

ASSEMBLY MULTICULTURAL MINISTRY'S CONTRIBUTION TO STAGE 2

It has been a painful experience for many migrant and multicultural congregations in the Uniting Church following the 10th Assembly. Whilst leaders of migrant communities have engaged in the sexuality debate over many years, it came as a great shock to hear that the ordination of practising gay and lesbian people was reopened without prior notification. The subsequent media attention left many people feeling a sense of shame and betrayal. Assembly Multicultural Ministry worked hard with members of different communities to ensure the materials were translated to enable dialogue on the issues. Many congregations arranged opportunities for people to understand and discuss Resolution 84. Out of some of these meetings some statements were prepared.

See Appendix 1.

Statement by Council of Korean Churches (CKC) In July 2003 Korean ministers of Uniting Church congregations in Sydney sent the Statement to Korean newspapers

Statement by the Victorian Synod Multicultural Committee – August 2003

Statement by the Chinese National Conference – March 2004

Statement by the Tongan National Conference in 1998 reaffirmed by TNC executive in 2004

ISSUES FOR NOTING

(i) Still a culturally a taboo subject

For some communities homosexuality remains a taboo subject that cannot be openly discussed and in some cultures sexual matters are not suitable for public discussion in mixed gender groups.

“In Tamil culture it is not the practice to speak of sexual matters like this”.

“Culturally, discussion of sexuality is taboo among Chinese, let alone homosexuality”.

“We do not discuss such things in our Samoan culture”.

Mrs Kalo Fotu during the 10th Assembly, shared the difficulties faced when trying to debate these issues because discussing such matters publicly went against her Tongan cultural heritage. In some cultures the concept of committed same gender relationships is still unfamiliar although not unknown. Such relationships, where they exist, are usually hidden. *“Same sex relationships are not acceptable in Tongan culture and in Tonga, culture and faith are so intertwined it is difficult to tell the difference”* (Rev James Latu). Dr Jovili Meo, who translated the materials from the 10th Assembly for the Fijian community said *“In Fijian these words are rarely spoken and almost never written down, usually it is just rejected outright without any discussion or listening to any other points of view”.*

It has therefore been very difficult for people in many of the migrant communities to feel comfortable discussing homosexuality. Some have preferred to focus on issues of local ministry and mission. Others have invested time to discuss the issues, both leading up to the 1997 Assembly, and more recently, in the debate regarding Resolution, and have written conveying their views.

(ii) Leadership issues arising from Resolution 84

Many migrant people know what it is to be marginalized and to face discrimination. They know the importance of inclusion and they want the church to be open to welcome all people. However, affirming gay and lesbian people in leadership is a step very few migrant and multicultural congregations can take. . There is concern that *“ the wider community could identify ethnic congregations with presbyteries and a church that permits practising homosexual persons to be ministers and deacons”* (Extract from the Victorian Synod Multicultural Ministry Statement)

Rev Benjamin Susilo says that Resolution 84, for many people in the Indonesian community, has led to a crisis in trust in the whole leadership of the Uniting Church. Many migrant communities who have gone through the experience of being uprooted, have a deep need for stability and affirmation of their self-identity. Their Christian faith, based on their belief in the authority of the Bible, gives them that sense of security and belonging. Resolution 84, in an indirect way, has threatened that sense of security giving rise to deep feelings of anger, confusion and a sense of loss.

Migrant congregations provide the stable anchoring point to help people cope with change. a secure base of support enabling members to remain connected to their cultural heritage while at the same time find their way into mainstream Australian life.. Ministers serving migrant congregations have a demanding role as community leaders and are held in high regard. It is expected that they should model ideal family life, uphold cultural values and traditions and be role models in every way. It is difficult for people from many migrant backgrounds to consider that homosexual people could be fit role models. Dr Jovili Meo says *“Coming from conservative cultural backgrounds combined with our evangelical biblical heritage, Islanders tend to see same gender relationships negatively and not as acceptable behaviour for those exercising Christian leadership”*.

