

REPORT ON THE NATIONAL SURVEY ON SEXUALITY
OF THE REFORMING ALLIANCE WITHIN THE
UNITING CHURCH, JANUARY 2004

Summary

Ministers and church secretaries in the Uniting Church (UC) were sent a survey pack that included a questionnaire and this was completed by 27014 members and adherents from 1459 congregations. This represents nearly one quarter of adult UC attenders spread over 58% of congregations. The results to the three primary questions were as follows:

1. Should a commitment to celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage be a requirement for those exercising leadership in the UC?

Yes 88.6%, no 6.3%, undecided 3.8%, no answer 1.3%.

2. Should people living in a same gender sexual relationship be ordained in the UC?

Yes 6.5%, no 88.8%, undecided 4.0%, no answer 0.7%.

3. Is the ordination of people living in a same gender sexual relationship an issue on which members of the UC should be directly consulted?

Yes 87.6%, no 7.7%, undecided 3.5%, no answer 1.2%.

For 1909 people from non-English speaking /ethnic background the answer to question 1 was yes 94%, no 3%, undecided 3% and no answer 0% and for 491 Australians of Aboriginal/Islander ancestry it was yes 81%, no 13%, undecided 5% and no answer 1%. There are 23943 people who answered the survey in 1459 UC congregations who expect that their ministers and other leaders will be committed to celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage.

Many people are distressed that in the few short years since the union of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in 1977 to form the Uniting Church (UC), the question of the ordination of practising homosexuals has become a matter of great division in the Church. At the time of union the three churches had agreed values on this matter, which had stood for nearly 2000 years. Since homosexual acts between men were illegal throughout Australia the church had no need for any written statement on homosexuality. In order to codify appropriate Christian sexual behaviour the UC in the early 1980's paraphrased the traditional position as "celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage".

The Assembly of the UC in the 1980's declined to affirm this principle for its ordained ministry. In May 1996 an Assembly Sexuality Task Group produced an Interim Report on Sexuality¹ that was sent to the Church for assessment and comment. Mr Peter Bentley was employed by the Assembly to report on the more than 8000 responses received from synods, presbyteries, parishes, congregations, groups and individuals. The Bentley

Report showed that 82% of the responses were not approving of a more liberal attitude on sexuality and involved at least 30000 members².

At the Eighth Assembly in July 1997 no decision was made on the ordination of practising homosexual ministers, hence the possibility has apparently existed since 1997 that a presbytery may accept for training and ordination a practising homosexual. As a result of the passage of resolution 84 at the Tenth Assembly in July 2003, Evangelical Members within the UC (EMU) circulated a petition against resolution 84 and in two weeks obtained more than 20000 signatures, which were presented to the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC). In September 2003 at a two day, intensive meeting in Sydney, the Reforming Alliance within the Uniting Church (RA) was formed. One of its first tasks has been to carry out a National Survey of the UC on the sexuality issue.

The survey was prepared and sent to all UC ministers and church secretaries in October 2003. A simple questionnaire was completed by 27014 church members and adherents from 1459 congregations, even although synod secretaries, many church councils and ministers opposed it. The results of the questionnaire and the various letters about the survey have been collated and analysed in this report.

1. Preparation, distribution and processing of the survey

1.1 Preparation of the survey pack including the questionnaire and its distribution

The questionnaire was modified many times to take into account various comments and suggestions and a plan was devised for distribution of the questionnaire. The final survey pack consisted of an explanatory letter from the leaders of the Reforming Alliance, instructions on use of the survey, a questionnaire which was copied so that each person could complete one form and a survey distribution form on which the names of the persons who were issued with a questionnaire and their church were recorded for verification purposes only. The survey pack was sent to all ministers and church secretaries in Australia and was also available on the Internet and posted on request. It was completed over three Sundays October 26 - November 9 and since delivery was delayed in some States it was extended by one Sunday. Completed questionnaires and survey distribution forms from the churches were posted to Newtown, NSW for collation. Many questionnaires that were filled in at home were returned separately by post. The questionnaire had three questions on the sexuality matter and four additional questions to establish whether male or female, what ethnic group the person identified with, whether member or adherent and the name and location of the attendees church.

