

**A report and comment on the debate on sexuality and leadership at the 11th Assembly of the Uniting Church. This report is based on Reforming Alliance notes sent via e-mail - 11th Assembly: 7 – 10 July 2006:
Prepared by Peter Bentley for the Reforming Alliance.**

Friday 7th July

The first part of the sexuality discussions was held during this afternoon. From 2 pm – 4 pm, the 8 major proposals were introduced by the agreed presenters, and Congress was also allowed to speak (through its chairperson – Vince Ross). Steve Estherby had previously raised a question about the arrangement of the agenda, in particular the idea for the Assembly to focus on **the question: *Do we need one policy for the whole church? Why/why not? (45 minutes of brief comments and then move straight to community groups)***

After consideration, this was changed by the Business Committee so that it would not be so directive to the Assembly and now read: *Given that there is a variety of proposals on sexuality, what do you think that God is calling the Assembly to do?*

43 people took the opportunity for a one minute speech on this and general matters during the time allowed for this part. Overall, I was very encouraged by the speeches from our supporters and members, and many good points were made about the time for a decision and the doctrinal basis of the matter. Praise God that new members spoke boldly as well – very daunting for first time people.

After the presentation of proposals the Assembly members moved to their community working groups for discussion. The next stage involved the facilitation group receiving all reports back from the groups, and reporting on the results of the discussions and options.

Saturday 8th July 2006

The report of the facilitation committee was presented Saturday morning.

Comments on the report of the facilitation committee: Proposals on sexuality and leadership.

There were 25 community groups (each about 10 people). Each group had considered the question and proposals straight after the presentation on Friday afternoon and each group reported on a prepared format. The facilitation committee collated the responses and noted questions to be considered.

In terms of the responses to Question 1:

Given that there is a variety of proposals on sexuality, what do you think that God is calling the Assembly to do?

(note: some responded to the original question) –

There were 6 basic groups of responses.

1. 13/25 – no to a decision at this Assembly

Thus 13 groups had either consensus, agreement or majority support on this matter.

(Note – only 9 of these groups provided numbers - 83% of the members of 9 of the 13 of the groups supported the idea of not making decision at this Assembly)

2. 2/25 - Yes to a decision at this Assembly.

The next four responses represent the other 10 groups.

3. Yes to a later decision
4. Make a pastoral statement
5. The group provided no comment
6. The group did not reach any agreement to send forward

Levels of support from groups. Groups were asked which proposal they supported.

Note; the numbers add up to more than 25, and are probably indicative of groups having two of more options, but it was not made clear which groups or how this was achieved, or which options if some groups chose more than one, were a first and second choice. I believe the clarification of the statistics may come with the written report (there were no copies of any written report) as a member asked for one, and I hope this was attended to). In any case, I believe the statistics provide a reasonable guide to the level of support from groups, even though it is unfortunate a full picture was not presented due to the very short time allowed.

Proposals (you can refer to the June 2006 ReForming and also see the Assembly website for the full wording of each proposal). The number refers to the original number for the proposal.

Proposal 34 – 0 (thus no group was able to register (at the very least) majority support or consensus for the Qld Synod proposal – which is the RA initiated proposal)

Proposal 35 – 0

Proposal 36 – 4

Proposal 37 – 1

Proposal 38 – 1

Proposal 39 – 15

Proposal 40 – 19

Proposal 88 – 8 (Note: Number 88 replaces Proposal 41 and is a revised version of the proposal to allow networks. It had a new focus on having Synods liaise about establishing memorandum of understandings between dissenting congregations, rather than a register). The facilitation group reported that there were a diverse range of comments on the clauses in this proposal, and only most support for 1,2,3 clauses)

The outcome of this process was that proposals 39 (Vic and Tas. Synod), 40 (WA Synod etc) (these are the two Synod based proposals; (39) which do not want a decision made at this time and 40 (which affirmed resolution 84, and 88, the revised David Pitman proposal (a critique of the original is on the RA website) were presented as the preferred proposals.

The presenters of these proposals were given comments from the community groups and were asked to consider working together to develop a proposal which offered a way forward. This essentially was meant to encompass the spirit of proposals 39 and 40 and some elements of 88 (probably clauses 1, 2, 3).

Steve Estherby raised questions about the process during this period, and also Robert Johnson (a former Victorian (and Vic-Tas) Synod Secretary). The Assembly General Secretary tried his best to explain the process related to consensus decision-making, and Robert Johnson then raised a further point of helpful clarification to make it clear for members of the Assembly what can happen when proposals are not formally dealt with. (In my opinion, it is important for the national council to be aware of the manual for meetings Section 6.12 – how to handle “Further possibilities” which is probably one of the most neglected parts of the process in all councils in terms of *The Manual for Meeting*).