(iii) Relationship with “Home Churches”

Some partner churches are struggling to understand the Uniting Church debate which is set in a context very different from their own. For example, the Cook Island Christian Church (CICC) sees marriage as a prerequisite for successful ministry so it is hard to understand how practicing homosexuals could be considered for ministry. In some cases churches overseas have exercised influence in the current debate, for example in cases where leaders from ‘home churches’ have spoken of the importance of the partnership relationship and encouraged people to ‘stay put in the Uniting church and keep struggling with the issues’. In other cases ‘home churches’ may be expressing disapproval, for example no longer encouraging students studying in Australia to join Uniting Church congregations. This underlines the importance of strong partner church relationships built on trust, mutual respect and open communication. A gathering of the Methodist Committee of Congregations of the Pacific in April 2004 reaffirmed the 2001 principles

- (a) *To absolutely respect the position taken by each Church*
- (b) *Respect any agreements made between churches represented in the M CCP regarding homosexuality*
- (c) *That each Church expresses pastoral concern for the people who originally came from another Methodist or United Church in the Pacific, bearing in mind the decisions of their home Church in regard to homosexuality.*

IMPACT OF RESOLUTION 84 ON THE UNITING CHUCH’S MULTICULTURAL MINISTRY AND MISSION

Some of the energy and impetus for multicultural ministry has suffered a blow in the last year. Some Uniting Church ministers serving migrant communities have been concerned that the Uniting Church now has a reputation of being the “gay church” and additional strain has been placed on ministers who have tried to counter negative attitudes and criticism from others in their community. Some migrant leaders are worried about what this means for the future growth and development of their ministry and mission and feel a loss of a sense of being proud to belong to the Uniting Church.

“There are so many exciting opportunities and possibilities to develop new multicultural initiatives and links with new and emerging groups but because of this issue many may now be more wary of the Uniting Church. We are finding more restrictions and limitations in developing the multicultural ministry.” Rev Jason Choi, Multicultural Ministry Consultant, Victorian Synod

RESPONSES SURROUNDING RESOLUTION 84

There is diversity within the multicultural network however the majority of migrant congregations strongly hold the view that homosexuality stands outside what God intends and goes against what the Bible teaches. (No study has been done to determine if there are generational changes and whether 2nd Generation young people have different or similar views to their parents. This is an area requiring attention).

Along with the rest of the church, the debate surrounding Resolution 84 has placed a tremendous strain on relationships. The Parish of Balkara in the Victorian Synod, a multicultural Parish that includes English speaking, Tamil and Cook Islander congregations has stated that *“having a homosexual minister within the presbytery or parish would place untenable strain on our relationships together”*. The Ministry Team of the Parish said that *“with our cultural heritage and cross-cultural focus, the Parish would not accept a Minister of the Word who was in a same gender relationship as a member of the Ministry Team or as a member of the Presbytery.”*

A congregation is not usually a completely homogeneous entity of people who have the same mind so one difficult issue is that when a congregation gives a strong lead in one direction it can mean that those who have differing views may grow quiet and concerns are submerged in order to ‘keep the peace’. It is also unclear how congregations, in such a situations, care pastorally for those who may have family members who are gay or indeed who might themselves be gay. Below are some perspectives that reflect something of the range of views within the different migrant congregations and communities.

Can we stay?

Although no Uniting Church migrant or multicultural congregation has yet left the Uniting Church over Resolution 84 some congregations believe Resolution 84 represents a compromise with the biblical truth as they understand it, and are feeling deeply sad, disturbed and angry. They are seriously considering whether they can stay in the Uniting Church. The Mulgrave Indonesian Uniting Church congregation in Victoria has written to the Assembly expressing its grief over the decision of the 10th Assembly which has led to a ‘dismembering’ of the congregation, twenty five of their congregation of one hundred and fifty have left feeling ashamed to be members of the Uniting Church. *“Elders and the whole church can not accept a practising same gender sexual relationship people to become a Leader within the Uniting Church in Australia. These congregations believe that celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage should be a commitment for people who wish to become a clergy. Furthermore we formidably believe that, practicing same gender relationship people should never be ordained in the Uniting Church in Australia since it is against the Holy Bible’s teaching”*.

