

The Assembly Can and Must Make a Decision.

Peter Bentley, 28 September 2005

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held during the 2005 Victorian and Tasmanian Synod.*

It could be argued that the Uniting Church has two cakes at present.
One cake has the writing 'Right Relationships' on the top of the cake:
The Other cake has 'Chastity in Singleness and Faithfulness in Marriage'

It could also be argued that the Uniting Church has many cakes with many different inscriptions. I will stick with two cakes because most debate has been around two understanding and this was also the basis for the Assembly decision, even if it has now been changed or clarified, because it appears the Assembly did not know what it was voting for at the time.

While it is often stated that no cake has been explicitly endorsed as the right or only cake a member of the Uniting Church should eat, there are signs that there is really only one cake on the long-term menu. They are not equal cakes even though some rhetoric implies this.
I have met many people who imply that the 'right relationships cake' is the only cake we should partake because it has all the right ingredients for a true cake.

Tolerance; Inclusiveness; Grace; Mercy; Honesty. Above all it is made with love.
It would appear that some people think other cakes are incapable of having these ingredients as well.

If there is a perfect cake, what type of cake is it?
Your imagination is probably running wild thinking about this, but I will leave this cake with you.
Of course, the other cake is portrayed as a bit stodgy, could be a mud cake, for those who are perceived as being stuck in their old ways. Some say this cake doesn't really taste like a cake should, or worse that it is even full of poison.

We may have two cakes, but it is painfully clear to me from twenty years observing different councils of the Uniting Church that many of the people in leadership roles within the Uniting Church believe that we should only like one type of cake, and the other cake should be allowed to crumble away.

1. The Assembly Can Make a Decision

There is a view, promoted in some quarters that the Uniting Church Assembly cannot make a decision about which cake is the best.

When you have two cakes and perhaps really only want one, you can tend to do strange things, even for those who may believe the Uniting Church is a truly post-modern church.

An Assembly may choose not to rule on certain aspects of doctrine and polity, even though the Assembly has made decisions on related matters in the past, and even still attempts to make decisions. Some people say that in the case of same sex relationships the Assembly did not make definitive decisions because there were ethical decisions involved, rather than matters related to the Assembly's core roles and responsibilities, especially doctrine and liturgy.

These people are sadly mistaken, and really this is a classic case of having one's cake and eating it.

The Assembly has made many pronouncements before on issues related to sexuality, and has clearly done so in a doctrinal environment. It has also referred many matters for discussion to the Commission on Doctrine, and in the 1980s, the Assembly even set up a special committee to consider homosexuality. In 1997 the Assembly had before it a document with a whole range of recommendations about sexuality which it could have adopted. The Assembly approved some statements on sexuality, continuing its past practice, and confirming that it can make decisions on these matters.

Some of the most significant decisions the Assembly has made on sexuality have concerned marriage:

For example the context here is: *Uniting-Lutheran Dialogue in Australia*

DECLARATION OF MUTUAL RECOGNITION

by The Uniting Church in Australia and The Lutheran Church of Australia

9 November, 1999

“Point 3.9: Marriage

We believe that marriage is instituted by God and is intended as a relationship of mutual companionship in which husband and wife complement and serve each other.

“We hold that the strength and stability of marriage and family life is the expression of God's purpose for the well-being of the wider society. It is the God-given institution for the expression of sexual intimacy.”

(See Pastoral Statement on Marriage.)

The statement was considered within a doctrinal framework by both denominations, especially through the opinions of the relevant doctrinal groups of both bodies. The Uniting Church did not say at the time that it could not make a decision because it thought this was merely an ethical matter.

Even the 9th Assembly (2000) Minute 00.35.03, in approving the Declaration also agreed:

(d) to note that this approval is without prejudice to ongoing discussions on sexuality.

The Assembly was aware that it could make decisions on matters related to sexuality and probably would in the future.

Point 1 The Assembly can make decisions on matters of sexuality which have been at this time referred to presbyteries.

2. The Assembly is the appropriate council of the Church.

While there are many areas I could mention, due to time I want to briefly note six areas which illustrate why the Assembly is the appropriate council to make decisions on matters related to sexuality.

2.1 Doctrine

I have already mentioned before how doctrine has never been viewed as unrelated from the discussions on sexuality, and indeed, it was part of our antecedent churches tradition to consider the connection between belief and practice, with the holiness tradition of Methodism providing a classic example. To imply, as some do, that actions committed in private have no consequences for the wider church is not only unreasonable for a church with a strong Code of Ethics, it also illogical when one considers a current liberal trend which is directed towards developing rules and guidelines within the context of the idea of the whole church community.