1.2 Processing of the questionnaires

Envelopes containing surveys were opened by the survey processing team and checked to see if they had been filled in correctly. They were then gathered into bundles of 50 forms that were uniquely numbered by a numbering machine and logged. Those that had not been filled in correctly were put aside for the supervisor and logged as an exception. These were carefully examined and entered if possible, or accounted for (see section 2.2).

The bundles were then processed by entering data into a relational data base running on a network of seven computers, each operated by a trained and supervised two person team, one entering and one checking the data as it was being entered. Each survey form was cancelled with a stamp after entry to make sure that forms could not be accidentally re-entered. Data entry errors were logged and entries corrected against the original form at the end of each day. Data records were checked against the manual numbering system and any duplicated records were removed. This process ensured that data entry errors were kept to a minimum and could be corrected.

The data entry and survey team did not attempt any analysis until the data entry was closed and then the raw data was burned to compact disk. Results were gathered by using specific queries in the database. The results were manually tabulated, percentages calculated, and results checked and audited.

2. Results of the survey

2.1 Results from the questionnaire

A comparison of the results of the 27014 questionnaires from 1459 UC congregations are given in Table 1 for the three questions and analysed for females and males. The numbers of persons answering each question are given with percentages of the total numbers of persons who answered that question. It is seen that 87 - 89% of the total number answered yes, no, yes to questions 1, 2 and 3 and 6 - 8% answered no, yes, no respectively. There is no appreciable difference between female and male. The number of undecided is very small at 2.9-4.4% and those who did not answer particular questions amounted to 0.5-1.3%. The overall data for questions 1-3 is also shown schematically in Figures 1-3, which gives a visual representation of the great disparity between the yes and no answers. The data for members and adherents showed no differences for any of the three questions.

In analysing the data with regard to question 5, "which group you most closely identify with", there were 20442 replies of Australians of non-indigenous ancestry, 2795 of other English speaking background, 1909 of other non-English speaking /ethnic background, 491 Australians of Aboriginal/Islander ancestry and 1377 persons did not answer question 5. The very large first group gave slightly higher values by 0.3-1.5% than the overall averages (F + M) in Table 1. The second group of other English speaking background gave values that were on average 2% lower than the overall averages in Table 1. Because these differences were small, detailed data for these first two groups is not given. However the results from the third and fourth group differ from the overall averages and are given in Tables 2 and 3 and pictorially in Figures 1-3.

The data for 1909 people of non-English speaking/ethnic background in Table 2 show that the answers yes and no to questions 1 and 2 are 4-6% higher at 93-94% than the average in Table 1. The result for question 3 is the same as the overall average of 87%. In Table 3 the data for 491 Australians of Aboriginal/Islander ancestry give results for a yes, no, yes answer to questions 1-3 that are 4-9 % lower than the overall average in

Table 1, but are still very high in the range 78-83%, with perhaps slightly lower results for females than males for questions 1 and 3.

2.2 Letters and statements received pertaining to the national survey

There were 177 letters and statements received which were all read in detail. One hundred and fifty five letters (88%) were sorted under different headings, whilst there were 22 letters (12%) that lacked names/addresses and were not recorded.

2.2.1 Letters supporting the survey There were 41 letters from churches that filled the survey, but this is a small number compared to the total number of responses received without covering letters from 1459 congregations. They were from NSW 15, Vic 11, Q 6, SA 5, Tas 2, WA 1 and ACT 1. About 70% were from country and 30% from city churches. There were 4 letters from individuals in churches that partially or completely filled surveys, against the wishes of ministers and/or church council members. There were 7 letters from individuals in favour of the survey and 6 letters from individuals interested in joining the Reforming Alliance.

There were 3 letters from churches where a vote was taken in a congregational meeting on questions which were similar to, but not identical with, those of the questionnaire. Had these results been added to the survey they would have been yes no yes 241, no yes no 21, undecided 24. One letter in a similar vein gave 64% yes no yes, 26% no yes no, undecided 10%. In this case the total number voting was unavailable.

2.2.2 Factors opposed to the survey There were 38 letters mainly from secretaries of church councils that did not allow distribution of the questionnaire in their churches. They were from Vic 11, NSW 9, SA 9, Q 6, WA 2, ACT 1. There were 8 letters from ministers who opposed and prevented the distribution of the survey in their churches. There were 10 letters in which the church executive/church council/minister had impeded the distribution of the questionnaire. There were 27 letters from individuals who opposed the survey for many different reasons. Some comments suggested intentional bias in the survey, some that it was too difficult and confusing, some that it was too simplistic, some that we should have provided background information, some that it was too rushed, some that we were attempting to exclude young people and so on.