In making efforts to raise their concerns some congregations writing to the Assembly have requested that Resolution 84 be rescinded. They want the Uniting Church to have a clear policy that does not allow people in same sex relationships to be ordained. Depending on the outcome of the next Assembly there are some congregations who are considering whether they can stay in the Uniting Church although they would not take this step lightly. The thought of becoming homeless and severing ties with the UCA would be painful. Other congregations may not physically leave but emotionally and in practical terms, do not feel part of the UCA.

‘The Uniting Church is our home’

Many migrant communities have appreciated the acceptance, openness and welcome they have received in the Uniting Church and they trust that their church is trying to find a way through a difficult debate in which there are differing perspectives. Although they do not feel happy with Resolution 84, they have made the Uniting Church their home and believe God has brought them here. They have no intention of leaving the Uniting Church as long as their position is respected and there is no attempt to force them to change their beliefs. It has been important for these congregations to carefully consider what Resolution 84 does and does not mean. Knowing that the final decision always rests with a congregation concerning whom they call to be their

minister has helped allay fears. They understand that congregations and presbyteries remain responsible for matters of candidature, ordination, commissioning and placement. They know that anyone who believes they are called by God to ministry will have that call tested by the church through a rigorous process and trust that congregations and presbyteries make decisions based on careful and prayerful processes before accepting someone as a candidate. They know that training of all candidates and ministers includes code of ethics and sexual misconduct courses. These congregations, not without difficulties, are trying to understand and live with the implications of Resolution 84.

We want a church courageous to stand with the marginalized and willing to engage with the difficult issues in our society

A smaller number of migrant and multicultural congregations want a church that recognizes and affirms the gifts of all people including gay and lesbians. Rev Liva Tukutama, the minister at Canberra City congregation believes that usually it is when people know gay and lesbian people, that fears are overcome and attitudes undergo change. Canberra City congregation, a congregation with people from many cultural backgrounds has wrestled with the issue in a personal way. *“A gay person making a tremendous contribution to the life of our congregation has served as chairperson of the Elders and chairperson of the Church Council. This person has many gifts for ministry and the congregation was very disappointed when the Presbytery rejected him as a candidate.”*

We want to get on with other things

Many migrant and multicultural congregations wish to move beyond a polarizing debate. They wish the church did not keep expending so much energy on these issues when there are other burning needs facing their communities and they want to focus on ministry and mission needs of their communities. This view is expressed by the multicultural Parish of Strathfield Homebush. Its four congregations, by consensus said: *“Our desire is to move on to other matters more concerned with the ministry and mission of our local context... We are sensitive to the diversity of views within the church and that some people have come to mutually exclusive positions. This diversity is present within our own Parish, but we are content to live with it as we respect the sincerity and integrity of faithfully held differing views among our members. We encourage our members to freely express their views and thereby contribute to a better understanding of the issues of sexuality that confront us all”.*

WAY FORWARD- SOME REFLECTIONS MAKING ROOM FOR GRACE

In a world where most organizations and institutions have little room for grace, where people who are different are dealt with through legalistic proceeding, political maneuver, and even violent destruction, the church community, as the body of Christ, must stretch its arms of compassion and justice to make room for grace... Only by the grace of God can we have the openness required to extend ourselves to listen and understand another's points of view with which we might disagree. Only by the grace of God can we have the patience to work through our differences. The abundant grace of God as shown to us by Jesus Christ will keep us secure in the midst of seeming chaos. In the grace of God, we can let go of our insecurity, let go of our rigid rules, let go of our power, and invite Christ to help us discern the will of our gracious God in the ministry of inclusion.
Extract from Eric Law, *Inclusion: Making Room for Grace*, Chalice Press

Clearly, since the 10th Assembly relationships across the life of the church have been strained and differences of opinion have become visible, threatening the unity of the church and opening up a chasm that seems very difficult to cross. In many ways the crisis following the 10th Assembly has been a crisis of trust in the church, in the leadership of the church and a crisis of trust that we can be clear about what the Bible teaches. Can the Uniting Church really be this fellowship of reconciliation or are we going to find ourselves unable to remain in fellowship with one another? Where has the joy gone? Where does our sense of security lie?

