic members would never support explicitly, particularly if they had been given the opportunity to respond before the Assembly made its decision.

8. Inadequate liaison with the UAICC

Similarly there was inadequate liaison with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Congress, and inadequate consideration of issues raised by the Congress, especially on the day after the passing of Resolution 84, where a group of people who had heard their concerns, tried to bring a recision proposal. While this proposal received some sympathy, it was not really able to be properly considered, because by then Resolution 84 had achieved a life of its own and could not be taken back by the majority of members.

9. A destruction of the process of consultation

Consultation was a major feature of the Uniting Church as during the 1980s and 1990s reports were issued and responses sought from the councils of the church to issues of concern, doctrine and contemporary problems. The normal process for the Assembly was to prepare a report on responses and then listen to the responses of the church. While the councils of the church will listen to the voice of the members on most matters, when it comes to sexuality, there has always been a view, especially from some leaders that the voices are not worth listening to. Listening has become an abusive word in the Uniting Church.

10. Too much focus on Personal Experience

I have become increasingly dissatisfied with the focus on personal experience and decision making, often based on one view of scientific research. It is my understanding that there is no reliable statistical validity at the present time concerning research into

the genetic basis of homosexuality, and in new research outlined in March 2005, the prime researcher of the 1993 'gay gene' theory, agreed that he was not able to support his previous research results.²

11. Continued Bias in Assembly process

The Assembly continues to demonstrate an orientation to one side in its presentation of matters related to Resolution 84. This is clearly demonstrated in the booklet *Sexuality and Leadership in the Uniting Church* (Assembly 2004), which in my opinion is still substantially better than previous documents. The main point in question for me is the article by Revd Margaret Blair, who is certainly entitled to an opinion, but why is this included? It cannot be argued it is a counter balance to the EMU article, because there is an article from Uniting Network. It is also termed 'Statement Five: An Assembly Member'. It is an interesting experiential reflection, but why is there no other view of an Assembly member. The brief introduction even says: *The following paper represents the views of just one member of the Uniting Church Assembly.*

Should this not be the 'view' of one member? Does this mean that there is only space for one Assembly member because every member would have agreed with the main orientation of this paper, or is it an acknowledgment that there is another viewpoint? For myself, I found the whole atmosphere of the Assembly markedly different from that suggested by Margaret Blair, but then having been an Assembly staff person for seven years, I am probably too deeply aware of the elements of real politics that cover these events.

12. Resolution 84 has critically damaged our polity

This resolution was inappropriate for a conciliar church because it changed our polity without discussion and approval by the relevant councils of the church, especially congregations and presbyteries, councils of the church where the issues are now confronted. Presbyteries have now moved to become mini-Assemblies. This means in effect that the Uniting Church is moving from being a national church to a federal church. This process will continue, as the orientation of our theology becomes more individualistic and congregational, but for this to be an unintended result, is in my opinion, an indication of what a very poor process can produce.

Conclusion

Can councils of the church err? Yes.

Peter Bentley
November 2005

¹ . This is a revised and expanded version of a short paper I presented to the July 2005 meeting of the Mid North Coast Presbytery. This meeting had been arranged to consider the Assembly booklet *Sexuality and Leadership in the Uniting Church*.

² . See the paper by Dr Neil Whitehead: 'Born that way?', presented to the Second National Conference of the Reforming Alliance 2005.

Romans 1: the main battleground of the sexuality wars

Concluding Doug Jones' paper at the 2004 RA Conference

(Parts of the paper appeared in previous editions of ReForming, and is edited for publication)

Romans 1 will become the major battleground in terms of homosexual activity. Novel readings have been suggested and the notion of 'against nature' has been called into question. In Paul's argument, to do something contrary to nature is to do something contrary to one's creaturely existence as either female or male. That is, it is to exchange, in relation to sexual expression, a female role for a male role and vice versa. Such an exchange is an expression both of idolatry and of creaturely existence turned in upon the creature rather than towards the Creator.

There is another important reference in Romans to something that is contrary to nature – Romans 11:24 : 'For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.'

Paul is addressing the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13) at this stage in his argument and draws upon the agricultural image of grafting. He refers to God's inclusion of the Gentiles as members of the people of God in terms of 'grafting' them, 'contrary to nature', into God's people.

