

Transition to ACC now gathers pace

The transition from RA to ACC is marked by unity and strength of purpose to recover the evangelical, reformed and orthodox character of the Uniting Church. A national executive was formed at the inaugural meeting and since then six commissions and two boards have been appointed.

As the Assembly of Confessing Congregations continues to build its administration following its formation on October 13-14, the Reforming Alliance continues to work in partnership with EMU towards the same ends.

The commissions will focus on Doctrine and Theology; Discipleship and Evangelism; Social Responsibility; Ecumenism; Cross-cultural ministry; and Networks Development among congregations. They will be supported by two boards : of Communication and Finance & Administration.

The ACC will encourage formation of groups to further its work in states and regions. Already 92 congregations from all states have voted to join the ACC, which, unlike RA, is a network of congregations rather than individuals. But there is still provision for individual membership.

The RA executive strongly encourages RA members and congregations to join the new body. Individual membership is \$50 per annum (covering the period to 31 December 2007). Congregational membership is \$10 per person per congregation per annum (eg a congregation of 40 people pays \$400 per annum); with a maximum of \$2,000 per annum for congregations of 200 or more members.

ACC executive members are :

Rev. Dr. Max Champion Vic. (chair); Rev. Steve Estherby, NSW (deputy chair); Rev. Ivan Kirk, Qld; (Secretary); Pastor Grahame Abrahams, NSW; Rev. Dr. Ian Breward, Vic.; Marion Byrne, NSW; Rev. Hedley Fihaki, Qld.; Rev. Rod James, SA; Robyn McKay, SA; Margaret MacMillan; Rev. Don Purdey, SA; Rev. Dr. Gordon Watson, NSW; Peter Bentley (administrator), NSW at PO Box 968, Newtown, NSW 2042.

Regular information about the ACC and its activities is available on its web site, at <http://www.confessingcongregations.asn.au>

Assembly rejects RA bid on vital questions

The last issue of *ReForming* (September 2006, No. 14) carried news about legal advice obtained by the RA Executive which dealt with whether Resolution 84 was valid, and the consequences of passing it. Our advice said that R84 was unconstitutional and invalid because it contradicted the doctrine of the UC with regard to sexuality and leadership, and that this invalidity had serious consequences. R108 is invalid also and has similar consequences.

Since then the executive has written to the Assembly Standing Committee, inviting it to join with the RA in seeking a determination of the questions of constitutionality and validity in a cooperative way before an impartial court.

The ASC has declined that invitation, and rejected a number of other requests that the executive believes will assist in the satisfactory resolution of the matter. General Secretary the Rev Terence Corkin has also refused permission for RA material responding to information circulated by the Assembly to be distributed through the appropriate channels of the church.

The executive is determined to have these matters resolved for the sake of the UC. It earnestly desires to accomplish this in a spirit of conciliation and reconciliation and is reluctant, at this stage, to take the matter to court. However, in view of the hitherto uncooperative response of the ASC and senior officers of the Assembly, it cannot completely rule out such an approach.

We are fortunate that, due to the generosity of members, the finances of RA have been sufficient to cover the costs of obtaining legal advice and other associated expenses, such as travel, copying, administration and phone calls. As further advice and research will be required to enable this matter to be concluded satisfactorily, the executive will need further financial support.

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A donation form is enclosed with this issue of *ReForming*.

WINDING UP

RA to close, but not yet

When the time is ripe, the Reforming Alliance will cease to exist and its work will be taken up by the Assembly of Confessing Congregations. This decision depends partly on the outcome of legal proceedings, which were initiated by the Reforming Alliance. RA is therefore the body responsible for steering the legal process and for financing the relevant costs. This means that RA will need funds to continue to support its work.

As might be expected, other matters must be clarified before RA can safely discontinue all of its activities and direct its resources towards the success of the confessing movement.

Dr. Max Champion, who chairs both RA and the ACC, this month assured members that money spent on a legal action would not be wasted, and that when that matter is resolved the executive will recommend to a special meeting of RA that money held by it would go to the ACC.

ACC's charter of responsibility

A definitive statement of the aims of ACC is contained in the Charter published in the last issue of ReForming and slightly modified at the inaugural meeting. The important points of distinction between the charter and current Uniting Church policies may be summarised as follows :

The Charter speaks not of social justice, with its connotations of political correctness and bias, but of social responsibility, as the attitude motivated by the biblical emphasis on grace that is universal and undistinguishing (Wesley), though not undiscriminating.