The multicultural vision of our church has been to create a church that expresses the welcome and hospitality of Christ, where we live together as a reconciling community. Through

multicultural ministry we have been encouraging the Uniting Church to find ways to 'cross over' to one another, allowing the 'other' to be different, not seeking to make them into our image. We have been called to walk together with those who are culturally different from ourselves, and to let ourselves be changed by the experience of others. We have been learning to live with difference and find ways to creatively deal with cultural diversity. The things we have been learning on our journey as a multicultural church are skills we are needing to help us move forward on many of difficult issues relating to the sexuality debate. We need to rediscover, in the words of Eric Law, the importance of *making room for grace* as we try to understand the perspectives of those who are different from ourselves and build bridges across the gaping chasms that divide us. We are needing loving conversation to find ways to build trust and a sense of pride in belonging to a church that may not have all the answers but is committed to struggling with the Bible in one hand and the painful issues of life in the other. We are needing to reaffirm that our oneness is only possible because it is Christ who reconciles us and makes it possible for us to be a reconciling community. We are needing patience with one another and assurance that the crucified and risen Christ is with us and will guide the steps we take.

It is not easy belonging to this church but if God has called us to travel together then there will always be struggles and without the struggles there is no growth.

"We need to pray for both the church and ourselves as we seek the mind and attitude of Christ the King, the reconciler, the head of church. We are not the first church to confront this issue, and surely will not be the last church. In a spirit of humility, I'd like to urge every member of the church to build up unity within the UCA."

(Rev Jason Choi, Multicultural Ministry Consultant, Victorian Synod)

Appendix 1

The Position of Korean Churches in UCA on Resolution 84 of the Assembly Meeting

The following statement was prepared by members of the Council of Korean churches meeting in Sydney and was then made available to Korean newspapers and Korean congregations.

Blessings, God's Peace and grace to all Koreans, Korean churches and Korean members of UCA. As you may know, there was a 10th Assembly Meeting from 12-19 July in Melbourne. Some mass media has published that the UCA has made the decision to ordain homosexual people. In many ways, the UCA has tried to assist congregations to understand the matter correctly, which has been misled by the media. Particularly it has done this through 'Pastoral Letters' from the President and Moderators, and 'Questions and Answers', and the church has been asked us to pray on this matter. The Korean churches in the UCA have also recognised the seriousness of this matter and have tried to find out further information to respond.

Firstly, the Korean Council has closely read the Assembly documents and had a long discussion. On 29 July, the Korean ministers invited the NSW Moderator, Alistair Christie, the Assembly Multicultural Ministry Director, Helen Richmond, and the NSW Board of Mission Director, Tina Rendell to clarify and to discuss further.

From this meeting, we have decided to make our position public to all Koreans and members of Korean churches.

1. The 10th Assembly Meeting (July 17 2003) Resolution 84
(*The resolution with Korean translation*)
2. Position of Korean Churches in UCA on the above Assembly Resolution
The Korean churches in UCA have confirmed the following backgrounds and meanings, after reading the documents and discussion with church leaders.
 - 1) The core value of the UCA has been to embrace various people with God's grace and inclusiveness if possible.
 - 2) The Assembly Meeting has not decided to ordain gay leaders. It has reconfirmed that the Presbytery has the authority on ordination, and if a Presbytery decides to ordain a gay person, it is possible and it could happen.
 - 3) However, any Presbytery and congregation can decide not to, and reject the gay ordination or accept a gay leader.
 - 4) The Korean Churches have confirmed that the UCA will respect our position not to ordain or accept gay leaders, as some other Presbyteries have also made it clear.

After the Korean Council has carefully examined, we have reached the following conclusions.

