

The practice of Homosexuality

A Comment on the attitude of Uniting Church affiliates

The following brief article uses statistical material provided by the National Social Science Survey (1993) on attitudes to the practice of homosexuality. The NSSS has included questions about homosexuality provided by the Christian Research Association which enabled the development of basic comparative material (1989 - 1993) in the 1994 Research paper No. 1 *'Australian Families: Practices and Attitudes*. Philip Hughes provided a general comparative church sketch in his recent article 'Attitudes to Issues of Sexuality' in the June 1997 issue of the CRA Bulletin *Pointers*.

This article seeks to provide more detailed comment on Uniting Church attenders and affiliates based around three questions (it is worth noting that some of the material is seemingly duplicated, but this is purely an overlap because the Australian survey also includes questions for the International Social Science Survey project. All Australians taking part in the survey answered these questions which allows some comparison to be made between various questions. What is particularly helpful is that in one part separate questions were provided about sexual relations between two men and two women, as opposed to a general 'same sex' category.

Two figures will be examined in this article: **Overall affiliates and Regular attenders**. Affiliates are those people who indicate a nominal affiliation with the Uniting Church, while regular attenders are most likely to be members or at least actively involved in local churches.

1. Same Sex Practice

This question asked what people thought "About sexual relations between two adults of the same sex?" Four main categories were included, ranging from "always wrong" to "not wrong".

Among affiliates 72% did not approve of sexual relations between people of the same sex (64% indicating it was always wrong). 12% did not believe same sex sexual relations were wrong.

The only other groups to record a higher conservative position (and with reasonable numbers for the sample) were the Baptists (75%), and the Pentecostals (95%). It is worth comparing the Uniting affiliates with the Presbyterian (71%) and the Methodists (68%). Yes - 2.5% of the total sample still recorded their religion as Methodist. This group was 30% of the size of the Uniting group. Uniting affiliates recorded a higher conservative picture compared to the general population where 61% did not approve of same sex relations, while 23% endorsed same gender sexual relations.

The conservative orientation of the Uniting group is even more marked when comparing regular attenders, rising to 87% overall (compared to 82% of all regular church attenders), with 74% believing same sex relations were always wrong (compared to 63% of all regular attenders). Only 4% of regular Uniting Church attenders endorsed same sex relations.

Two other interesting categories correlated in this sample were age and region. With age there is a consistent trend to a more conservative position after age 40. The *age group 30 - 39* display the most liberal attitudes, with 29% endorsing same sex relations, while the *15-30 years* and *60 plus* hold the most conservative positions. There were interesting state differences, with Queensland recording the highest conservative percentage (92%) compared to NSW (67%) and Victoria (68%).

Interestingly among The *No Religion* group 33% indicated they agreed that same sex relations are always wrong, while 40% stated it was not wrong at all (ten times the Uniting Church sample).

2. Specific questions, i.e., identifying the gender.

These two questions allowed people significant choice of position, ranging from absolutely wrong to absolutely right, with five options in between, including a classic middle position and allowed respondents to distinguish between men and women.

2.1 Sex between two men

Just over 88% of Uniting regular attenders hold a general conservative position on male-male sexual practice, with 72% indicating that sex between two men is absolutely wrong. Just over 2% endorsed male homosexual sexual relations, with about 9% in the middle. These figures are similar to the overall picture for all regular denominational attenders, except that a higher percentage (80%) indicated that sex between two men is absolutely wrong.

Examining the figures for affiliates it is clear that the majority still hold a conservative viewpoint (67% stating it was absolutely wrong rising to 80% not approving), with 6% endorsing male homosexual relations (6%) and 14% taking a middle ground. Age was a significant factor, with the 30-39 age group being the most liberal (only 43% indicating absolutely wrong) and the 60 plus group the most conservative (79% absolutely wrong). There was a significant difference between male and female respondents with males more likely to say male homosexual relations were absolutely wrong (74%) compared to females (60%). Females were twice as likely to take a middle position (18% - 9%).

2.2 Sex between two women

Compared to male-male sex, a slightly lower percentage of regular church attenders believe that sex between two women is absolutely wrong (70%), with 89% indicating an overall conservative stance. Similar to attitude to male sex, just over 2% endorsed these same sex relations, with about 9% taking the middle ground.

These figures are similar to the overall picture for all regular denominational attenders, except that a higher percentage (79%) indicated that sex between two women is absolutely wrong.

Examining the figures for affiliates it is clear that the majority still hold a conservative viewpoint with 62% saying absolutely wrong, rising to 80% less approving, but again there is a slightly larger positive group (5%) and 15% in the middle category.

Age was again significant, with the 30-39 age group being the most liberal (41% indicating absolutely wrong) and the 60 plus group the most conservative (77% absolutely wrong). There was no significant difference between male and female respondents in overall orientation, but males were slightly more likely to say female homosexual relations were absolutely wrong (64%) compared to females (62%). Females were again twice as likely to take a middle position (19% - 10%).

3. Homosexual Marriage

The NSSS also asked a question related to the approval of homosexual marriage. It is clear that the majority of Uniting Church affiliates do not regard homosexual marriage as an option, with only 7% expressing agreement (compared to 13% of all Australians). The percentage of approval from regular attenders was again lower and recorded only 5% for all denominations.

4. Conclusion

It is clear from all the data above that Uniting Church affiliates are usually located on the most conservative end of the spectrum with regard to the approval of or endorsement of sexual relations between people of the same sex.

While it is not possible to reach definite conclusions about the reasons for this orientation, I have decided to note below a few random thoughts which I am endeavouring to explore further.

Firstly, it should be noted that people in our society generally have reasonably conservative private attitudes about homosexual practice (i.e., to contrast with support for the human rights for homosexual people). Secondly, all church people have in general are more conservative attitudes. Of course, this would not surprise anyone familiar with the church (catholic and particular) which has traditionally fostered a heterosexual lifestyle through its active commitment and endorsement of the practice of marriage between a woman and a man and usually following, the promotion of the 'family'. The Church has also traditionally taught (implicitly if not explicitly) the unacceptableness of homosexual practices for at least a Christian lifestyle. Most regular attenders would have grown up within this theological and sexual ethic framework. Only a section of the church has been continually exposed to more liberal and alternative perspectives and an even smaller section of the church have actually taken up these perspectives as the basis for either practical or structural change. In any case, many of the broad topics related to the place of homosexual people in society only become more public prominent in the 1980s, leading to the establishment of the Task Group on Homosexuality (in the Uniting Church) and the publication of an Assembly report (1985) and eventually the Responses to the report. (1987).

Thirdly, it is worth noting that most of the continuing focus on homosexuality within the Uniting Church has been on internal matters related to internal perceptions of appropriate standards and behaviour for leaders, including the blessing of same-sex relationships by Uniting Church ministers and the training and ordination of homosexual candidates, rather than on external matters related to the private rights of individuals in a secular and pluralist society.

For a picture of the broader development of gay religious life in Australia see the short article by Warren Talbot (a member of the Uniting Church and of the Assembly Task Group on Sexuality), *On the Boundary: Gay Religious Groups in Australia*, published in the *Australian Religion Studies Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1995.

It is evident that the recent reports on Sexuality from the Assembly Task Group have increased public discussion of homosexuality within the church, so it will be interesting to see in future years if there has been any change in the overall orientation of the attitudes of Uniting Church affiliates toward homosexual practice.

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