Thus, there is, in the argument of Paul, an acceptable form of activity that is contrary to nature, and that is God's activity of grace. Thus, on the one hand, the Gentiles exchange the truth about God for a lie and act contrary to nature. That, however, does not prevent God from acting to do something that is contrary to nature, namely to include the Gentiles by grace in the new covenant community. There are limits to this comparison, particularly as it relates to the expression 'contrary to nature.' Nevertheless, it does indicate the power of the gospel to take hold of the Gentiles who have acted contrary to their nature as men and women and thus in defiance of their Creator, and, by grace, and 'contrary to their nature', to include them in the people of God. This is far from suggesting their former actions, which arose out of their rejection of God their Creator and which were 'contrary to nature', are consequently acceptable to God whom they now know as Saviour. It does, however, indicate that even such an awful perversion (i.e. in the sense of a turning away from their Creator) is not beyond the saving

action of God who grafts them, 'against nature', into the covenant community. It needs to be noted that this fundamental perversion of humanity, its turning away from its Creator, finds expression, not only in same gender relationships, but also in a whole raft of other attitudes and activities as listed in Romans 1:29-31.

A very useful and thorough treatment of the biblical material on homosexuality is given by Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament : Community, Cross, New Creation - a Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper; 1996, 379-406). It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully canvass Hays' views on this matter. **However, I conclude by citing some aspects of his argument :**

"Paul's references to homosexual conduct place it within the realm of sin and death to which the cross is God's definitive answer. All of this is simply to say that the judgment of Romans 1 against homosexual practices should never be read apart from the rest of the letter, with its message of grace and hope through the cross of Christ.

"*New Creation*. A similar point can be made here: neither the word of judgment against homosexuality nor the hope of transformation to a new life should be read apart from the eschatological framework of Romans. The Christian community lives in a time of tension between "already" and "not yet." (p. 393)

"...the New Testament contains no passages that clearly articulate a rule against human sexual practices. The Leviticus texts (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), of course, bluntly and explicitly prohibit male homosexual acts in rule form. Paul...presupposes this prohibition – indeed, there may be an allusion in Romans 1:32 to Leviticus 20:13, with its prescription of the death penalty for a man who "lies with a male as with a female" – but he neither repeats it explicitly nor issues any new rules on the subject...

"The New Testament passages in question do express ideas that can be read as principles governing sexual conduct. From Romans 1, one could properly infer the principle that human actions ought to acknowledge and honor God as Creator. When read against the specific background of the Genesis creation story, this principle yields for Paul the conclusion that homosexuality is contrary to the will of God. This application of the principle, however, is dependent on a particular construal of the order of creation. Taken by itself – apart from the biblical narrative context – the same principle could be used to authorise quite different judgments. For example, if homosexuality should be judged on the basis of empirical factors to be a "natural" part of the created order, this principle could be used to argue strongly in favor of its acceptance within the church...the normative application of principles is fundamentally dependent on a particular narrative framework.

"The only paradigms offered by the New Testament

for homosexual behavior are the emphatically negative and stereotypic sketches in the three Pauline texts (Rom. 1:18-32, 1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10). The New Testament offers no accounts of homosexual Christians, tells no stories of same-sex lovers, ventures no metaphors that place a positive construal on homosexual relations...In the paradigmatic mode, the slender evidence offered by the New Testament is entirely disapproving of homosexuality. (p. 395)

"... the hermeneutical guideline that claims about divinely inspired experience that contradicts the witness of Scripture should be admitted to normative status in the church only after sustained and agonizing scrutiny by a consensus of the faithful. (p. 399)

"...we must acknowledge that persons of homosexual orientation are welcome along with other sinners in the company of those who trust in the God who justifies the ungodly...

"This means that for the foreseeable future we must find ways to live within the church in a situation of serious moral disagreement while still respecting one another as brothers and sisters in Christ...

"At the same time, I would argue that the pastoral task of the church is to challenge self-defined homosexual Christians to reshape their identity in conformity with the gospel. Those who hold the offices of teaching and preaching in the church should uphold the biblical standard and call all who hear to follow. This is a tricky line to follow but we do it on many issues...