- 1) We confirm that the homosexual relationship is not Biblically correct.
- 2) We do not accept gay people to become a leaders in the church.
- 3) We will continue to pray and to do our best that the UCA go to a right path in this matter. We seek an understanding from all Korean members and ask to pray in faith about this as being part of God's family. We specially ask all Korean members in the UCA to pray for the UCA and for the UCA Korean congregations so that we can renew and make our faith strong in God. The blessing and guidance of God be with you.

July 29 2003

The Council of Korean Churches, Chairperson Rev HK LEE and All Korean ministers

STATEMENT FROM ETHNIC CONGREGATIONS
WITHIN THE SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA
IN RESPONSE TO ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 84 – August 2003

After Assembly, 25 lay and clergy leaders from ethnic congregations from the Victorian Synod Multicultural network met in Melbourne on July 2003, to discuss resolution 84 and they developed the following statement.

We are deeply disturbed by Assembly Resolution 84 which allows presbyteries the possibility of ordaining candidates whose sexuality is expressed in homosexual behaviour.

We believe that this is not acceptable to most ethnic congregations.

We are deeply troubled that the wider community could identify ethnic congregations with presbyteries and a church that permits practising homosexual persons to be ministers and deacons.

Our understandings of Christian discipleship with our experience of many cultures makes it very difficult to accept this kind of Uniting Church leadership.

We are generally not willing to accept the notion of 'right relationships' as it now stands, though some of us are better able to live in the tension this notion creates, than others.

Most of our people are confused, embarrassed, angry and grieving. We ask, 'How can Assembly not express what we believe is the majority ethnic position, in a Uniting Church that desires to be a multicultural church?'

We see possible division ahead. We do not want this to happen, because we love the hospitality the Uniting Church offers in Christ to all cultures.

Three urgent requests arising from resolution 84:

We ask the Assembly Standing Committee to provide the scripture that validates and reconciles with the Resolution 84.

We ask the Assembly Standing Committee to enable the voice of ethnic congregations to be clearly heard on this matter and to encourage ethnic congregations to take action within the discipline of the Uniting Church.

We ask the Assembly Standing Committee to explain in a simple and practical way how 'right relationships' could apply to the life and work of local ethnic congregations.

**The Uniting Church in Australia - Chinese National Conference, March 2004
Statement on Homosexuality**

The Conference heard presentations on the Uniting Church polity & code of ethics. The Conference delegates shared the deep pain and sense of confusion relating to the possibility of ordination of practicing homosexuals. We unanimously resolved to state our view on the issue of homosexuality.

- 1 In accordance with Roman 1:26-27 and 1 Cor. 6: 9-10, we believe our Bible clearly tells us: homosexual behaviour is a sin. We unreservedly accept the biblical teaching and recognise that homosexual behaviour is a sin.
- 2 In 1 Timothy chapter 3, it states the criteria for those exercising leadership in the church. Any such person must set a good example within the church and be of good repute outside the church. We believe practicing homosexuals fail in meeting such standards both inside and outside the church. That said, we firmly oppose the ordination of practising homosexual persons to the ministry of God.
- 3 In Luke 19:10, we seek to follow the example of Jesus our Lord, that the door to our church be opened, so that people in same sex relationship are welcomed, together we learn and experience the redemption of His gospel. We all need repentance and returning to God.
- 4 Our sins are redeemed by the righteousness of God through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus. His infinite love is manifested to the world. The righteousness and love of God are held in balance and neither is excluded. We must not selectively emphasis His love and sacrifice His righteousness and holiness. This is not the forgiving love of God.

Chairperson
Peter Teo

Secretary
Rev Kau Lee

Tongan National Conference 1998 reaffirmed by the TNC Executive in 2004

The TNC affirmed their stand on this matter saying that homosexual practice is contrary to the teaching of the Scripture which has been affirmed by the church historically, that those who advocate through promotion and practice of any homosexual lifestyle or behaviour contrary to the Scripture will be deemed unfit for Church leadership and that self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates into ordained ministry or appointed to any positions of leadership”