2.2 Ecumenical Context

The Uniting Church Assembly has the overall responsibility for ecumenical relationships and if the Church is to take seriously its ecumenical commitment, let alone the faith and order of the church, then it should make a decision, and it should listen to our ecumenical dialogue partner churches. The overwhelming position of at least eight of these churches is a confirming understanding of a traditional view of sexual practice, as well as belief in the connection of right practice and right doctrine. (See end for paper for my list of the eight denominational ecumenical partners)

2.3 Government and Discipline - Polity

The decision of the Assembly has placed presbyteries in an invidious and odd position. Presbyteries have become mini-Assemblies, each perhaps understanding their role in a different way as well. Different presbyteries can seemingly make different decisions, and our practices may result in different levels of pulpit and even table fellowship within our own denomination.

It is also worth noting that The Lutheran and Uniting Church statement was referred to presbyteries for implementation, and I have often wondered if the statement has been informing presbyteries in their internal debates.

Has the Assembly actually suggested to presbyteries that each presbytery has a responsibility to affirm the Uniting Church position on marriage? Certainly I believe it is now technically possible to have a minister in a de facto relationship undertaking all the responsibilities of a marriage celebrant on behalf of the Uniting Church, while never wishing to make that public step personally.

There is also the need to have uniformity with discipline arrangements in presbyteries, or will we have different presbyteries making different decisions (at least initially), and Synods making different decisions as they interpret the Sexual Misconduct Regulations and also the Code of Ethics. All arrangements can have implications for other stages of the discipline process.

2.4 Worship

Worship is also a responsibility of the Assembly, and there are liturgical implications for any moves to legitimise relationships along the lines of ‘right relationships’ – including the arrangement of ceremonies for blessing same sex relationships and for de facto relationships.

There is also the issue of how these matters relate to our established doctrine.

In one of the earlier controversies (1991), the Commission on Liturgy made it plain that one of its main concerns was to stress that the blessing of a covenant relationship should in no way resemble the marriage service. This was also related to ecumenical concern at the time, as well as the church’s doctrine of marriage.

2.5 Reception for Ministers

There are also implications for the work of reception of ministers. We need to have consistent approaches which all presbyteries can readily work with, rather than allowing decisions by one part of the church to be rendered practically invalid by another presbytery.

2.6 Relations with Partner Churches

It is the Assembly, and not a presbytery, which has the primary role of relating to our partner churches, and the decisions of one presbytery (or more) should not be allowed to damage our partner relationships.

Point 2: The Assembly is the appropriate council to make decisions.

3. There is a view that the Assembly should not make a decision.

Some people believe that we should just let matters be as they are now. Let the church move forward, though when I ask where to, I always receive so many different ideas about the nature of the church and where we should move forward to, that it is difficult to sense any agreement, or alternatively a general belief in “mission”, that is seemingly designed to cover everything and anything.

Some people argue on the basis that the Assembly has a guiding role in determining what authority can be exercised by certain councils and it has determined the matter. Why has it not been consistent though – why has the Assembly been so liberal on the matter of sexuality?

I believe I have already outlined some of the reasons why the Assembly has the right, and therefore it should not shirk its responsibility. Why should it not make a decision on this matter when it has made decisions about related matters.

Point 3: On a practical and consistent level, the Assembly is the appropriate place for decision making.

4. What is the future for a church that has two cakes?

I believe the most likely outcome of the two cakes model is that the church will end up only sanctioning the eating of one cake. Even at this stage of the debate I have the impression that though some people say they like having two cakes, they actually only want the second cake if it is a cupcake, a token cake, without much substance or filling.

One of the dangers of a probable move to a one cake arrangement is that the focus will then be on the viability and appeal of the one or main cake. Many people who want more of a radical cake mix than the present 'right relationships' will campaign for a piece of the cake.

Now concerning my next point you may think I have gone completely crazy or lost the plot. What of marriage for example? Some presbyteries may view marriage as a good idea, perhaps others may eventually decide that marriage is a tool of oppression by men, and decline to endorse or encourage marriage within their bounds.

What about baptism? Some may regard baptism as a sacrament, others may decide that naming ceremonies, still complete with baptismal certificates, are really the best way to provide a service in a post-Christian environment.

While these examples no doubt seem extreme, especially because the Assembly has positions on these matters, I ask you to consider that many members of the church, did not foresee the day when the Uniting Church would move from a basis and understanding of traditional Christian standards for sexual practice, especially without an explicit decision sanctioning this dramatic change.

In a time of individual cake making, the message needs to be made clear so that members of the church can make a decision now, rather than to be told down the track, sorry, but there is only one true cake now allowed.

The Assembly can make a decision, and for the sake of the future of the Uniting Church, it should make a decision that respects our polity, honours our traditions, and keeps the Uniting Church firmly connected to our ecumenical dialogue partners and partner churches as part of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Peter Bentley: 28 September 2005

Ecumenical Partners as noted in Point 2.2: (not all dialogues are active at present)

Anglican Church of Australia

Baptist Church

Churches of Christ

Greek Orthodox

Lutheran Church

Oriental Orthodox Churches

Salvation Army

Roman Catholic Church