

BOOKS

No polemics as UC crisis is clarified

Papers culled from conferences and published in book form do not usually reach the audience they deserve. Such publications fall often by the wayside, and on stony ground; they lie discarded, waiting for the pulping machine, or some itinerant prince to offer the kiss of life. *The Other Side of 84* deserves life.

It contains the proceedings of a 2003 conference of the Reforming Alliance and as the sub-title indicates, deals with homosexuality and the Uniting Church. This most valuable collection refrains from polemics but aims to clarify the situation in which the UCA now finds itself; a church internally divided after years of officially-encouraged 'listening' which amounted to argument and political manoeuvring, and caused a rift with partner churches by our cavalier approach to orthodoxy.

Dr. Brian Edgar points out that the debate was never about orthodoxy; it was confined to sexual ethics and Scriptural authority. Edgar says that to meet the secular challenge of homosexual claims the church "had to go to the level of theology ... that is, the doctrine of God and Christology: who is the God that we worship? what is his nature? how do we follow him? what does it mean to follow Jesus? what role does the Spirit play in revelation?" But it didn't.

His paper's title, 'The Great Reversal', refers to New Testament ethics as a reversal of (worldly) values, whereby "the ethics of the kingdom transform all human thinking." But the word also means "the great reversal which takes place when that which is condemned by scripture - homosexual practice - becomes something to be praised." A further reversal occurs when "the argument previously put forward in support of allowing homosexual practice within the church (namely, that we have never made a decision about it)

suddenly becomes reversed after the (2003) Assembly to become 'we're only doing what we've always done!'"

Another reversal is when "the principle of the church transforming culture is turned on its head as the wider culture transforms the church" and finally, "when the newspaper headlines declared that the Uniting Church had moved to allow the ordination of gay people while at the same time the Assembly web-site answered the question, 'Did the Assembly approve the ordination of gay and lesbian people?' with a resounding No!" Edgar adds: "I know which I think best reflects reality. In this debate reversals abound!"

All this prepares the ground for Owen Davis' exploration of the long march of Assembly minutes towards the present position of mutually exclusive and equally acceptable attitudes to sexual expression; a position sustainable only on the basis of deep *doctrinal* divisions.

Mr. Davis is administrator of EMU in South Australia. He states that "One could easily be led by comments or actions of some leaders or councils of the Uniting Church, and even calls by congregations to ministers of the Word and appointments to positions of leadership, to believe that the Uniting Church has a *permissive* doctrine with regard to the ordination of those in same-sex relationships."

Nevertheless, he says, despite all official minutes the church "continues to hold to an orthodox doctrine, teaching and practice with regard to sexuality and marriage." He shows that the Assembly has never revoked the church's traditional position on ordination of practising homosexual people, and that Resolution 84 did not alter that position.

These excerpts only hint at the rich content of this 76 page booklet. Without its 12 chapters in circulation in the church informed debate is hardly possible between now and the next Assembly. To obtain it, contact the RA office in Sydney. \$10 plus postage.

Warren Clarnette



ReForming

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EDITORIAL

Information for a church facing crisis

The Reforming Alliance newsletter has been published regularly in printed form and on the Alliance website. This issue is the first to be edited and published in Melbourne and will complement the work of our Sydney office in providing regular information to our growing audience within and beyond the Uniting Church. We hope ReForming will provide information that our church's official organs do not see fit to publish, and that readers will share this newsletter with others. Church members need to be aware of the critical situation facing the Uniting Church.

'Critical' is not too strong a word. The Uniting Church is in crisis, and the situation is all the more serious given the promise and hopes, as well as the possibilities, generated by the union of 1977. Positively, we want to affirm the original vision of the Basis of Union, which contains the bedrock of faith, hope and love without which no church can survive.

The catalyst for the rise of the Reforming Alliance was Proposal 84, passed by the 2003 Assembly. But that is not the whole or even the most critical issue before us. A far more serious question is whether we will rediscover the rich traditions from which we came into union, or conform to the secular fashions and cultural pressures around us. Will we revise the moral and ethical patterns of the New Testament according (continued p.2)

RA Inc. lists its reforming goals

Eight months after its formation the Reforming Alliance has a new constitution and will become an incorporated body, with legal status as a non-profit organisation with specific aims and obligations. One of its chief objects will be to affirm and maintain the integrity of the Basis of Union, the founding document of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Melbourne members met on May 26 to endorse a draft constitution which, among other things, commits the Alliance to working for constitutional reform in the Uniting Church so that the church's councils work more effectively and adhere to the principle of inter-relatedness.

The new constitution describes the Alliance's primary objective as "the advancement of and witness to the Christian faith within The Uniting Church in Australia." The Alliance will work towards these aims by:

Upholding the Reformed, Orthodox and Evangelical commitment to faith in the all-sufficient love of God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit – as authoritatively attested in Holy Scripture and set out in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds as well as in the Basis of Union;

Calling on all members and councils to adhere to the Basis of Union;

Calling for reform where we consider the UCA deviates from upholding the Lordship of Christ, the Holy Scriptures as our final authority in discerning His will, and the Basis of Union, and by continuing to seek this reformation in our own lives;

Grounding the Christian ethic for the whole of life on the triune God's love, mercy, holiness and justice, revealed in the Holy Scriptures;

(continued p.2)

to post-Christian preferences, or allow ourselves to be shaped by the biblical witness to the grace and judgment revealed in Jesus Christ.