As a result of the questioning from Steve Estherby and some others, Steve Estherby prepared a procedural proposal to allow proposals 34 and 38 to be at least initially considered again (along the lines of the following). Note: – This includes both of what the Assembly regards as the extreme proposals, but gives opportunity for a clearer decision on these proposals. Possible proposal:

That Assembly consider, and determine the level of support for proposal 34, and if that is unsupported, consider, and determine the support for proposal 38.

This was added to the agenda for the Sunday morning debate.

Sunday 9th July 2006

As mentioned in the note, Steve Estherby (and co-presenter Stuart Pendlebury) prepared a procedural proposal (given the Number 102), to allow proposals 34 and 38 to be at least initially considered first, before the proposals arising from the community groups.

Steve and Stuart put a succinct and reasoned case that these proposals be considered, because to do otherwise would deny justice to those who sent the proposals. They argued that people who through their views to be true needed to have them properly aired and tested.

Oddly, even though it was a procedural proposal, the President allowed discussion, rather than having it put straight after. There were in fact different speakers as this went on for a significant period for a procedural proposal. Warwick van Ede, an associated member of the Assembly for the Assembly Legal Reference Committee spoke and outlined his story of seeing a students sign in the college he was staying in - "24 hours a day - 24 cans of beer in a case - coincidence - I think not". He then emphasised his belief that the facilitation proposal was not a coincidence – it was the work of the Holy Spirit bring things together, and that was why it was not the time to make a decision.

Hedley Fihaki raised a significant matter in this debate, drawing attention to issues with the procedures put in place by the 11th Assembly standing and called the attention of the Assembly to documents which he said came under the guise of helpful aids, including Assembly paper, B27 - *The New Humanity in Christ*, provided as information for the

Assembly, which he argued were not neutral because of their orientation and direction, and could be simply perceived as responding to the Qld Synod proposal and thus heavily influential in the debate.

It is worth noting that the **Working Group on Doctrine Committee** had produced a statement for Assembly members to help Assembly members in their discussions about sexuality and leadership. This received several critical comments during other debates date (mainly from evangelical members), mainly because of its perceived bias and didactic orientation. This report: *The New Humanity in Christ* has 22 points or ‘perspectives’, and can be found in the papers on the 11th Assembly website.

There were other points made from several people opposed to the procedural proposal. Steve was allowed to respond, rightly indicating that this procedure is within the manual for meetings and it is quite appropriate to be able to use this mechanism as needed. The use of the procedures in all their fullness are simply part of good meeting procedure if one is following the Manual for meetings.

Niall Reid then got a word in to say ‘vote yes’ to this proposal for the good of the church. He outlined that if we did not have the opportunity to have this debate, there would be disappointment.

The President then seemingly tried to follow the manual for meetings using consensus decision making, and asked for the meeting’s opinion, rather than going to the vote, but in any case it was clear from this ‘vote’ that a decision was to be made, and the proposal was then put formally (simple vote by formal majority). The President declared the proposal lost – his estimate was about 65% not in favour.

A count was requested, and the vote declared: 79 in favour – 150 against.

The debate then moved to the facilitation committee proposal (new Proposal 103), where it was advised that this committee had continued the negotiations, and had fallen from their proposal, having taken on board a similar proposal from the Business Committee, numbered 104.

The facilitation proposal had been described as “indicative of the mood of the working groups”. It proposed similar sounding concepts from previous decisions, which the Business Committee used as well. The Business committee went further, but it was put in the context of ‘refining’ proposal 103. Significant changes included:

- Deleting the affirmation regarding applicants for the specified ministries;
- Changing the paragraph about those congregations unable to accept into ministry placement a person living in a committed same-gender relationship to essentially a consideration; and
- Stating more definitely the Assembly’s inability to exercise any further determining authority in the matter.

The Business Committee believed they needed to make the changes because they argued that the facilitation clause suggestion that assured congregations of being able to keep their position on sexuality and practice was not possible because it is Synod and Presbytery responsibility, and this the Assembly could not determine this for these councils.

So the end decision was Proposal 104 came from the Facilitation Committee - with “help” from the Business Committee. This is a very interesting situation, with the Business Committee becoming so influential in this critical part, but as it was indicated, they were being helpful.

