

## **THE GOSPEL, THE CHURCH AND HUMAN SEXUALITY SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE WAY**

The following reflections identify what I consider are some of the major theological and doctrinal issues with which the UCA will have to deal if it is to adequately address the issue of the ordination of persons practicing homosexuality.

### **1. THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY – THE LONG DUREE**

- 1.1 Most major theological controversies have engaged the church over a long period of time. One Anglican theologian, commenting on the current debate within the Anglican Church, suggested that the debate over the ordination of persons involved in homosexual relationships is the most substantial that that church has had to deal with since the time of King Henry VIII.
- 1.2 The Christological and Trinitarian controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries engaged the church in difficult, painful, and even dangerous debates that were only finally resolved in ecumenical councils. Let us remind ourselves that the debate over what was to be accepted as orthodox Christology raged throughout the third century and came to a head at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. That council, the first ecumenical council, was attended by 318 bishops and was held from May to August of that year.
- 1.3 In the end, the debate came down to a dispute over one letter – is Jesus *homoousios* with the Father or *homoiousios* with the Father? Was Jesus of the same substance or being as the Father or was he of like being with the Father? The Council finally decided on the *homoousios*. I would suggest that the church down through the ages bears the fruit of the hard work that was done by that Council. Some left that Council clearly identified as heterodox in their Christology. Other left the Council confirmed that they held to an orthodox Christology. There were “winners” and “losers” but I would contend that the whole church catholic became a “winner” because of the work of those bishops in council and because the Holy Spirit lead them into an appropriate understanding of Christology. Nothing less than an adequate understanding of the saving work of Jesus Christ was considered to be at stake in that debate.
- 1.4 Theological controversy provides an opportunity for the church identify the theological and doctrinal issues, to expose and test assumptions, and to seek for a better understanding and clearer articulation of the gospel, the light of the revelation of the grace and truth of God that are in Jesus Christ. The Uniting Church in Australia is currently in the process of engaging a major theological controversy that involves a number of important theological and doctrinal issues, some of which are dealt with briefly in the following material.

### **2. CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY**

2.1 How is humanity to be understood? Is humanity created in the image of God, humanity as male and female? What does it mean to be created male and female? Does being made in the image of God relate to how sexuality is expressed? The recent statement from the Roman Catholic Church, *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons* (3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2003) understands that being made in the image of God clearly relates to the expression of sexuality. To quote from that document:

*There are three fundamental elements of the Creator's plan for marriage, as narrated in the Book of Genesis.*

*In the first place, man, the image of God, was created "male and female" (Gen 1:27). Men and women are equal as persons and complementary as male and female. Sexuality is something that pertains to the physical-biological realm and has also been raised to a new level – the personal level – where nature and spirit are united.*

*Marriage is instituted by the Creator as a form of life in which a communion of persons is realized involving the use of the sexual faculty. "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24).*

*Third, God has willed to give the union of man and woman a special participation in his work of creation. Thus, he blessed the man and the woman with the words "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28). Therefore, in the Creator's plan, sexual complementarity and fruitfulness belong to the very nature of marriage.*

2.2 How is homosexuality to be understood in the light of creation of humanity as male and female in the image of God? Does God create male and female and, within that polarity and complementarity, create some males who are sexually oriented in their very beings (whether that be genetically, psychologically, or however else that possibility is described) towards males and some females who are sexually oriented in their very beings towards females, whilst, at the same time, creating males and females who are heterosexually oriented?

2.3 How does being created in the image of God as male and female relate to being part of the new creation in Christ Jesus? Does being in Christ eliminate our maleness and femaleness"? Some readings of Galatians 3:28 ("There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, **there is no longer male and female**; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.") would suggest "Yes". However, we need to be aware of Paul's argument that **our status in Christ** does not depend upon our being male or female, Jew or Greek, etc. Our being in Christ does not depend upon such things. That status, our being in Christ, rests solely and securely upon God's gracious action towards us and for us in Jesus Christ. However, whilst distinctions like those that Paul lists are excluded as a basis for such a status, they are not eliminated *per se*. Are there still male and female in the new Creation? Yes, but gender is no basis for identity in Christ. [This theme of the new creation and creation in the

image of God is picked up in a number of places in the Pauline literature: Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:9, 10; 2 Cor. 5:17. See also the references to marriage by Paul and Jesus: Matt. 19:4-6; 1 Cor. 6:16; 7:2, 8-9.]

- 2.4 What part does the socialization process play in the formation of personal identity and sexual orientation? If a person is socialized in society and in church where attitudes and role models are not free from the damaging influence and effects of sin, how can one determine what impact the sinful aspects of church and society have had in shaping identity? How does one distinguish between sexual orientation, sinful influences and sinful inclination? [Some have described options alluded to in 2.2 and 2.4 as the **nature** versus **nurture** (although "influence" might be a better term than "nurture").
- 2.5 How is the new identity in Christ to be reconciled to the old identity of a person with a homosexual orientation or engaging in homosexual behaviour? Are there certain things that are "beyond redemption" because they are "natural" in the sense of being a "given" of a person's creaturely existence?
- 2.6 These are complex questions without easy answers. Nevertheless, the ongoing discussion of such questions must take adequate account of the reality of sin and its pervasive and subtle impact upon our thinking, feeling, willing, and acting.