"Is it Christianly appropriate for Christians who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation to continue to participate in same-sex erotic activity? No. The only one who was entitled to cast a stone instead charged the recipient of his mercy to "go and sin no more." It is no more appropriate for homosexual Christians to persist in homosexual activity than it would be for heterosexual Christians to persist in fornication or adultery. (Insofar as the church fails to teach clearly about heterosexual chastity outside marriage, its disapproval of homosexual coupling will appear arbitrary and biased.) Unless they are able to change their orientation and enter a heterosexual marriage relationship, homosexual Christians should seek to live lives of disciplined sexual abstinence. (p. 401)

"Should persons of homosexual orientation be ordained? ...It is unfortunate that the battle line has been drawn in the denominations at the question of ordination of homosexuals. The ensuing struggle has had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing a double standard for clergy and lay morality; it would be far better to articulate a single set of moral norms that apply to all Jesus' followers. Strictures against homosexuality belong in the church's moral catechesis, not in its ordination requirements. It is arbitrary to single out

homosexuality as a special sin that precludes ordination. (Certainly, the New Testament does not do this.) The church has no analogous special rules to exclude from ordination the greedy or self-righteous. Such matters are left to the discernment of the bodies charged with examining candidates for ordination; these bodies must determine whether the individual candidate has the gifts and graces requisite for ministry. In any event, a person of homosexual orientation seeking to live a life of disciplined abstinence would clearly be an appropriate candidate for ordination." (p. 403)

CONCLUDING A.N. WHITEHEAD'S PAPER ON GAY ACTIVISM

Against all the odds, change is possible

Is there anything Jesus cannot change? We would often say "Many, many things." I assert that is a reflection of our failure to seek the answers in Him, rather than in His failure.

Eighty years ago the standard medical opinion about alcoholism was that it is impossible to treat. That may surprise you. We all know of people who have stopped exploiting the bottle, rather, have stopped letting the bottle exploit them. The reason is the rise of Alcoholics Anonymous, which ultimately arose out of the Oxford Group and its strong emphasis on Jesus. Many church folk look at AA today and think it isn't Christian enough. Well, look how amazingly well it does with what it does! Why aren't you doing better?

Paedophilia is one of the most intractable problems of a sexual nature, but I am convinced, by the glimmers I see in a few places, that there are solutions for that too, and ultimately in Jesus.

Sometimes the advances will be medical. I have a nephew who has many mental problems. The drugs are not yet good enough to fine-control his symptoms. Perhaps Jesus will inspire some researcher to devote his working life to this problem.

Perhaps there will be some spiritual healing of some type.

Unless the church has many within it who testify to how they have changed, with the help of Christ, few will try to do so. The process must be modeled. How often do the church meetings you attend involve Testimony? Probably rarely. But is a fundamental activity in Christian services. Even change in some other area can be a model, as the Alcoholics Anonymous pattern formed the basis of the Homosexual Anonymous pattern. If you can say "Jesus rescued me" about anything in your life that is a fundamental Christian witness, a basic building block. What can you say?

The future

If this pattern of activism in society or the church is allowed to continue, so that it becomes coercive, the result ultimately can be judgment on that society or church. We are not in that position yet but moving quickly towards it. I would point you to two passages in Scripture – those in Genesis about Sodom and those in Judges about Gibeah in Benjamin. In both, same sex activity had progressed to the point where it was coercive, justifying and enforcing homosexual gang-rape. In the latter case it manifested itself in the end as heterosexual (bisexual?) gang-rape. In both cases judgment resulted. Sodom is now an interesting heap of crystalline salt pillars. Benjamin was nearly wiped out as a tribe. There is a fearful biblical pattern here. Why should God be so concerned? Because all sorts of evils accompany same-sex activity, or are dragged along with it, and because it is so profoundly the wrong pattern of the realities in the heavens, (the marriage of God's Son) which is what heterosexual activity is supposed to mirror.

We are beginning to see this coercive pattern in some countries. You will be aware of the notorious Victorian hate-law problems, which are inevitable in spite of assurances of politicians to the contrary. You will be aware of the legal ruling in Canada that at least parts of the Bible talking about homosexuality are technically "hate literature" and the conviction of the ex-gay in Canada in May, who distributed a virulently anti-homosexual tract giving the facts from his own experience. They fined him \$17,500 Canadian, which latest information said he refused to pay, preferring prison. You will be aware of the Pastor in Sweden on trial for a sermon against homosexuality. He won his case, but the government is appealing it. This is oppression. It leads to silencing of Christians. We are not yet in this position in most places, but with present trends it could be only five years. One ray of hope is that it is often at this stage that God will not accept it and intervenes.

I believe this is much more of a defining issue for our generation than most of us are aware of. It is not the only activity which can bring judgment, but it is an important one.

But perhaps there are three responses – those who join another church, those who join the great crowd of those who are actively Christian but not aligning with any institution, and those who like Jeremiah elect to stay (or against their will have that calling) and see it out to the bitter end, and I cannot hide that the latter may be apparently bitter, but carries an everlasting reckoning.