Then Congress made a statement and representative, Shayne Blackman outlined the concerns about the process and the present proposal. This was quite strong, but was significantly moderated by a second statement after lunch (see later). Mr Blackman read mainly from the congress statement in the Sexuality and Leadership Booklet. The President made reference to the difficulties of discussion for Congress and thanked them for still being with us.

Then speakers started to formally debate Proposal 104.

Robert Johnson spoke, initially in reference to 102, saying that the Assembly was not saying we will not hear about these proposals, just that we have chosen not to vote on them before we hear the mind of the Assembly. He outlined that he believed there were true things in all these proposals - many things are true from our experience on both sides - in seeking to honestly listen to God, but that we cannot yet reconcile these truths. The spirit is leading us to more knowledge. "God is bigger than any of our truths"

The debate after morning tea was delayed due to the need to hear further from Congress after they had met (and there were also several amendments that need to be typed up so they could be projected for all to see)

Matters were deferred delay to allow the Congress to consider the proposal.

The Congress statement occurred after lunch and the ballot for President-elect.

The Congress re-stated their opposition to change, and then effectively declared that they would be continuing within the Uniting Church, allowing the Assembly to make its decision. How one reads this is very interesting. Some people perceived it as a form of disassociation – leaving the Assembly to its own devices, but it was certainly read by many Assembly members as an endorsement of the spirit of Resolution 84. More needs to be considered on this important development, and I would urge people to read the full statement from the Congress when it is made publicly available.

Debate continued over the two afternoon sessions, closing at 5 pm.

During this time Clause 1 of the seven clause proposal 104 was approved by formal decision making and it was clear that Clause 2 could have been as well.

A brief summary follows, and the approved clause is below.

Clause 1 (104)

To acknowledge and lament that even though the decision of the 10th Assembly regarding Sexuality and Leadership (Assembly Minute 03.12.04, varied by Assembly Standing Committee Minute 03.69.03) was made prayerfully and according to UCA polity it was a catalyst for the deep concern and disquiet present in some parts of the UCA.

This clause was decided by formal decision making, after some seeming confusion about the procedures, which personally surprised me again. In any case, it was overwhelmingly approved when they finally went to a simple formal decision.

The Assembly then returned to consensus decision making after the President was helpfully reminded of this need by one member and went on to consider Clause 2 of 104. During this time it became clear that consensus would not be able to be achieved, so a suggestion of working through the clauses (in effect sorting them out with amendments and getting agreement in general), and then bringing the whole proposal back for decision, (rather than doing each clause through formal decision making), like it had been originally proposed.

Clause 2 (this was not approved at this stage by the Assembly, but the Assembly had moved on to clause 3 having effectively reached overwhelming support). Note: the version below is the original version of clause 2 (see Resolution 108) for the final version.

To express its regret that following the 10th Assembly there were some ministers and members of the church who believed that because of the 10th Assembly decision regarding Sexuality and Leadership (Assembly Minute 03.12.04, varied by Assembly Standing Committee Minute 03.69.03) they had no option but to withdraw from the Uniting Church altogether.

There were many amendments proposed to the other 5 clauses (including clause 3), and it took some time to work through them all. Many evangelicals made brave stands and to keep opposing this proposal in the face of the pressure that is perhaps unwittingly applied to people who do not agree (either by consensus or agreement), is a point worthy of highlighting for the personal sacrifice involved.

The meeting finished for the day still considering the present clause 3, which I include below (note – this is the original and was not approved, but is included for the interesting reference to the Holy Spirit):

3. To acknowledge that Assembly members are not of one mind regarding the issue of the acceptance into the specified ministries of those living in committed same-gender relationships, and that therefore, and notwithstanding the hopes of many in the Church, this Assembly discerns the leading of the Holy Spirit in its determination to remain in unity despite differing convictions on this matter.

There were many matters left undecided on the agenda of the Assembly, but the conclusion of the debate on sexuality was given priority. There was an extra session for sexuality timetabled at 2 pm for Monday 10th, but the agenda was revised to allow initial discussion earlier on the Monday morning. The revised proposal was still being promoted as the clear way forward.

After this day, I had a strange sense that all this talk had happened before, but it is a slightly different era, as the direction is clearer, and it is not Resolution 84, but a Proposal numbered 104 still being considered. Perhaps it is another clarification, or a supplement or a clarifying complementary supplement? Many people I met during this time asked will it help in any case, and my question is, how many clarifications are necessary?