### **3. GRACE**

- 3.1 The debate on homosexuality and ordination has been going for some twenty years in the Uniting Church. **The debate is not Law versus Grace.** For me, that is a Lutheran way of conceiving the issue and how the church might deal with it. The Reformed branch of our tradition has always valued "law" and has not accepted a dichotomy between Law and Grace. (However, it has been aware of "legalism" which is a quite different matter.) John Calvin spoke of a threefold purpose for the Law. Firstly, the Law acts as a restraining force in society guarding it from sinful behaviour and violence. Thus, it benefits not only the Christian citizen but also all citizens. Secondly, the Law is a *pedagogos* or "schoolmaster" leading people to Jesus Christ. And thirdly, the Law reveals God's will in general terms and provides guidance for Christian persons for their Christian life.
- 3.2 **The debate is not about the reception of sinners into the church.** Our Protestant heritage makes it amply clear that we are incorporated into Christ, we receive forgiveness of sins, adoption as children of God, membership in the body of Christ, and new life in Him, solely on the basis of the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ, in his life given in sacrificial love for the world. That is, our being incorporated into the church is solely on the basis of the grace of God in Jesus Christ received by faith. This is what the Reformation debates about justification were all about. I would hope that the debate about sexuality is not about revisiting that understanding of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.
- 3.3 **The UCA, in conducting its debate around the issue of the appropriateness of ordaining those who claim homosexual**

**orientation or who are actively engaged in homosexual expression, has now arrived at a situation where the church is clearly polarized (and deeply divided?).** In the process, two catch-cries of the Reformation – *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia* – have found expression in particular ways.

3.4 Some have argued that the **grace of God** is pre-eminent, and that all are welcomed by Christ into the church. Thus, the issue is about **inclusivity**. Others have argued that homosexual expression is contrary to the teaching of **scripture** and have wanted to uphold the authority of the scriptures in this matter. Thus, the matter is about conformity to the revealed will of God and **holiness**. It is not, however, a matter of either **grace** or **scripture**. Those who argue on the basis of **grace** appeal to the scriptures to support their argument. Those who argue on the basis of **scripture** do not exclude **grace**, and argue strongly that **grace** is effectual because it brings about transformation (sanctification).

3.5 **The debate is, in part, about how the UCA understands grace** (which is not about God's unconditional love, but about God's undeserved love). In one sense, it is about how the doctrine of sanctification is to be understood, particularly in relation to the doctrine of justification. At the time of the reformation, the debate that engaged the church resulted, in part, from a confusion or drawing together of these two doctrines. Language that the Reformers (and the New Testament) used exclusively for sanctification was used by the Roman Catholic Church in relation to justification. It seems that much of the debate in the UCA in recent years is in danger of running these two doctrines together again.

#### **4. SCRIPTURE – WHAT IS IT & HOW IS IT TO BE INTERPRETED?**

4.1 With reference to the former, there are at least two positions to be considered, namely that held by individual members of the UCA and that held by the UCA in its official documents (e.g. Basis of Union and the reports and resolutions of the Assembly). In 2000, the Assembly reaffirmed "the centrality of reading and studying the Bible for the enhancement of every aspect of the life of the Uniting Church" (Assembly Minute 00.29.02 as part of the Assembly resolutions associated with the report of the "Task Group on the Understanding and Use of the Bible"). In the report of that Task Group received by the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly, reference was made to seven broad perspectives on biblical authority held within the British Methodist Church which, the report suggested, "does give a sense of the breadth of views found within a church like ours." (4.2.3 (c)). These seven perspectives are indicative of the range of opinions held by individual members in the UCA.

4.2 The seven perspectives identified were:

- The Bible is the Word of God and is therefore inerrant (free of all error and entirely trustworthy in everything which it records) and has complete authority in all matters of theology and behaviour.
- The Bible's teaching about God, salvation and Christian living is entirely trustworthy. It cannot be expected however, to provide entirely accurate scientific or historical information since this is not its purpose.

- The Bible is the essential foundation on which Christian faith and life are built. However, its teachings were formed in particular historical and cultural contexts, and must therefore be read in that light.
- The Bible's teaching, while foundational and authoritative for Christians, needs to be interpreted by the Church. In practice it is the interpretation and guidance offered by church leaders and preachers which provides authoritative teaching.
- The Bible is one of the main ways in which God speaks to the believer. However, the movement of God's Spirit is free and unpredictable, and it is what the Spirit is doing today that is of the greatest importance.
- The Bible witnesses to God's revelation of himself through history and supremely through Jesus Christ. However, the Bible is not itself that revelation, but only the witness to it.
- The Bible comprises a diverse and often contradictory collection of documents, which represent the experiences of various people in various times and places. The Christian's task is to follow, in some way, the example of Christ.

4.3 Having acknowledged this breadth of perspectives on the Bible held by individual members of the UCA, that Task Group's report (in Section 4.2.6) does go on to state the relationship between the Bible and the Word of God:

*To what or whom do we refer when we speak of "word of God" or "Word of God?" The Basis of union is very clear (para 4) that "Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives new life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist." The Bible is described in the Basis (para. 5) as "unique prophetic and apostolic testimony." This in no way diminishes the significance of the Bible for the church's preaching of Jesus Christ is "controlled by the Biblical witnesses" (para 4). Jesus Christ is the Word of God but we have no access to Him without the witness of scripture. It has been the custom of the Church to refer to the Bible as word of God. Jesus as Word of God and Bible as word of God are inextricably bound together.*

4.4 That report went on to note (Section 4.2.7):

*Though we might hope that differing ways of interpreting the Bible within the church might be energizing and helpful, the opposite is often true. **Debates about biblical interpretation are often divisive and inconclusive.** It is time for the church to move on beyond the present impasse towards fresh ways of valuing, using and interpreting the Bible. While scholars have a role to play in this process such a breakthrough must grow organically over many years from within the life of the church reclaiming and befriending the Scriptures as a life-giving, transformative and faith building gift of God to the Church.*