Regrettably, step by step the Uniting Church has politicised and trivialised the gospel. Proposal 84 was not a moment of churchly inspiration, as some have claimed; it confirmed the moral and theological confusion within our official leadership and among many congregations. The claim that we are an inclusive church that honours right relationships, non-discrimination, tolerance, compassion and love is a delusion. We are engaged in an embarrassingly rancorous debate marked by dishonest claims and official bias.

For many within the Reforming Alliance the first business is to sort out the anomalies and confusion caused by Proposal 84. This issue is the tip of a very large iceberg of corrupted bureaucratic practice and muddled 'official' theology.

Reforming Alliance within the Uniting Church of Australia

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Rejoicing in understanding of Christian marriage as the faithful union of a woman and a man in Christ and the Church, thereby embodying the image of God and providing the only divinely approved context for the expression of our sexuality and the procreation of children;

Working for constitutional reform to ensure that the Councils of the UCA work more effectively in an inter-related way;

Developing partnerships for a more effective proclamation of the Christian faith in our pluralist and multicultural society;

Working towards the renewal of commitment to national evangelism and the growth of God's kingdom in our society and its neighbours; and

Establishing and reaffirming ecumenical relations with other churches.

Membership of the Alliance will be unchanged from present practice. It is open to individuals, groups such as presbyteries, congregations and synods, and other bodies. The Alliance will aim to ensure that all members are represented in its decisions, with a constant exchange of information by mail and email, and through the web site.

National chairman Dr. Max Champion said the Alliance was formed to provide a point of contact and encouragement to people who want to continue to work within and trust the church but are disappointed, even outraged, by decisions of the Assembly and attitudes of Assembly officials. He described the Alliance as "an alternative avenue of hope for the Uniting Church."

Membership of the Alliance is available to all who wish to join, and agree to work for the objectives of the Alliance. There is no joining fee but donations are invited.

The national conference, July 15 – 17, 2004

RA's most important gathering

The first national conference of the Reforming Alliance will be held in Brisbane on Friday and Saturday, July 16 and 17 and will take as its theme 'Hope, healing and holiness'. With more than 1000 individual members Australia-wide it is hoped good numbers will come from interstate to join Queensland members in the most important gathering of the Alliance since its formation.

The program is set out in detail in the leaflet mailed with this issue. It promises to provide further evidence of the depth of resistance to current trends in the polity and thought of the Uniting Church, through a series of papers ranging from reflections on the Gospel, Church and Human Sexuality (from lecturer in Old Testament at Trinity College, Brisbane, the Rev. Doug Jones) to discussion of the impact of Resolution 84 in the UCA (led by a panel including Mary Hawkes, national chair of EMU, the Rev. Rosemary Broadstock, founding chair of RA, the Rev. Rod James and members of ethnic congregations).

Past issues will be revisited and future possibilities will be canvassed in a session led by Peter Bentley, social researcher and

author of The Bentley Report on Sexuality and the UCA (1997) who will speak on 'Liberalism, sexuality and the future of the UCA'. The next Assembly will be foreshadowed by Philip Leslie in 'Approaching the Eleventh Assembly'.

National chair of RA the Rev. Dr. Max Champion will lead the opening Bible study on 'Compassion, tolerance and acceptance' (based on Mark 6: 30-45) and is a speaker at the public rally at Chapel Hill church, Moggill Road. His theme will be 'Sex and society: the reforming agenda'. Also speaking will be Mary Hawkes on 'Recalling the UCA to the ministry of hope, healing and holiness.'

The annual general meeting will be held on Friday afternoon. On Saturday the Rev. Ivan Kirk of Coolum will lead a study of Ephesians 2:11-22, and Dr. Brian Hill, Emeritus Professor of Education, Western Australia, will speak on 'interpreting the Bible'. Reports will be heard from the three Strand directors, Dr. Gordon Watson, the Rev. Phil Marshall and Dr. Ian Breward. Presidential ruling 23 will be discussed before a plenary session on 'the way forward' and a concluding Communion service at which the celebrant will be Dr. David Rankin, professor of church history and principal-elect of Trinity College.

Meshing with the Assembly

Reforming Alliance chair Max Champion was asked to submit a paper for inclusion with Assembly documents in part 2 of the process of discussion leading to the next meeting of Assembly. Also invited to take part was the national executive of EMU.

On May 24 Max Champion attended the Queensland Synod where he spoke to about 100 representatives on the theological and biblical aspects of the current controversy over sexuality.

At the request of the Assembly president and general secretary, Alliance members in Melbourne on May 25 met the national leaders for general discussion.

National chair Max Champion was invited to speak at the anniversary of the Indonesian church (Mulgrave and Box Hill) on Pentecost Sunday, May 30, where he outlined the activities and aims of the Alliance. Like other ethnic congregations, the Indonesian church is troubled by the 2003 Assembly decision on ordination of homosexual persons.