There were not as many people observing the debate as I had perhaps thought may come (Perhaps 170?). A small group of about 50 joined in prayer and fellowship on the oval at lunch time and were blessed by some great Tongan singing. RA Chairperson, Max Champion, provided an update of what was happening, and prayers were offered for the Uniting Church and personal prayer for individual members of the Assembly who joined in this time.

Monday 10th July 2006

The debate continued this morning from 11 am, and with a break for lunch, concluded at afternoon tea. It is difficult to give too much of an impression about the state of the decision as the process was quite complex and perhaps confused at times, given the number of amendments and suggestions being made.

You may remember that the new Proposal 104 had seven clauses. Only the first clause had been approved. Basically what happened on Monday was majority approval for the other clauses (3 – 6) – like a pre-approval without consensus, by agreeing at a certain time that enough work had been done on that particular clause and it could be considered in a full proposal later. Due to the move to formal decision-making for the approval of the first clause, and the time involved in the consensus decision-making, the Assembly adopted this way forward in the morning.

However, Monday also saw the introduction of a very important summary type proposal in one format, prompted by Revd Dr Andrew Dutney. Very significantly, Dr Dutney, Principal of Parkin-Wesley College, Adelaide, and Chairperson of the Church Polity Committee, made statements to the Assembly that in his opinion the Assembly had not been helping the church in its proposals, and that this was very problematical, and outlined that:

- a) the traditional teaching on sexuality and practice of the Reformed and Evangelical churches was the orthodox position
- b) the Uniting Church was in the process of considering whether to depart from that position
- c) that it has not formally done so. He said "we have never made that decision"

This was an important development given that Dr Dutney indicated that his personal view is that God was leading the Uniting Church in a different direction. I believe it is helpful to outline the original Andrew Dutney alternate proposal: 10 July 2006, so you can compare this to what was approved on the Tuesday (note my underlining).

To acknowledge that Assembly members are not of one mind regarding the issue of the acceptance into the specified ministries of those who living in committed same gender relationships. Some members of the Assembly adhere to the traditional teaching and practice of Reformed and Evangelical churches in this matter, while others believe that God may be leading us to a different understanding and practice. Therefore and notwithstanding the hope of many in the Church, the 11th Assembly is not prepared to exercise its determining authority in this matter.

Church Polity Issues

One of the interesting things about the debate on Monday, (as already mentioned) was that there was longer consideration of some issues of doctrine, mainly through the efforts of one of the members, who as already noted is also Chairperson of the Church Polity Committee, Revd Dr Andrew Dutney. You may not have read the Church Polity report to the Assembly. At just two pages, it is one of the most stimulating reports and raises many issues. I note below Point 5 on sexuality. (Full version see the 11th Assembly website).

5. SEXUALITY AND DOCTRINE

The Committee considers that sexuality is a doctrinal issue and the Assembly has the responsibility to determine the church's position in this area. The Committee can not see how the Assembly could do this at the moment given the depth of disagreement among its members and advisors and in the church around the world. Nonetheless it is only the Assembly which is competent in the UCA to determine this matter of doctrine. It is the view of the Committee that, unsatisfactory as it may be, the other councils must continue to recognise the limits of their authority in the matter.

I also draw your attention to an interesting reply by the Assembly General Secretary to an article by Paul Gray in the Melbourne Herald Sun in late June 2006. Please read the full piece (you can find this through the NSW Synod website – news (nsw.uca.org.au), but I draw your attention to a brief part of the General Secretary's reply (I have placed in italics below) and ask you to consider if this was your understanding of the Uniting Church in 1977?

“In 2003 the National Assembly refused, yet again, to adopt a single national policy for the church on this issue. Instead, it again decided these decisions should be made locally, at the regional council, the presbytery, on the basis of an assessment of each individual's suitability. While many argue this opened the door to homosexuals being ordained, the reality is that the possibility had existed since the Uniting Church was formed in 1977.”

It appears that there are officially contradictory opinions about the actual status of the perceived policy position of the Uniting Church on sexuality issues.

During the course of the debate, a number of other additions and suggestions were provided to the facilitation committee to work with in conjunction with the revised proposal. It was then up to the facilitation committee to draft another version, based on the indications of support during the Monday, noting that some material may be included in a pastoral letter. In effect, the other 'agreed' suggestions and additions were given the nod to go into the package of material that the facilitation committee was to work with. The Assembly President indicated that he hoped the revised proposal would be swiftly considered on the Tuesday, and handled by formal decision-making if consensus is not achieved. The Assembly President also stated that he hoped that it would be very clear what the Assembly has actually decided in the end.

The final day (Tuesday) is presented in a brief report by itself, along with the eventual new proposal, now Number 108.