Synod General Secretaries in *four States* circulated their ministers with cautionary advice on aspects of the national survey, as follows: (1) that Synods had recently met and considered resolution 84 (hence no need for a survey), (2) emphasis put on the point mentioned in the survey letter that the survey had no official status, (3) that it would be appropriate to involve church councils in any decisions on distribution of the survey, (4) that the timing of the survey may be linked to the next meeting of the ASC (which was incorrect), (5) that there was some attempt to bypass church councils/ministers (it was meant to be a survey of UC people, not of church councils). There was also a suggested procedure given for those who wished not to distribute the survey. One Presbytery minister circulated ministers with additional material that would tend to discourage

ministers from running the survey. No assistance was provided by the Assembly and Synods to facilitate distribution of the survey pack.

3. Discussion

The results in Table 1 show that of 27014 members and adherents drawn from 1459 UC congregations, 23943 (88.6%) expect that their ministers and other leaders should live by the standards of celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. Furthermore, for questions 1-3 the average number who answered yes, no, yes is 23866 (88.3%) compared with only 1843 (6.8%) who answered no, yes, no. The average undecided figure for questions 1-3 in Table 1 is only 3.8%, which shows that the views of these church people are very polarised. There are very few people in the “messy middle”. These figures agree very well with an earlier study³, which reported “Just over 88% of Uniting regular attenders hold a general conservative position on male-to-male sexual practice ----, just over 2% endorsed male homosexual sexual relations, with about 9% in the middle.” With regard to female-to-female sex “89% indicated an overall conservative stance.”

It is not easy to put these numbers into perspective for the UC as a whole, because of the extraordinary statistical figures issued by the Assembly⁴. Whilst the number of members and members in association (adherents) are said to have decreased by 12% between 2000 and 2003 to 165440, the numbers attending worship are claimed to have increased by 28% from 159388 to 203775 over the same period. Because of the steady downward trend in church members over recent years the lower values are much more likely and an estimate of 150000 seems reasonable. Another similar figure is obtained from the National Church Life Survey⁵ which gave 142900 church attenders in 1996. The mean of these numbers is 146450 and if this is reduced by the 25700 children⁵ this gives 120750 adult attenders in church on any given Sunday. The 27014 people who participated in the survey represented a sample of greater than 22% (nearly a quarter) of weekly attendance. Since the total number of UC congregations quoted by the President is 2500⁶ these worshippers are distributed over 1459 (58%) of the congregations in Australia.

In Table 2 it is shown that 94% of people of non-English speaking/ethnic background expect ministers and leaders to be committed to celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage compared with 81% for Australians of Aboriginal/Islander ancestry (Table 3), and 88.6% over all people (Table 1). This value may perhaps be higher than the analysis of negative responses of 82% in 1997 to the interim report on sexuality, from an estimated total of at least 30000 people². Thus, members of the UC have not changed their opinion over the intervening years since 1997 and are unlikely to do so if there is a further period of “biblical and theological study” as proposed by the ASC for 2004-2005.

Why was it that many in the church, particularly those in authority such as general secretaries, church councils and ministers, opposed the national survey? Some reasons were given for this opposition (see 2.2.2), but we are very concerned that ordinary members were denied a basic civil liberty; the freedom to express their own opinion in

answering a questionnaire. Ideally, every member/adherent should have had the opportunity to choose for themselves whether to participate in the national survey. We are disappointed and distressed that this was not possible because so many church leaders opposed the survey.

What is the significance for the UC in the result that 23943 people who answered the survey expect ministers and other leaders to exercise celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage? The opinions expressed so strongly in this national survey spread over 58% of UC congregations, are consistent with past research conducted amongst UC attenders and Presbyterians, Baptists and Pentecostals³. These opinions are firmly based upon a conservative understanding of scripture, which is unlikely to change. A conscious decision by church leaders to ignore this reality can only result in the exodus from the UC of whole congregations, parts of congregations and the leakage of many faithful Christians including ministers to other churches. The only way in which this process could be limited is through the rapid recall of the Assembly to rescind resolution 84. The proposed “road map” of the ASC to occur over the next three years leading to the Assembly of 2006, will not stem the bleeding of the church, because people will not wait another three years for the *possible* resolution of an issue that has already festered for many years.

