

RESPONSES TO RESOLUTION 84

There is much in the life of the Uniting Church of Australia that we have good reason to cherish. Apart from many congregations meeting weekly to worship God, study the Scriptures, and spread his Word, there are our widespread network of welfare agencies, our efforts to achieve social justice for oppressed groups, our involvement in Aboriginal reconciliation, recognition of the status of women in the church, ministries to the outback, and development of the gifts of the laity. These are only some of the many activities of the Uniting Church that honour and display the spirit of Christ.

But some important issues are causing serious concern. Many people worry about what they see to be theological and moral drift, and oppressive structures. The Reforming Alliance Within the Uniting Church was formed in 2003 to promote reforms that will lead to a higher respect for the testimony of Scripture to the saving power of the Lord Jesus Christ and the holy lifestyle to which he calls us. The RA is not a one-issue organisation. But the immediate reason for its emergence has been the turmoil in congregations resulting from Resolution 84 of the 10th Assembly, and that is what this present statement deals with.

History

Since about 1985, the issue of what should be the church's attitude to homosexuality has been a matter of continuous debate. It was originally triggered by a request from a Victorian presbytery for a ruling on whether it could ordain a person who admitted to being a practising homosexual. The issue was referred to congregations across the nation for comment, resulting in an Interim Report which usefully opened up the whole area of human sexuality and faith. This in turn was referred to congregations for comment, eventually resulting in the presentation to the 8th Assembly in 1997 of a final report entitled "Uniting Sexuality and Faith."

On the face of it, this was clearly an extensive consultative process. But in fact there are grounds for saying that the voice of the congregations was not sufficiently heard. The prime movers knew what result they wanted and downplayed the voices of dissent. For example, the Task Group responsible for the Report had recruited competent social researcher Peter Bentley to summarise the many responses that had been received from congregations, and his summary revealed that something approaching a fifth of the people attending Uniting churches had made submissions, of whom over 90% disagreed with the stance taken by the Interim Report towards homosexual behaviour.

The minority group pushing for the change of attitude has pressed on, however, and the matter was raised again, at short notice, at the 10th Assembly. Resolution 84 was the result. More protests and petitions have caused the Assembly Standing Committee, which meets between Assemblies, to convene another consultation process in preparation for Assembly 2006. Stage 1 of this process requests church councils, from congregational to presbytery level, to report their reactions to Res. 84 by April 30th this year.

Church members may be forgiven for wondering if this is just another stalling tactic, given that the Assembly has already been given enough evidence that a great number of our people object to the implications of Res. 84, and there is general weariness at the thought of the debate dragging on for another three years. It would, however, be a mistake for such

people to sit back and make no further response. **Minority rule relies on majority apathy.** In the meantime, there is widespread evidence that a great many disillusioned individuals and even congregations are leaving the Uniting Church in increasing numbers.¹ Many are our best workers and most effective evangelists. We must stop the rot. The first step is to be clear what Res. 84 is about.

Resolution 84 and After

The original question had concerned the ordination of practising homosexuals. The 10th Assembly saw no prospect of getting agreement on the moral point at issue, and chose to treat it as a structural question, dropping it back in the laps of individual presbyteries, which one critic has described as setting moral standards by postcode.

Resolution 84 in summary

- It claimed that people interpret the Bible differently
- It acknowledged that two strong and conflicting views on sexual morality exist within the denomination, namely "CISAFIM" (celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage) and 'right relationships' (which, according to the Report, include long-term homosexual relationships).
- It called on all members to live together in peace and be "gracious enough to live in fellowship with people of faith who hold differing opinions."
- It reminded presbyteries to decide on ordinations case-by-case, and affirmed their right to ask questions about the applicant's views on sexuality.
- It requested the Assembly Standing Committee to provide guidelines for discussing such cases, in the light of anti-discrimination and anti-vilification laws.

Our Commentary

True, but not all these interpreters start from the assumption that the clear statement of Scripture stands over any cultural attitudes that tend in a different direction. For some Uniting theologians, the Bible is only a human account which they are free to adapt in the light of social change and contemporary opinions.