- Section 5 (a) of the Charter states the aims of ACC as encouraging the provision of reformed, evangelical and orthodox ministry of Word, sacraments and pastoral care in confessing congregations.
- Section 5 (b) states "encouraging reformed, evangelical and orthodox Christian education for leaders and lay people."
- Section 5 (c) states the ACC will provide a vigorous biblical perspective on contemporary public issues in a society that is increasingly ignorant of or hostile to orthodox Christianity.
- Section 5 (j) states the ACC will distribute a regular publication for "communication, education and encouragement" of member congregations.

ACC FORMED

No safe place for a church under threat

Christians are under threat from a world steeped in cynicism and a church that has lost its way and is in danger of surrendering to the false faith of the present age. This was the message at the inaugural service of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations in Sydney in October.

ACC chair Dr. Max Champion, preaching on the stilling of the storm (Mark 4: 35-41), said no matter how vulnerable a church or a confessing movement might be, it must not try to shelter from the weather, because Jesus brings peace in the midst of the tempest.

More than 150 were present for the inaugural service, when a two-day meeting laid the foundations of the new body's commitment to ministry and mission within the Uniting Church. All states were represented and the new executive committee has members from all parts of Australia.

Speaking in Wesley Church, Dr. Champion said our post-Christian, post-modern, neo-pagan society had turned its back on the traditions of Christian faith and enlightened reason, and had turned to ideas and practices found in nature and human nature (the self). These included the individual as the centre of all beliefs and values; choice as an absolute right; tolerance of diversity – whether good or bad – as a prime virtue; compassion rather than goodness as the mark of true humanity; diversity replacing unity as the goal of true community.

"It is thought to be enough for individuals and groups to adopt beliefs and life-styles which suit their religious, sexual and aesthetic tastes. Spiritual and moral relativism reign supreme in many of our public institutions. The church is not protected from this storm damage from outside ... there are also threats to her mission from within."

A confessing movement could expect threats to faith and dignity from inside the church as well from outside it. In the Uniting Church many were embarrassed by the 'splendidly orthodox beliefs and practices' derived from the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Many, like the so-called 'Progressive Christian Network' preferred to speak of his life and teaching as one path among many to the 'realm of God'.

Holy Communion was regarded as a pagan meal signifying hospitality; not the particular sign of

Christ's presence with the church. Jesus' death was often treated as a case of 'divine child abuse'. The rise of interest in spirituality has led to liturgies, songs and writings extolling the divine timeless essence in Christianity rather than its specific historical truth.

Dr. Champion said the usefulness of scripture, doctrine and creeds was determined by whether they fitted an individual's spiritual or sexual preferences. And costly grace leading to repentance was now swamped by what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace' which justifies sin, not the sinner. Love had become detached from faithfulness and righteousness.

"The Uniting Church is now committed to diversity of opinion, behavior, belief and practice. The fine evangelical concepts of acceptance and grace have been torn from their moorings at the foot of the empty cross and come to rest on the sands of hyper-toleration. This is evident in Resolution 108 where there is no mention of the great biblical themes of creation and redemption; no attempt to relate diversity and tolerance to the incarnation of Christ or to set forth the triune love of God as the foundation of our co-humanity; no word of hope for the sexually broken."

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Dr. Champion said when the National Assembly again refused to reaffirm the splendid classical teaching of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church on sexuality, as attested in scripture, it demonstrated its impatience with what Timothy called 'sound teaching' and 'truth' and signalled its readiness to accept 'myths'.

"So it became absolutely clear that a confessing movement within the Uniting Church was necessary. The general weakness of R108 shows that the underlying theological problem was not confined to the single issue of sexuality. The Uniting Church had come to believe in myths generated by neo-pagan culture."

He made it clear that "The ACC is not a single issue pressure group. It is committed to recapturing what Dorothy Sayers and G.K.Chesterton called the 'thrill and romance of orthodoxy' which stretches our minds and hearts and wills until our life together is shaped by the awesome splendour of God displayed in Jesus."

Hypocrisy charge as officials gild the ethnic lily

A letter from the Rev. Sione Alo Fakahua to Assembly general secretary the Rev. Terence Corkin reveals tension within migrant-ethnic congregations with recent Assembly decisions. Mr. Fakahua wrote in response to the general secretary's claim that migrant and ethnic leaders have little sympathy for the aims of the ACC.

"Some of us are baffled at the selective nature of your hand-picked so-called migrant community leaders and the lack of representation of ordinary people's views and interests," he wrote on October 9. He said many migrant-ethnic people "felt badly let down" ... after the 11th Assembly.

"Our views on homosexuality were not considered seriously, indeed were largely ignored, (but) the explanation given to us by our Assembly delegates was at best ambiguous and confusing on the Assembly's position on homosexuality.