4.5 Paradoxically, at the same Assembly, a Statement on Unity and Diversity, arising out of ongoing consultations on the issue of sexuality, was adopted and commended to all Synods, Presbyteries and Congregations (Minute 00.25.33). In that statement, the following affirmation was made:

We affirm

- *The authority of the Scriptures as defined in the Basis of Union, acknowledging that **within the church there is a range of views on questions of Biblical interpretation on various matters of Christian faith and practice.***

4.6 This debate over the interpretation of Scripture will go on and on and will, I suggest, be inconclusive, at least in the short term. The UCA does not have, as the RC church has, Tradition and the Magisterium as checks upon its hermeneutical engagement with Scripture. Why? Because there is a growing diversity of interpretive methodologies and only recently has there begun to emerge an attempt to engage the question of how hermeneutical pluralism is to be disciplined in the Christian Church (particularly the Protestant branch of the church). Susan Gillingham (*One Bible, Many Voices: Different Approaches to Biblical Studies*, Eerdmans: 1998, 231) comments helpfully:

*Towards the end of his six-hundred-page work on biblical hermeneutics, Anthony Thiselton's last pages focus entirely on the issue of what he calls 'hermeneutical pluralism'. By this, Thiselton means the tension between the need for openness to each and every mode of interpreting the biblical text, and at the same time the need to exercise some discretion over this openness, lest pluralism itself becomes another ideology. The irony in a pluralistic approach is that it too can become a dogma...*

*An appeal to read the Bible in a pluralistic way is thus in need of some sort of self-critique. Thiselton, as a Christian theologian, proposes that this could be achieved by the new horizons which are found in the cross and resurrection: the **cross**, because it reverses all our expectations about what is effective, and challenges our very concept of the power and understanding, and even alienates us from all we may believe about 'wisdom, religion and power politics of...society'; and the **resurrection**, because it offers us a world-view which cannot be evaluated by any systematic predetermined way of thinking about the Bible as Scripture **and** an open-ended, liberal, pluralistic way of thinking about biblical texts. The ultra-orthodox and ultra-liberal approaches to the Bible are equally extreme, and the truth may well lie somewhere between the two.*

I quote Gillingham's work simply to indicate that, in the midst of the methodological pluralism for the interpretation of Scripture in the current debate, there has to be a recognition that pluralism needs to be "disciplined" by the gospel. By advocating "discipline", I am not, however, advocating "control" for that would be dangerous, and ultimately destructive. Nevertheless, biblical interpretation must be in the service of the gospel. In recent years, there has begun to emerge an awareness that biblical interpretation done in isolation from systematic theology (and vice versa) does not necessarily serve the gospel nor the church.

## **5. DEALING WITH DIVERSITY**

5.1 The recent experience of the UCA has shown just how divisive (and inconclusive?) the debate about biblical interpretation vis-à-vis homosexuality can be. And the UCA, in the midst of this debate and division, affirmed, in afore-mentioned statement, “that the church’s work and unity are built upon the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ” and that “we are bound together by Christ”, whilst acknowledging “our diversity as servants of the living God.”

**5.2 I would contend that the Ninth (2000) and Tenth Assemblies (2003) have begun to redefine the understanding of diversity in the UCA.** The Basis of Union does speak of diversity in the church. However, it does so in a particular way, namely with reference to the gifts of its members which are to be used for the building up of the whole (Para. 3). This diversity of gifts is acknowledged with thanksgiving because “the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ’s Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service” because “all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ” (Para. 13). That is, the Basis of Union uses “diversity” in relation to *charismata* or *gifts*.

5.3 However, the Ninth Assembly’s “Statement on Unity and Diversity” used “diversity” with reference to a number of matters. It noted that there is a diversity of viewpoints on “committed same sex relationships and ordination”, whilst also acknowledging “the diverse gifts of all church members”. (Minute 00.25.03) It also acknowledged, as noted above, a diversity (although the word “range” was actually used) “of views on questions of Biblical interpretation on various matters of Christian faith and practice.”

5.4 The question needs to be asked whether the Ninth Assembly, in this very process of acknowledging and giving status to a modified understanding of diversity, together with the naming of the seven broad perspectives towards the Bible, laid the platform (or simply acknowledged its existence) for the UCA to become the firstly truly post-modern church in Australia.

## **6. THE CHURCH’S CONFSSIONAL AND EVANGELICAL HERITAGE**

6.1 How does the UCA embrace both its confessional (Presbyterianism and Congregationalism) and evangelical (Methodist) heritage? Although the nuanced wording of the Basis of Union indicates that its framers did not want the UCA to go down the path of something like the Scots or Westminster Confessions of faith, the Basis of Union could still be described as a “minimalist confessional document”.

6.2 The Basis of Union contains some key statements about Christology, church, scripture, soteriology, and sacraments. However, it is “confessional” in a different sense than The Scots Confession of Faith (1560), The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) and it can hardly be compared to the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Savoy Declaration (1658). The status and role of the Basis in the life of the UCA have been the subjects of ongoing, and I would contend, unresolved debates in the church. Do we know what it means to be “guided by the Basis of Union”?

## **7. THE AFTERMATH OF DECADES OF THEOLOGICAL LIBERALISM IN MAINSTREAM PROTESTANTISM**

7.1 One of the issues facing the UCA at this time is how three to four decades of liberal theological influence in the life of mainstream Protestantism is to be reconciled with an orthodox Trinitarian theology. Although there are pitfalls in claiming to be orthodox, there is a groundswell of support for those doctrines that were hammered out in the ecumenical councils of the church and which are set forward in summary form in the Apostles and Nicene Creed. This groundswell is described by Thomas Oden (*The Rebirth of Orthodoxy*) and others as a return to "orthodoxy". How are such different theological approaches or emphases to be accommodated in the UCA (or any church for that matter) if the church is to faithfully pass on the apostolic tradition? These differences come into sharp focus in the debates within the councils of the church where presuppositions, theological convictions, personal experiences, and ethical frameworks swirl in dynamic (and sometimes destructive) tension around such issues as human sexuality and how it is expressed.