Within the extremely liberal Methodist church in New Zealand I remember advising an old man horrified at the open ordination of homosexuals (now official policy) who wanted to protest in an open church meeting discussing it. I believe he was given a fair hearing, and treated as a curious antique

not even worth collecting or destroying as a menace, but simply to be ignored because of his age. That could be the fate of many who remain in the Uniting Church.

But a church which models personal change – that can do amazing things, even if it does not know what it is doing. Uniting Church people – testimony of change must be a regular part of your church life. If it can't be, doesn't that show you have castrated Jesus? Not allowed him to change you enough to talk about?

Back about 40 years ago, in the days when causes of same-sex attraction were not so well known, by some series of accidents a Pentecostal church in the US attracted a significant group of gay men, who began to attend. The church was obviously and overtly traditional in its views and did not espouse gay theology. It had no idea how to counsel such people. It had a strong emphasis on prayer, personal testimony of change, discipling and small groups and simply treated the gay group the same as everyone else. Over some years lots of changes were seen, same-sex attraction diminishing in many to the point where a significant fraction of the group got married (and these days I have to specify heterosexually). This shows that good enough interactions amongst church members can have huge effects if done the right way.

Two recent surveys, one in the US and one here in Australia by Peter Lane of Exodus in Brisbane, found that the most effective help was actually mentoring. Briar will speak more about that. But therapy, support groups, general church life can be quite effective.

At one reunion of a Christian group among students at a New Zealand university, Briar mentioned briefly as part of the public proceedings that she had written a book saying change from homosexuality was possible. She was approached by one student who had become a clergyman who said "Are you aware that there are quite a few people here who were offended by what you said?" He meant that those who had got into the gay lifestyle now didn't like to hear that alternatives were possible, therefore she should not say so. I think this is another example of the type of pressure which will come on Christians as a result of gay activism. "Don't say change is possible. You offend us. This is therefore hate speech and not allowed." By accepting these comments we are giving veto rights to anyone who claims to be offended.

Probably those the clergyman referred to were those who had tried extremely hard to change and could not. But he was saying that essentially they had veto rights on a good news which could benefit many. A cancer patient on whom therapy has failed denying other patients the right even to listen to advice about the possibility of therapy. This will increasingly happen. Those from within our own ranks will increasingly prohibit the message of freedom. But

this is against our essential foundation – Jesus is the one who saves. This is the essence of the offense of the Gospel. I must continue to say it.

Do you remember the example of Poland? More than 100 years ago, politically all MP's had veto rights. If one said "I object" the entire year's legislation of their parliament was wiped and they had to start again. You can't run a country that way.

I want to challenge you all on a personal level. During the Homosexual Law Reform Bill in NZ in the late '80s, the most articulate spokespeople for traditional Christian views were two members of the Reformed church. They had excellent arguments including the classic statement "We do not admit that any government has the right to tell the Christian Church how to worship". However it came to light later that one was having an affair with his secretary and the other was also immorally involved in some way. Recently the Spokesman for the Christian Heritage party in NZ was convicted of child sexual abuse and more charges are being evaluated. So often I have found those taking a strong moral stance are themselves hiding problems.

Are you? You must get help on this. Go to older people in the faith whom you trust.

What do we say to those who are so long in SSA that change seems impossible? If you will excuse the pun, it is like the woman bent double whom Jesus healed – although like that for 18 years, she became straight. Never give up. That is despair, ultimate lack of trust. If you are following Jesus you are called to radically do what he says even if you struggle your whole life. I think many of us do in various ways.

"I have tried all my life to change, and can't", says someone with SSA. "I understand, I am still struggling with some things in my life. But also, it is partly my fault you are the way you are. I don't know enough answers yet to help you radically the way you would like. If you commit yourself to continue to fight all your life, I'll commit myself all my life to continue to search for ways to fight with you." This is the true love, this is eternal life.

Activists act because (1) there is a worldwide –transcultural river flowing that way. (2) They have tried to change and can't. (3) they have been deceived by the stories of those who have tried and failed.

So you are up against a worldwide current, one of the strongest in history. Have you the strength to stand? Have you the testimony to Jesus? Have you the courage to boycott? Have you the commitment to stand with those who are struggling? Have you the courage to be more open about these things? Who are the real heroes, deserving to lead us? Those who have stood against even natural inclinations, with great pain and sacrifice, or those who have given way to them for many years until the Is Jesus the foundation or is comfort?