Three surveys, each based on over 20,000 responses (Bentley, EMU, Reforming Alliance), and a National Church Life Survey in Jan. 2004 have shown that the second interpretation is the view of a small minority. The Assembly declined to make a ruling on this moral issue, yet it admits that the two views directly conflict. Can they really be equally scriptural when so many committed Christians think otherwise?

What is the "faith" referred to here? Can such big moral differences exist in the one faith, especially as other big differences have also appeared in the denomination, e.g. with respect to the deity and resurrection of Christ. Are sections of the church (even in leadership) moving away from the apostolic faith affirmed in the *Basis of Union*? Reform is needed at several points.

Is this not a cop-out? Ought not the moral issue to be decided first, at denominational level, before taking up questions of ordination? Is it not the Assembly's responsibility to guard against departure from the *Basis of Union* in regard to interpreting the Gospel and ethic of Christ?

There is a hint here that presbyteries might find themselves in breach of the law if they did actually ask questions about an applicant's sexuality – UNLESS the top body had already taken a stand on the sexual standards affirmed by the denomination as a whole.

After the Assembly had concluded, and in the light of the turmoil Res. 84 had created, the Assembly Standing Committee was approached by many bodies asking that the resolution

¹ This is not all due to Res. 84. According to National Church Life Survey statistics, membership of the Uniting Church has halved since union, and is currently declining in numbers and rising in average age faster than any other major Christian tradition. This is why the concerns of the RA go beyond the issue raised in Res. 84.

be referred to other church councils. Initially the ASC said there was nothing it could do, and that in fact nothing had changed. Later, faced with a petition from 20,000 and requests from four synods, it reversed its decision to do nothing, issued amendments to Res. 84, and then set in motion the three-stage review in which we are presently engaged.

Summary of the ASC's Amendments to Res. 84:

- An Apology – The ASC conceded that not enough notice had been given of the intention to debate these issues at the 10th Assembly.
- A Clarification – The ASC made the point that the church was not sidestepping issues of sexual morality, having, in “the decisions of previous assemblies”, already made strong affirmations on marriage, divorce, and sexual ethics, including adoption of a Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice.
- A Ruling – that congregations and councils may choose, in their decision-making, to affirm a particular sexual ethic, provided that they show how they will pastor those who dissent from it, and that they decide on ordinations case-by-case.
- Deletions – The clauses referring to the viewpoints associated with ‘CISAFIM’ and ‘right relationships’ were deleted. These terms now have no official weight.

These amendments concede that the process was imperfect, but do not significantly alter the situation created by Res. 84.

Further Guidelines

Further guidelines on how to conduct the process have been issued by a group composed of the state moderators and presidents (ex-, present, and -elect). They say:

- Congregations and Councils may respond to all parts of the Resolution, and/or its implications as a whole. They may reflect a particular view or a range of perspectives.
- In particular:
 - Do you agree with parts and/or the whole?
 - Do the Assembly decisions accurately reflect previous decisions?
 - Given the present situation, how can the Assembly help the church in this area?

There is an element of cart before the horse in this. These questions should have been asked of congregations and other councils before the Assembly addressed the motion which is now Res. 84. However that may be, these guidelines leave the door open for any responses people wish to make on any parts of the overall question that churches wish to comment on.

We noted earlier that many congregations are tired of the merry-go-round of requests for reactions which in the event do not appear to have been taken into account. Don't give up now. If you think a previous submission from your church or council still basically represents what you believe, **send it in again, now.**

On the next page are a number of possible motions you, your congregation, or your presbytery might care to consider, in deciding how to respond to the ASC request for reactions to Res. 84. They are not necessarily consistent with each other, so it's not a package deal. Choose one or more that represent the level of agreement you feel able to reach. After all the debate that has gone on, you should not need to spend a long time spotting and debating those motions which reflect your situation. At this stage, if agreement is hard to reach on any particular motion, don't spend time on it.

The suggestions are in three groups. Depending on the situation in your church, you may only feel that you are able to propose motions of the kind in the first group.