## **8. DOING DOCTRINAL WORK IN THE UCA**

8.1 **How does a church in the Protestant tradition, without confessional statements, and with an openly acknowledged, nay endorsed, diversity of understandings of Scripture [in spite of, or, perhaps, because of, what the Basis of Union says about scripture], and interpretive approaches, do its theological and doctrinal work.** Given that the 2000 Assembly of the UCA officially acknowledged a range of diversities (e.g. in relation to how people understand and interpret scripture), how does the UCA do its theology and doctrine through the Assembly? I would suggest that it does not do it all that well at the moment. I give three examples from 1991 to the present:

- (i) The first relates to ordination. In 1991, in making decisions about the renewed diaconate, the Assembly committed the church to a new theological understanding of ordination. It adopted the notion of one ordination and two commissionings. In 1994, with the assistance of the Assembly Commission on Doctrine, changed that decision to two ordinations.
- (ii) The second relates to the changes to church structures that were approved by the 1997 Assembly. That decision, as we all know, approved the establishment of a single Church Council. That, in itself may have been a sound decision. However, it left elders dangling in theological space because there did not seem to be any awareness that it was substantially changing the theological basis of eldership. Prior to 1997, eldership was about corporate oversight. The Elders' Council had corporate oversight of a congregation. Individuals were chosen and commissioned as elders and became part of that corporate episcopate. Eldership was both a corporate responsibility and an individual responsibility.

After 1997, eldership was about individuals called elders who were, in some way part of the Church Council which now had the responsibility of corporate oversight. The nuances of the changes seem to have escaped the Assembly and the 2000 Assembly was confronted with the theological loose ends that it had created. The Assembly appeared to me to be sadly lacking in critical theological acumen on this issue. The question of what it means for the UCA to be “guided by its Basis of Union” remains rather problematic in relation to this issue.

- (iii) If the Assembly was unable to get it right on what I consider to be reasonably straightforward issues, it faced an uphill battle when it set itself to address the question of homosexuality and ordination and such has proved to be the case. What are some of the indicators that the UCA has a problem in doing good theology and developing clear doctrinal positions on this matter. I would suggest that, in choosing to use a Task Group rather than the Assembly Commission on Doctrine, the Assembly clearly signalled where its commitment to sound theology and doctrine lay. An Assembly Commission clearly committed to rigorous theological work in the Reformed and Evangelical tradition was marginalized. I will say no more on this matter.

8.2I thus consider that the UCA faces a major challenge. On the one hand it encourages theology, but on the other hand, theology within the confessional orthodoxy of the traditions that came into the Uniting Church is in danger of being marginalized. Thus, the Assembly Commission on Doctrine made its last major contribution to the Assembly in 1994 when it helped the Assembly to get out of the hole it had dug for itself in 1991 with one ordination, two commissionings. Its subsequent demise and the establishment of the Working Group on Doctrine have left theologians in the church asking just how serious the Assembly is about its theological and doctrinal enterprise. This is not to imply that the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine has not made contributions on certain matters referred to it. It does, however, raise the question of why certain matters are referred by the Assembly to task groups when they are primarily about theology and doctrine.

8.3Christiaan Mostert, in an article “Is the Uniting Church Serious about Doctrine” (*Marking Twenty Years: The Uniting Church in Australia 1977-97* edited by William W. Emilsen and Susan Emilsen, UTC: 1997, 269) wrote:

*It is ...striking that when the 6<sup>th</sup> Assembly wanted to commission a report on the church's response to changing patterns of human relationships and sexual activity, it appointed a sexuality task group. It did not see this as primarily a doctrinal matter. It wanted to ensure broad and open discussion, and asked the Standing Committee 'to appoint the members of the task group, ensuring that it is constituted by a broad range of views and expertise – theological, ethical, biblical, medical and sociological'. One can agree that the breadth of expertise is essential for the investigation of a set of issues as complex as sexuality, but in the event there was not one recognized theologian in the membership of the task group! Finally, when the Assembly Standing Committee recently received a close-to-final draft of the revised report on sexuality, to be discussed at the eighth Assembly (Perth, July 1997),*

*it discussed a recommendation that a task group be established to report on the matter of the authority of the Bible. All well and good; but when the suggestion was made that this might instead be referred to the Commission on Doctrine, it was like a lead balloon. One might reasonably have thought that this is precisely the kind of task that should be given to a Doctrine Commission.*

*...By-passing the Doctrine Commission is not necessarily the same thing as relegating doctrine to a marginal position, though they may go hand in hand. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the Commission on Doctrine has a very low status in the Uniting Church.*

8.4 The next question that needs to be asked is whether the Assembly has the capacity, with its current structures and processes, to determine doctrine. It appears to me that the current process, through a triennial Assembly, for dealing with theological and doctrinal matters is somewhat inadequate. If the Assembly is the council with responsibility for determining doctrine, is there a better way to go about the task of doing sound theological work and doctrinal development that will serve the ministry and mission of the church? (c.f. The Roman Catholic Church's commitment at the Second Vatican Council from 1962-1965 indicates the seriousness of the theological and doctrinal enterprise in that tradition. Papers were presented and represented in draft after draft until there was general agreement on the substance contained in each document. The approach of that church is to test any theological novelty against the tradition and also to test it against their commitment to a natural law approach to theological ethics. When the final votes were taken on substantive matters in that council, the votes were in the order of 2000 members "for" and 10 "against".) Perhaps consideration needs to be given to dedicating every fourth Assembly to engagement with theological and doctrinal issues, with a doubling of the time that the Assembly meets for these "doctrinal" assemblies. Careful consideration needs to be given to finding a better way for the Assembly to do its theological and doctrinal work, noting, of course, that theological and doctrinal matters do not emerge in the life of the church in a carefully scheduled way.