References

¹ Interim Report on Sexuality (1996). Joint Board of Christian Education, Uniting Church Press, Melbourne.

²Bentley, Peter (1997). Analysis of the responses to the interim report on sexuality. Uniting Church in Australia, 22 p.

³Bentley, Peter (1997). Uniting Church Studies, August 29. (Based on material from the National Social Science Survey, 1993).

⁴ Uniting Church Assembly Triennial Statistics, June 2003.

⁵ Build My Church (1999) National Church Life Survey Research

⁶ Congregations Split on Gay Ordination. Barney Zwartz. The Age Melbourne, December 13 2003

National Survey Team

Stephen R. Estherby, Ian C. Denton and J. Howard Bradbury
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For further information contact:
Survey Organiser, Rev Stephen R. Estherby 0438426714

Table 1. Comparison of the three questions analysed by gender for members and adherents from 1497 UC congregations

Question Number	Gender	Answers in numbers of people & percentage				
	F female M male	Yes	No	Undecided	No Answer	Total
1	F+M	23943	1704	1023	344	27014*
		88.6 %	6.3%	3.8%	1.3%	100%
1	F	14489	1033	644	188	16354*
		88.6	6.3%	3.9%	1.2%	100%
1	M	9337	651	368	104	10460*
		89.3	6.2%	3.5%	1.0%	100%
2	F+M	1745	23990	1084	195	27014
		6.5%	88.8%	4.0%	0.7%	100%
2	F	1113	14425	726	90	16354
		6.8%	88.2%	4.4%	0.6%	100%
2	M	616	9444	347	53	10460
		5.9%	90.3%	3.3%	0.5%	100%
3	F+M	23668	2079	951	316	27014
		87.6%	7.7%	3.5%	1.2%	100%
3	F	14245	1301	642	166	16354
		87.1%	8.0%	3.9%	1.0%	100%
3	M	9317	748	303	92	10460
		89.1%	7.1%	2.9%	0.9%	100%

*The gender question was not answered by 200 people.

Question 1. Should a commitment to celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage be a requirement for those exercising leadership in the UC?

Question 2. Should people living in a same gender sexual relationship be ordained in the UC?

Question 3. Is the ordination of people living in a same gender sexual relationship an issue on which members of the UC should be directly consulted?

Table 2. Comparison of data for questions 1-3 by gender for members and adherents of other non-English speaking/ethnic background

Question number	Gender	Percentage of answers			
	F female M male	Yes	No	Undecided	No Answer
1	F+M	94%	3%	3%	0%
1	F	94%	3%	2%	1%
1	M	93%	4%	3%	0%
2	F+M	3%	93%	4%	0%
2	F	3%	93%	4%	0%
2	M	3%	94%	3%	0%
3	F+M	87%	9%	3%	1%
3	F	87%	9%	3%	1%
3	M	86%	9%	4%	1%

Total number of replies 1909 consisting of females 1043, males 855 and 11 persons who did not answer the gender question.

Table 3. Comparison of data for questions 1-3 by gender for Australians of Aboriginal/Islander ancestry

Question number	Gender	Percentage of answers			
	F female M male	Yes	No	Undecided	No Answer
1	F+M	81%	13%	5%	1%
1	F	79%	14%	5%	2%
1	M	83%	11%	5%	1%
2	F+M	11%	84%	5%	0%
2	F	11%	84%	5%	0%
2	M	10%	85%	5%	0%
3	F+M	79%	15%	5%	1%
3	F	78%	16%	5%	1%
3	M	81%	14%	5%	0%

Total number of replies 491 made up of 309 females, 171 males and 11 persons who did not answer the gender question.

FIGURE 1

Question 1: Should a commitment to celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage be a requirement for those exercising leadership in the Uniting Church?