MAY MEETINGS FOR VICTORIANS

Two meetings of interest to Victorian RA members are planned for May. A one-day conference on Saturday May 6 (10 am. to 3 pm.) will hear Peter Bentley of the RA administration office, Sydney, on latest moves in preparation for the July Assembly. RA chairman Max Champion will speak on 'concrete proposals for action' after the Assembly meets.

The venue is St. John's, Virginia St., Mt. Waverley, with registration starting 9.30 am. Byo lunch.

Of national interest is the consultation on Cross-cultural Ministry planned for Friday-Sunday May 19-21 at the Geelong Conference Centre, East Geelong. Organised by the Assembly multicultural and cross-cultural ministry, there are five keynote speakers and worship leaders from the church's multi-cultural spectrum, with sessions for discussion of many issues including 'sexuality and leadership'.

Registration closes on May 7. The cost is \$100 per person. Accommodation cost is \$154 (single); \$65 (shared); \$260.

PETER BENTLEY DEBUNKS POLITICAL SPEAK IN THE UCA

Political Speak 2

'There is no hierarchy in the Uniting Church'

There are many things in life that are technically true, but we know that is not the way it works out in practice. I have been constantly amazed at how some church leaders think presbytery proposals need to go to the Assembly only after they have been to the respective synod. It is also intriguing to see how presbytery proposals are considered after synod proposals in terms of Assembly process. I am not aware of any justification for this in the Basis of Union. Perhaps unwittingly, leaders of the church give the impression that their particular council is superior to another council, and thus help to raise the common perception that there is a hierarchy and ordinary members are certainly not part of it.

The failure of the Assembly to listen to the voice of the wider church through the responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality is one of the most significant examples of the way in which the reality of hierarchy squashed the ideal of interrelated councils.

Political Speak 3

'We ('the liberal side') do not caucus!'

An interesting reaction to evangelical gatherings for prayer, support and information over the last two years has been the response "how dare you", usually coupled with "we do not do these things". One could probably argue that the liberal response is at least partly true, because when you have so much power you don't need to caucus openly. If you already start with 20-25 per cent of the votes at major councils of the church because of the number of paid employee representatives and co-options, then you have an excellent starting point for the first decision making process. When you add the present system of appointments which has a tendency to produce an ever increasing theological liberal orientation as one moves toward the Assembly meeting, then you have an excellent foundation for directing the whole decision making process. *In reality, however, many of the 'theologically liberal' members and groups in the church constantly caucus.* It is sometimes termed 'having coffee'. Other times it is 'a sharing meeting', and some times it is 'worship'. Rarely is a term such as 'political meeting' used, but the nature of politics makes the caucus a constant reality because of the experience and orientation of many overtly 'theological liberal' members of the church toward political life. Everyone caucuses, and if you think you don't, you are in power.

Political Speak 4

'People need to understand the Bible better'

This is perhaps a not so subtle way of saying, 'you have got it completely wrong and you will be educated until you get it right.' I am aware that we all need to understand the Bible better. It is purely astounding arrogance that promotes the view that the 'theologically liberal' approach is the best or only approach. I believe it would now be helpful for those on the 'theologically liberal side' to either admit that there is intellectual foundation for the evangelical and reformed approach to scripture, or to publicly inform our membership in a more direct way that they do not think so. At present, the language used, like the reference sentence at the start, makes a mockery of the supposed idea that there are two (or even more) valid positions in the church.

Political Speak 5

'The migrant-ethnic churches need more time'

Please, let us not patronise our migrant-ethnic churches even more than we normally do.

This is about strongly held positions. Why can't the Uniting Church recognise that migrant-ethnic churches have well grounded and maintained

positions on sexuality and sexual practice? Our migrant-ethnic churches know the value of family life for the vitality of, and development of their community.

Political Speak 6

'There are other voices in migrant-ethnic communities'

This is an interesting attempt to bring doubt mainly into the minds of Anglo members who dominate the councils of the church. It is a subtle way of raising issues without reference to the real situation and real beliefs of the members of our migrant-ethnic congregations. Yes, of course in any debate there are other voices, but in most debates it is important to base your argument in reality. The Uniting Church needs to recognise that 95 per cent plus of our migrant-ethnic members are supportive of traditional positions on sexuality. From my discussions with leaders and members in these communities, there is also overwhelming support for traditional positions from all generations, and it is not a matter of more time or other voices.

Political Speak 7

'We listen!'

Yes, there has been a great deal of listening going on. Sometimes it is good to actually act on what people say or at least let people know that no matter how much is said it will not make any difference. Rather than more listening, what is needed is brutal honesty. Church members need to know the whole agenda for the future of the Uniting Church, rather than listen to more political-speak.