8.5 Notwithstanding my earlier comment about substantial majorities in Vatican II, the truth does not necessarily lie with the majority. There have been times in the history of the church when various forms of heterodoxy or heresy have held sway over extended periods, only to be later refuted and subsequently rejected as the Holy Spirit has guided the church more fully into the truth that is in Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, conflicting voices within the tradition were often heard. Perhaps one of the most obvious examples is in the book of Jeremiah. That book portrays Jeremiah, a minority voice, in conflict with other "prophetic" voices. With hindsight, the covenant community came to accept that the "word" that Jeremiah proclaimed was truly from the LORD.

## **9. SOURCES AND FORMATIVE FACTORS IN THEOLOGY**

9.1 Where does authority lie and what weighting is to be given to the various components of the theological enterprise? It seems that human experience has been given a pre-eminent place in recent discussions and debates about

sexuality, and the contemporary cultural is also an extremely strong influence. Have we moved through the history of the church from

<b>Catholicism</b>	<b>Protestantism</b>	<b>UCA (?)</b>	
<b>1. Church</b>	<b>1. Scripture</b>	<b>1. Experience</b>	<b>1. Scripture</b>
<b>2. Tradition</b>	<b>2. Church</b>	<b>2. Church</b>	<b>2. Church</b>
<b>3. Scripture</b>	<b>3. Experience</b>	<b>3. Scripture</b>	<b>3. Experience</b>
<b>4. Experience (?)</b>			

“REASON” is common to all of the above. This is not meant to imply that the UCA does not stand within the Protestant stream of the Christian church. It does, however, indicate that a major emphasis has been placed upon individual experience in recent discussions and debates.

REVELATION is the primary source of theology and is, as John Macquarrie [*Principles of Christian Theology – Revised Edition* London: SCM; 1977, 7] has pointed out, “a basic category in theological thinking.” CULTURE should also be added to the list of sources and formative factors in theology. The relationship between theology and culture is a highly complex one as the church does its theology in particular cultural contexts and draws upon the language used in those contexts to expound its theology and doctrine.

9.2 The warning of John Macquarrie is worth noting at this point [1977, 18]:

*Exaggeration of one or other of the formative factors must lead to theological distortion. Too much stress on experience is the cause of individualism, enthusiasm and, at the worst, fanaticism. A too rigid emphasis on revelation, and on the scripture and tradition which mediate it, leads to obscurantism, antiquarianism, ultra-conservatism. Those who lean too far in accommodating theology to the mood of the culture or of trying to exhaust its content in terms of what can be rationally established apart from religious experience and revelation end up with a shallow modernism or rationalism from which the distinctive religious content has been eliminated. Heresy (the word seems to have meant originally “taking for oneself,” that is to say, “individual preference”) is just the distorted kind of theology that arises from the exaggeration of one element at the expense of others.*

## **10. CHURCH AND CULTURE**

10.1 Our recent debates have raised the profoundly difficult question of whether the church is conforming to cultural expressions that, through an increasing acceptance in the community, are moving towards cultural “norms”. Will Generation X-ers raise an eyebrow in twenty or thirty years time when people openly say they are actively engaged in a homosexual relationship? Many in the debate argue that the teachings of scripture that refer explicitly to homosexual behaviour relate to specific cultural settings and are not relevant in our new cultural context, characterized by greater knowledge of the human condition.

10.2 I would like to offer a brief comment on scripture and the issue of whether its teaching is culture or context-specific **versus** transcultural or enduring.

The distinction between these usually involves an ongoing process of communal discernment in the light of the gospel and under the guidance of the Spirit. The gospel creates its own culture. The world does not absorb the Word but the Word absorbs the world. The gospel culture critiques both the dominant contemporary culture and also, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, leads the church to a fuller understanding of the truth that is in Christ Jesus and to a fuller expression of the freedom that that truth gives. In that process, the church discerns those aspects of its tradition and practice that are culture bound.

10.3 Some argue that the church's received understanding on homosexual activity as a sin is a culture-bound or culture-specific understanding that must now give way in the light of our better understanding of the human condition and those aspects of the culture of the New Testament era that no longer pertain to our new context. That is, the church is involved in a communal discernment process about valid expressions of human sexuality in the light of the gospel. The key question here is whether the dominant culture is shaping the church culture or whether the gospel is creating its own culture. The answer to that question requires discernment of the whole church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

## **11. HUMAN EXPERIENCE**

11.1 Our recent debates have raised the profoundly difficult but nonetheless fundamentally important issue of how the church understands human experience, how that understanding relates to the church's pneumatology, and how those, in turn, inform the whole theological enterprise. If, as Luke Timothy Johnson contends, the church "is called to discern the work of God in human lives and to adapt its self-understanding in response to the work of God" (in *Theology and Sexuality* 2002, 372), how is that to be done? How is the church to deal with claims to the work of God in human experience that contradict scripture and tradition?