"Our sense of loyalty to and ... trust for the UCA has been undermined and shaken by R84 and R108 ... Our people maintain that homosexuality is a sin against the biblical teaching and having this endorsed officially by the UCA highest decision-making body, the Assembly, amounts to apostasy.

"You mention in your letter that the migrant leaders themselves individually took the initiative to write to their respective members ... I suggest that this scenario is most unbelievable and it defies logic for migrant leaders to do this on their own without some input from other participants in the meeting. Any right-thinking and sensible person could not simply accept this version of events ...

"Are we that naïve to believe that the president and general secretary both did not say anything whatsoever in the meeting that implied in any reasonable sense that the ACC is causing problems to UCA people?

"The allegation by Assembly officers and migrant leaders that ACC is a threat to church unity is completely misplaced ... on the contrary ACC provides disenchanted UCA members the opportunity to remain in the UCA but reject the resolutions 84 and 108 ... The alternative to ACC is for disenchanted people to leave the Uniting Church.

"The real cause of disunity in the Uniting Church is deliberate acceptance by the Assembly of practices that are inconsistent with biblical teaching and the refusal of the Assembly leaders to present people with alternative views to those held by themselves.

"For a church which prides itself on its support of human rights and champions the cause of minority groups, and in fact severely criticises governments and secular organisations both locally and internationally on these matters, to deny minority groups ... these same rights is nothing short of hypocrisy."

UC officials not happy with new confessing body

The national Assembly of the Uniting Church is not happy with the Assembly of Confessing Congregations. Relations between the two bodies are neither warm nor conciliatory. Assembly office bearers have rejected request from RA, EMU and the ACC for unbiased reporting of the ACC's aims, including its firm commitment to stay within the Uniting Church, thus rejecting the option of schism.

The Assembly has generated fear of division and suspicion of the confessing movement's motives. This was evident in the outcome of a recent meeting of officials and selected leaders of ethnic congregations. Correspondence between RA and EMU has been tense since they agreed to form a confessional movement, following the Brisbane Assembly's decision to endorse Resolution 84 and pass Resolution 108.

Assembly general secretary the Rev. Terence Corkin and associate general secretary the Rev. Glenda Blakefield have refused to allow ACC material to be distributed to presbytery officers and church councils. Instead of offering to encourage open communication within the church about the new confessing body, they have cast suspicion on it. This decision is despite the confessing assembly's stated intention to recall the Uniting Church to the Basis of Union and its heritage in the evangelical, reformed and orthodox traditions. Indeed, the Assembly's official 'guidance' on the subject dismisses the ACC position and gives the impression that the ACC is fomenting disunity in the church.

In its 'guidance' the Assembly counsels restraint in what it describes as a 'time of uncertainty and confusion'. The ACC response is that most of the uncertainty and confusion is due to R84 and R108 and Assembly officials' failure also to respond to the deep concerns it raised for many in the church. ACC leaders have expressed dismay at the silence of the church's official papers on the issues. They say reporters from the synod journals could easily have interviewed members of the ACC executive to offer unbiased reports of their aims and

intentions. This clearly shows that the control exercised on official Assembly mailings extends to the church press, to create a propaganda campaign against questioning the path now being taken by church officials.

All this, says the ACC executive, makes a mockery of the 1977 inaugural Assembly statement that the new church "affirms our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice"

Christians with backbone needed

Turning around the Mainline is Thomas C. Oden's study of renewal movements of "confessing Christians" in mainstream denominations. It was reviewed in last issue of ReForming and is available from the ReForming Alliance.

Oden writes : "believing Christians require spine if they are to revive mainline churches that lack discipline," and claims that orthodox believers in unorthodox church bodies are in fact demonstrating that they do have spine in these difficult times. On page 261 he declares :

The opposite of spine is flabbiness or slackness. Where spine should be there is jelly – soft, gelatinous, semi-liquid. The chief virtues in some precincts of the mainline are flexibility, tolerance and vacillation. They lack muscle tone. Something is spineless if it has no backbone. Confessing Christians were not raised in Sunday school to be spineless ...

The metaphor that characterises confessing Christians is spine – determination, nerve and persistence. They have decided to remain in their churches to transform them. They are not intimidated. Confessing Christians within the mainline have courage to stay in and speak out unapologetically for classic Christian teaching.

Contrasted with spine is spin.

To spin is to twist. The Latin root means to snare or hang. Spine is firm and straight, spin is flexible and warped. The catchwords of spin are elasticity, softness and evasion. The virtues of elasticity are the central concern of the egalitarian spinners. They are dogmatic in being opposed to any dogma, any centred teaching, and any assertion of any clear truth.

Today many Christians believers are called upon to have spine within a mainline church tangled in spin.