Political Speak 8

'People are really not sure'

While there is a group who are not sure when questioned about matters of sexuality, the overall opposition to liberalisation of standards for sexual practice within the Uniting Church has been plainly evident to anyone who has read survey material over the last ten years.

It is evident to me from my research and contacts that synod and area differences are very important in terms of the position of the membership of a local congregation. Also significant is the influence of the minister, and people may be interested to learn that it is actually the lay members with traditional viewpoints who are more suppressed by their 'theologically liberal' ministers, and as a consequence are now the ones who are probably becoming less sure. This should not surprise anyone who is familiar with the overt orientation of the leadership in the UCA. There should be an honest and up front statement from the Uniting Church to clearly outline why the church will never listen to the voices of the majority of members on this particular matter, when in the past it had always done so.

Political Speak 9

'The church is not a democracy'

I agree that the church should not decide matters by plebiscite, but it needs to hear the voices of its membership. From my study of the Assembly and its decision-making processes over twenty years, it is evident that one of the main ways the Assembly heard the voice of the church was through responses to reports. The opinions of members have been very clear, and to dilute, belittle or interpret these opinions to the idea of "not sure" is simply propaganda.

I marvel at the way the church can use these types of slogans when they suit, and discard them if they do not. As I have stated before, if the statistics on sexuality and leadership had been the other way, then the Uniting Church would have proudly proclaimed the voices of the membership and declared the church had spoken.

Many times evangelicals have been outmanoeuvred, and credit must be given to the actually very small group of strongly committed really 'theologically liberal' members who have been trained in party politics and know how to wield the stick.

Political Speak 10

'The church is a safe place'

There is a curious idea in the Uniting Church that if we pass resolutions about a council being a 'safe place', then this will provide the basis for a 'safe place'. Just like there is no such thing as 'safe sex', there is in reality no such thing as a 'safe place in the church'. We may be able to provide a 'safer place', but at present the orientation of the 'safe place' is usually at the expense of other people's culture and practice. A 'safe place' can also be abused in ways that are seemingly innocuous – careful, or subtle use of didactic devotions and even directed chairing of meetings and business arrangements. These factors can actually contribute to a non-safe environment, especially for evangelical members, though sadly many people in power are seemingly unable to realise this factor, or else they would care.

Political Speak 11

'The church membership is too comfortable'

This means "why is there not more support for social justice and social programs from the membership?" Support for any program or initiative by the leadership of any church is based on the level of connection and trust the leadership have with the membership. Thus any commitment to social renewal and justice programs within the UCA is actually based on trust. Sadly the hierarchy of the UCA is now so disconnected with the majority of the membership that the ideal of trust has been seriously damaged.

Political Speak 12

'The church membership is too conservative'

This is code for 'too many church members vote for the National Party or Liberal Party'. I have long been intrigued by the (usually private) bewailing of some leaders of the church about the conservative nature of the membership of the church, particularly in rural areas.

One Anglican Bishop said to one prominent UCA member that he had finally figured out the Uniting Church. 'It was a bunch of socialists leading a bunch of capitalists.'

I believe most members of the church realise that all political parties are part of a fallen world, and that no party has a monopoly on ethics and values. The Uniting Church should be part of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and not an implicit or even explicit part of a political party. While there has probably been significant change over the last ten years, many members today would still have conservative political orientations, and woe betide anyone who publicly supports a more socially conservative position at a council of the church. The Uniting Church needs to work harder at providing a 'safe place' for all people.

JOINT RA/EMU SUMMIT TO FOLLOW ASSEMBLY

A special joint meeting of RA and EMU will be held after the Assembly on Wednesday July 12 at King's College, University of Queensland. It will follow RA's annual general meeting and will consider proposals following the decisions of the Assembly. On the previous night (Tuesday) RA will host a post-Assembly briefing and de-briefing session.

Further details will be provided to members later in April.

Editorial (continued from p. 1)

confidence that the July meeting will include genuine debate about sexuality. If that is the case, we can hardly expect it to repent of its accommodation to the worldly agenda to which the Uniting Church finds itself captive. Consequently, should the Assembly fail to uphold the faith and practice of the ecumenical Church on this matter, the July 12-13 post-assembly meeting of RA will have no choice but to implement its radical reforming agenda.

We can only hope and pray that at the eleventh hour, the Eleventh Assembly may show itself to be a true branch of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic body of Christ.