11.2 In terms of theological method, **the UCA has, at least in its official reports, accepted homosexual orientation or identity and, more recently, (it could be argued) homosexual behaviour, as "givens" and has proceeded to engage the scriptures with those "givens", particularly the former, as more or less non-negotiable. Where does that lead hermeneutically and theologically? It leads to novel and imaginative readings of the scriptures.**

11.3 **These "givens" needs to be revisited by the UCA** if it is to do justice to the complexity of the human condition, the reality of sin which impacts upon individuals, churches and the society at large, and produces all sorts of distorting and destructive identities and influences, and to deal with the available scientific and psychological knowledge with honesty and integrity. What evidence is currently available from scientists, psychologists and sociologists in relation to the emergence of sexual identity? In that process, the church needs to do careful "exegesis" of the "evidence" and opinions of researchers in the fields of biology and genetics as there is clearly evidence that these fields of research have themselves become, to varying degrees, polarized (sometimes because of *apriori* commitments). To be fair to the

whole process, such research should also take into account research into heterosexual orientation, identity and behaviour.

## **12. CHARIS, CALL, CHARISMATA, CHARACTER AND CONDUCT**

12.1 God is free to be gracious, to call and to bestow gifts upon any person God chooses. The Spirit blows where it wills. However, because God calls and gifts a person does not mean that that person's character is wholly conformed to the gospel, nor his or her conduct wholly consistent with the will of God. Recognition of a person's call should never be confused with legitimation of his or her conduct.

12.2 Consequently, the church must discern a person's call to ministry and distinguish between his or her gifts, morality and psychological makeup (or, to express it slightly differently, between charisms, conduct and character) of persons called to ministry. Persons may have gifts that would equip them well for ministry. That does **not** necessarily mean that their morality is consequently acceptable. Nevertheless, it is not to be doubted that the Holy Spirit is active in the lives of those whom God calls to ministry, nor is it to be questioned that the Holy Spirit is in the process of sanctifying those called to ministry, even when there is evidence of sin in their lives, for God does not call us because we have attained sinless perfection. God calls us because God is gracious.

## **13. SEXUAL RIGHTS?**

13.1 Is sexual expression a "right" and has the language and understanding of rights influenced our current debate? The report *Uniting Sexuality and Faith* caricatured some of the Old Testament teaching on human sexual expression as "populate or perish", but it needs to be asked whether the spirit of the age suggests that the popular approach to the expression of human sexuality is "copulate or perish". Suggestions of discipline and restraint in relation to the expression of human sexuality in obedience to the gospel stand in some tension with an emphasis on the "rights" of persons to sexual intimacy.

13.2 It is argued by some that people have the right to experience and express sexual intimacy in homosexual relationship. A "Letter to the Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons" offers a different perspective when it states:

*What, then, are homosexual persons to do who seek to follow the Lord? Fundamentally, they are called to enact the will of God in their life by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross. That Cross, for the believer, is a fruitful sacrifice since from that death come life and redemption. While any call to carry the cross or to understand a Christian's suffering in this way will predictably be met with bitter ridicule by some, it should be remembered that this is the way to eternal life for all who follow Christ.*

- 13.3 Acknowledging the particular emphasis of the Roman Catholic Church should not blind us to the fact that this represents an approach that is vastly different from a “rights” based approach.

#### **14. RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS OR TELEOLOGICAL EQUIVALENCE?**

- 14.1 Are homosexual relationships morally equivalent to marriage? Are they teleologically equivalent? That is, do they have the same purpose or end? If all relationships in the Christian community are to be informed by the gospel, to participate in the communion of the Holy Spirit, and thus to be doxological, is that the *telos* (“purpose” or “end”) of both marriage and same-gender relationships? How does one deal with the dimension of procreativity that is unique to the marriage relationship? Is there a *telos* that relates to the **salvific purpose of God**, that is, a *telos* that is common to all relationships between Christians, and another *telos* that relates to the **creative purpose of God** that is unique to those who are married?
- 14.2 How is the issue of human sexuality and its expression to be understood in light of the doctrines of creation, sin and salvation (justification and sanctification)? What is the God-given *telos* or *purpose* of sexually explicit relationships? What makes “right relationships” “right”, and what is the God-given purpose of such relationships? Are same-sex relationships morally equivalent to traditional marriage between a man and a woman? If so, are they also teleologically equivalent? In what ways? If they are not teleologically equivalent, in what sense are they “right”?
- 14.3 How are the doctrines of creation and salvation to be understood in relation to each other? In the study of the Old Testament in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship between these two doctrines was not insignificant. One scholar, Gerhard von Rad (“The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation” in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays* London: SCM; 1984, 142) wrote:

*Our main thesis was that in genuinely Yahwistic belief the doctrine of creation never attained to the stature of a relevant, independent doctrine. We found it invariably related, and indeed subordinated, to soteriological considerations.*

That is, belief in God as Creator arose out of and was understood only in the context of belief in God as Saviour. How does the Christian church understand the relationship between its belief in God as Saviour and God as Creator? Is salvation the “dominant” doctrine through which all other doctrines, including creation are to be understood? What is the relation of the old creation and its ordinances (“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” Gen 1) to the new creation?

#### **15. SLAVES, WOMEN AND HOMOSEXUALS**

- 15.1 Homosexuality as an issue is not equivalent to the church's debate about slaves and women. Ulrich Mauser from Princeton Theological Seminary, in a debate held in 1994 with Walter Wink on the topic "The Bible and Homosexuality" had this to say:

*The modern dispute about homosexuality in the Church has produced the argument that we must be open to changes. The history of the Church demonstrates that it is necessary, from time to time, to re-evaluate time-honoured traditions and to alter accustomed positions. It is often said that the abolition of slavery and the recognition of women as fully equal partners with men are issues in which Bible-supported positions had to be given up. Against this claim it must be kept in mind that, first, nowhere in Old or new testament is it indicated that being a member of a given race, or being a woman, is in conflict with being a part of God's good creation, but homosexuality is said to be in that conflict. And, second, while both slavery and patriarchal society are presuppositions in much biblical literature, they are counterbalanced by other aspects of Biblical teaching which have been used successfully by advocates of the abolition of slavery and of women's rights; but no such counterbalance exists in the Bible concerning homosexuality. In regard to homosexual activity there is no Biblical evidence which might soften the unambiguous stand adopted in the Bible.*