A. Process Issues

1. This [group, congregation, or presbytery] welcomes the opportunity it has now been given to comment on issues related to Resolution 84 of the 10th Assembly.
2. We consider that it is the duty of the Assembly to deal with the moral issue raised by Resolution 84², rather than treating the matter as a purely structural one affecting presbyteries. We therefore urge the Assembly to do so.
3. We request that the Assembly Standing Committee meanwhile declare a moratorium on the ordination of practising homosexuals at least until the present review is complete.
4. Having regard to the weariness of the people at the years that have been spent in cycling discussions regarding homosexual practice, we deplore the prospect of another three years retracing the debate, and ask that a special Assembly be convened in 2004 to achieve closure on this issue.
5. In regard particularly to the special Assembly, we ask that a record be available to congregations of how each member voted on each substantive motion.³

B. Responses Related to the Moral Issue

6. This [congregation, presbytery] re-affirms the biblical standard of “celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage”, and calls on the Assembly to acknowledge that this principle is integral to the apostolic tradition it is committed to upholding.
7. We affirm the worth of all people in God’s sight, whatever their sexual orientation, and welcome them into our fellowship, covenanting to help them understand the Gospel of Christ, which assures us that whenever any of us fall into any kind of sin (sexual or otherwise) there is free forgiveness for us if we repent and resolve to live a new life according to the pattern of holy living into which Christ calls us.
8. This [congregation, presbytery] will not sanction the ordination or continuance in an ordained placement under its jurisdiction of anyone who is prepared to engage in same-gender sex.

C. Identification with the Reforming Alliance

9. We declare that our reading of the *Basis of Union*, which affirms the primary authority of the Scriptures in revealing the Person and Work of Christ and the holy living to which he calls us, leads us to endorse the objectives of the Reforming Alliance Within the Uniting Church of Australia.
10. To this end we encourage our people to become individual members of the Reforming Alliance, and will periodically update them on the progress of its objectives..
11. We will also apply for corporate membership of the Reforming Alliance, and in our general publicity we will refer to ourselves as “a Reforming Alliance [Congregation, Presbytery] Within the Uniting Church of Australia.”
12. Without prejudice to the theological and moral standards by which we have defined our mission, we shall take steps to continue in warm fellowship with individual members whose views differ from the majority on some points.
13. We authorise the treasurer to forward to the Reforming Alliance a donation of \$xx. for the year 2004.⁴

² As it has done with some other issues of sexual morality, as pointed out by the ASC amendments. Homosexual acts can hardly be viewed as irrelevant, when heterosexual acts outside marriage are seen to be sinful. Of course, some people in the Gay lobby are already pressing to have the word “marriage” extended to homosexual relationships as a way of legitimating them.

³ The rule that members vote as individuals, not delegates, needs review. But at the least, members should be obliged to let the constituencies which elected them know how they voted.

⁴ Membership of the Reforming Alliance is through the registration of one’s name and agreement with the objectives. It does not require a financial subscription, though voluntary contributions are very welcome.

A Note on Voting Procedures

The preferred method of decision-making in the Uniting Church is consensus. It is conceded, however, that sometimes, after more informal negotiations have failed to achieve resolution, things must be taken to a vote. In regard to the issues presently under discussion, consensus has been tried at many levels, but we appear to be stalled. Yet it is hard to see how there can be forward movement in the church without resolving them.

Voting it must be. But whatever motions are put, a substantial majority should feel led by God to support them. In matters of the kinds presently under debate, unanimity is most unlikely, and to require a unanimous vote would in effect be allowing the minority to overrule the majority. Many would say that this is exactly what has already happened at Assembly level. Equally, a mere 51% in favour of a motion would hardly be sufficient to enable a body to move forward in fellowship. Two procedures are suggested below.

*Note: it is essential that the meeting agree on procedures such as these **before** getting involved in discussion of the actual issues. A simple majority would be sufficient for this step.*

(a) Agree on what will count as an acceptable majority.

Suggest that the meeting adopt rules of the following kind:

- The vote in favour should be at least 65%.
- The vote against should not exceed 20%.
- People who wish to abstain from voting are entitled to have their abstention recorded. At the same time, abstention should be viewed as allowing majority vote to prevail if it is at least 65%. If a particular abstainer objected to this interpretation, they would effectively be saying they opposed the motion, and their abstention should be counted as a vote against.

(b) Protect the rights of dissenters

In the case of a decision in favour of the motion, the meeting should also spell out the ways in which the church will continue to welcome and pastor those who dissented. See motion 11 above.