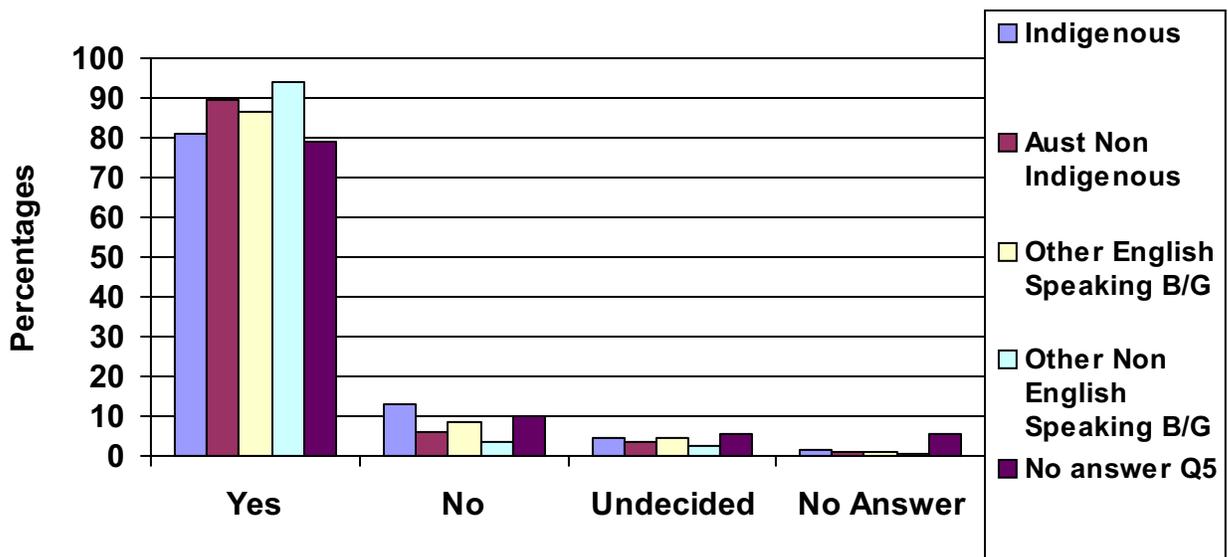
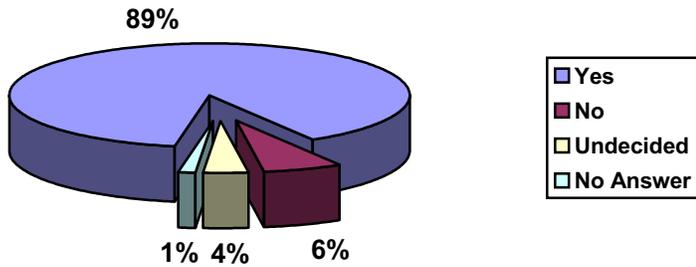
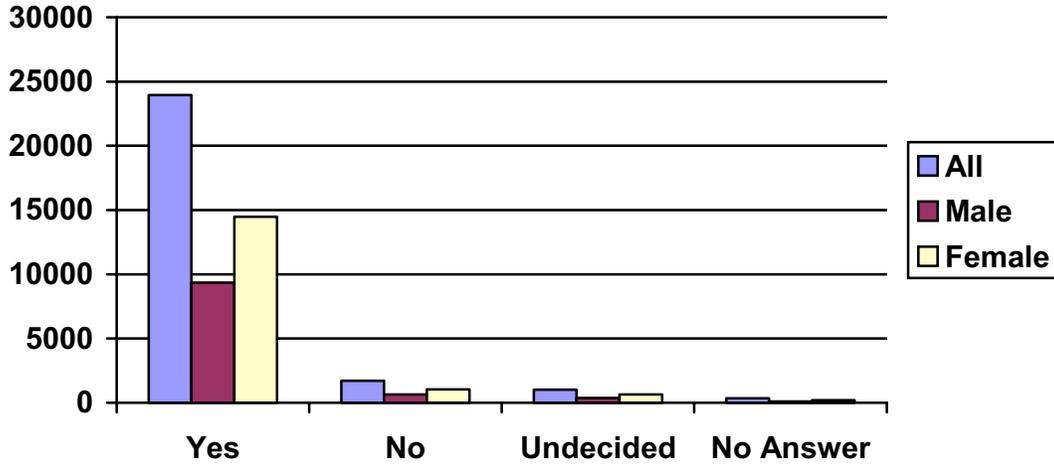


FIGURE 2

Question 2: Should people living in a same gender sexual relationship be ordained in the Uniting Church?