## **16. ROMANS 1 AND CONTESTED INTERPRETATIONS**

- 16.1 In terms of the biblical witness, Romans 1 will become the major battleground in terms of prohibitions against homosexual activity. Novel readings have been suggested and the notion of "against nature" has been called into question. However, in Paul's argument, to do something contrary to nature is to do something contrary to one creaturely existence as either female or male. That is, it is to exchange, in relation to sexual expression, a female role for a male role and vice versa. Such an exchange is an expression of idolatry and of creaturely existence turned in upon the creature rather than towards the Creator. There is another important reference in Romans to something that is contrary to nature and that is Romans 11:24 - *For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.* Paul is addressing the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13) at this stage in his argument and draws upon the agricultural image of grafting. He refers to God's inclusion of the Gentiles as members of the people of God in terms of "grafting" them, "contrary to nature", into God's people.
- 16.2 Thus, there is, in the argument of Paul, an acceptable form of activity that is contrary to nature, and that is God's activity of grace. Thus, on the one hand, the Gentiles exchange the truth about God for a lie and act contrary to nature. That, however, does not prevent God from acting to do something that is contrary to nature, namely to include the Gentiles by grace in the new covenant community. There are limits to this comparison, particularly as it relates to the expression "contrary to nature." Nevertheless, it does indicate

the power of the gospel to take hold of the Gentiles who have acted contrary to their nature as men and women and thus in defiance of their Creator, and, by grace, and “contrary to their nature”, to include them in the people of God. This is far from suggesting their former actions, which arose out of their rejection of God their Creator and which were “contrary to nature”, are consequently acceptable to God whom they now know as Saviour. It does, however, indicate that even such an awful per-version (i.e. in the sense of a turning away from their Creator) is not beyond the saving action of God who grafts them, “against nature”, into the covenant community. It needs to be noted that this fundamental perversion of humanity, its turning away from its Creator, finds expression, not only in same gender relationships, but also in a whole raft of other attitudes and activities as listed in Romans 1:29-31.

- 16.3 A very useful and thorough treatment of the biblical material on homosexuality is given by Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation – A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper; 1996, 379-406). It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully canvass Hays’ views on this matter. However, a few aspects of his argument follow:

*Paul’s references to homosexual conduct place it within the realm of sin and death to which the cross is God’s definitive answer. All of this is simply to say that the judgment of Romans 1 against homosexual practices should never be read apart from the rest of the letter, with its message of grace and hope through the cross of Christ.*

**New Creation.** *A similar point can be made here: neither the word of judgment against homosexuality nor the hope of transformation to a new life should be read apart from the eschatological framework of Romans. The Christian community lives in a time of tension between “already” and “not yet.” (p. 393)*

*...the New Testament contains no passages that clearly articulate a **rule** against human sexual practices. The Leviticus texts (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), of course, bluntly and explicitly prohibit male homosexual acts in rule form. Paul...presupposes this prohibition – indeed, there may be an allusion in Romans 1:32 to Leviticus 20:13, with its prescription of the death penalty for a man who “lies with a male as with a female” – but he neither repeats it explicitly nor issues any new rules on the subject..*

*The New Testament passages in question do express ideas that can be read as **principles** governing sexual conduct. **From Romans 1**, one could properly **infer the** (p. 394) **principle that human actions ought to acknowledge and honor God as Creator.** When read against the specific background of the Genesis creation story, this principle yields for Paul the conclusion that homosexuality is contrary to the will of God. This application of the principle, however, is dependent on a particular construal of the order of creation. Taken by itself – apart from the biblical narrative context – the same principle could be used to authorize quite*

different judgments. For example, if homosexuality should be judged on the basis of empirical factor to be a "natural" part of the created order, this principle could be used to argue strongly in favor of its acceptance within the church...the normative application of principles is fundamentally dependent on a particular narrative framework.

...

The only **paradigms** offered by the New Testament for homosexual behavior are the emphatically negative and stereotypic sketches in the three Pauline texts (Rom. 1:18-32, 1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10). The New Testament offers no accounts of homosexual Christians, tells no stories of same-sex lovers, ventures no metaphors that place a positive construal on homosexual relations...In the paradigmatic mode, the slender evidence offered by the New Testament is entirely disapproving of homosexuality. (p. 395)

...

...the **hermeneutical guideline** that **claims about divinely inspired experience that contradicts the witness of Scripture should be admitted to normative status in the church only after sustained and agonizing scrutiny by a consensus of the faithful.** (p. 399)

...we must acknowledge that persons of homosexual orientation are welcome along with other sinners in the company of those who trust in the God who justifies the ungodly...

This means that for the foreseeable future we must find ways to live within the church in a situation of serious moral disagreement while still respecting one another as brothers and sisters in Christ...

At the same time, I would argue that the pastoral task of the church is to challenge self-defined homosexual Christians to reshape their identity in conformity (p. 400) with the gospel. Those who hold the offices of teaching and preaching in the church should uphold the biblical standard and call all who hear to follow. This is a tricky line to follow but we do it on many issues...

**Is it Christianly appropriate for Christians who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation to continue to participate in same-sex erotic activity?** No. The only one who **was** entitled to cast a stone instead charged the recipient of his mercy to "go and sin no more." It is no more appropriate for homosexual Christians to persist in homosexual activity than it would be for heterosexual Christians to persist in fornication or adultery. (Insofar as the church fails to teach clearly about heterosexual chastity outside marriage, its disapproval of homosexual coupling will appear arbitrary and biased.) Unless they are able to change their orientation and enter a heterosexual marriage relationship, homosexual Christians should seek to live lives of disciplined sexual abstinence. (p. 401)

***Should persons of homosexual orientation be ordained?*** ...It is unfortunate that the battle line has been drawn in the denominations at the question of ordination of homosexuals. The ensuing struggle has had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing a double standard for clergy and lay morality; it would be far better to articulate a single set of moral norms that apply to all Jesus' followers. Strictures against homosexuality belong in the church's moral catechesis, not in its ordination requirements. It is arbitrary to single out homosexuality as a special sin that precludes ordination. (Certainly, the New Testament does not do this.) The church has no analogous special rules to exclude from ordination the greedy or self-righteous. Such matters are left to the discernment of the bodies charged with examining candidates for ordination; these bodies must determine whether the individual candidate has the gifts and graces requisite for ministry. In any event, a person of homosexual orientation seeking to live a life of disciplined abstinence would clearly be an appropriate candidate for ordination. (p. 403)

## **17. THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH**

17.1 Our unity is in Christ Jesus and in Him alone. At times, the church has been confronted with issues that have put the visible expression of that unity under severe strain. Whilst the UCA faced issues in relation to baptism in the 1980s and 1990s, no debate, in my memory of the UCA, has been as divisive or potentially divisive as the debate over homosexuality. As we are aware, this debate is impacting upon other churches as well. I give just three examples:

17.2 The **Anglican** Commission on Communion is working to find a way to maintain the unity of the worldwide Anglican communion in the face of the actions of the Episcopal Church (USA). In its May meeting, the Standing Committee of the Sydney Diocese resolved as follows-

"Given the extremity of the situation in ECUSA and the Diocese of New Westminster, who have abandoned the teaching of Scripture as it relates to matters 'necessary to salvation', the Standing Committee supports the Global South Primates in their request to the Lambeth Commission, recently appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, to include in their Report a specific call to ECUSA to repent, and to rescind and revoke their election of Gene Robinson as a Bishop.

Furthermore, Standing Committee supports the application of disciplinary action, should it be necessary, and supports the maintenance of those parishes and dioceses who are seeking to uphold the historic faith of the Anglican Communion as set forth in Holy Scripture."

17.3 It would appear that primates representing 50 million of the world's 70 million Anglicans are expressing major concern for the Anglican Communion in the light of the actions of ECUSA.

17.4 In addition, on the 3 June, 2004, a Press Release from the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Revd Dr Rowan Williams, welcomed the decision by the Canadian General Synod to defer a decision on the question of same sex blessings until 2007.

"The decision to defer the question of the right of dioceses over same sex blessings offers hope for the continuing collegiality of the Anglican Communion.

"It is important that the Canadian church has held back from a structural shift that would have run counter to the pleas and wishes of the Primates' meeting last Autumn and of so many around the Communion. In doing so, it has avoided complicating still further the work of the Lambeth Commission."

17.5 On 5 May this year, **The United Methodist Church**, at its General Conference, affirmed its stance against ordaining practicing homosexuals when it debated two proposed amendments to *The Book of Discipline*. The qualifications for ordaining ministers in the United Methodist Church set out in *The Book of Discipline* contained a statement that said, "Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as ministers or appointed" in the church. The Church and Society Legislative Committee brought two reports to the General Conference. The majority report recommended that the wording of *The Book of Discipline* be amended to read:

*The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We recognize that Christians disagree on the incompatibility of homosexual practice with Christian teaching and we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons."*

The minority report recommended that the wording proposed in the majority report be amended by the deletion of the words "We recognize that Christians disagree on the incompatibility of homosexual practice with Christian teaching". The General Conference decided (527 "yes"; 423 "no"; 4 abstained) to set the majority report aside and to deal instead with the minority report. After debate, the Conference adopted the following amendment to *The Book of Discipline* :

*The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers or appointed to serve in the United Methodist Church.*

[The full debate can be read on pages 1974-1980 & 2021-2024 of the Proceedings of The General Conference to be found through the website <http://www.umc.org/>.]

17.6 That same Conference, on 7 May, adopted a statement on Church Unity:

As United Methodists

we remain in covenant with one another,  
even in the midst of disagreement,  
and reaffirm our commitment to work together  
for our common mission  
of making disciples of Jesus Christ  
throughout the world.

17.7 Part of the backdrop to this statement was informal talk of “amicable separation” of certain groups from the rest of the United Methodist Church. The UMC website gives more background to what was obviously a difficult time for that Conference.

17.8 The **Presbyterian Church (USA)** has also recently voted at its 216<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2 July, 2004) to “retain an ‘authoritative interpretation’ of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) that forbids the ordination of ‘self-affirming, practicing homosexuals’ as officers of the church.” The vote was 297 “for” and 218 “against”. Part of the backdrop for the decision was the fact that the PCUSA has a Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church which is to make its final report to the 2006 General Assembly. The PCUSA ordination standards are among the key issues before that Task Force.

17.9 From these three examples, it can be seen that the issue of practicing homosexuals in the ministry is putting enormous strain on the visible expression of the unity of the church.

17.10 The Basis of Union of the UCA clearly states that it “lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.” The UCA, in making such a commitment, needs to recognize that it will be subject to the wider church catholic as it discusses **theological and doctrinal novelties** that are not necessarily congruent with the apostolic tradition. It therefore needs to take great care that it allows its theological discourse to be guided by the gospel and disciplined by its membership within the church catholic.

May God so guide and discipline the Uniting Church in Australia.

D.L. Jones  
16<sup>th</sup> July, 2004