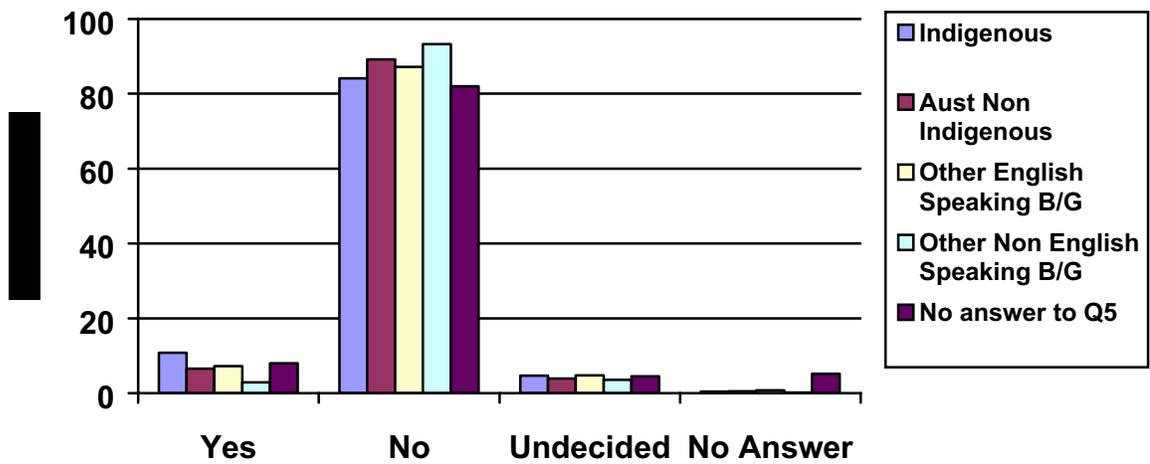
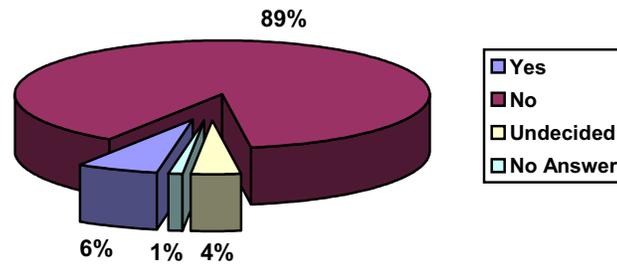
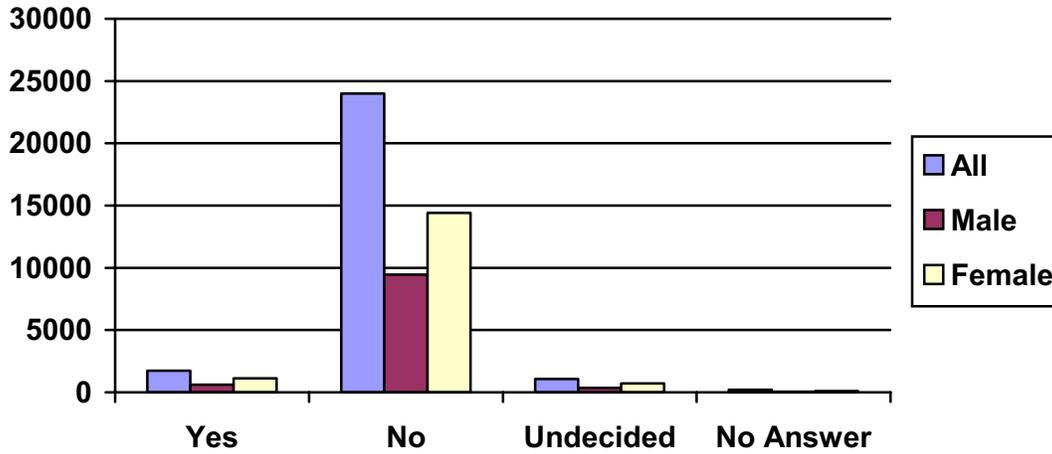


FIGURE 3

Question 3: Is the ordination of people living in a same gender sexual relationship an issue on which members of the Uniting Church should be directly consulted?

