



## **Ethics**

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### ***Part A An outline of the Uniting Church in Australia***

Most “official” teaching on ethics comes from the synods (regional councils related to state and territory boundaries), and the national assembly. Most decisions bind only the staff of the synod or assembly, and their agencies, in their work for the church, but does not bind individual members of the church.

### ***Part B Outline of the Uniting Church approach to ethics.***

The Uniting Church values intellectual scholarship and reflection. We use a variety of scholarly methods for understanding the Bible and relating it to everyday issues of life. This is required by our fundamental statement of belief: the *Basis of Union*.

We see all members of the church as having capacity for theological reflection and personal decision-making about morality. Some church members would prefer that we gave them a set of rules, but most appreciate our approach.

What are our sources of ethics? Our understanding of ethics is informed by Scripture, Christian tradition and reason. It also takes account of experience.

On most issues, it is widely accepted in the Uniting Church that we should begin from our understanding of the nature of God. We understand God as a God of grace, forgiveness, mercy, love and compassion, a God who created and sustains the whole of creation and the whole of humankind. We see internationally recognized human rights as consistent with the Christian tradition since God is concerned with the wellbeing of all human beings. We refer to the ten commandments (Exodus 20) but see ethics as more complicated than obedience to the commandments. Also, the ten commandments are not an adequate expression of the range of ethical issues that we face in contemporary society. One can obey the ten commandments, and still fail to be ethical. For example, they say nothing about care for the environment, or about work or business or professional ethics. Jesus Christ pointed to the two great commandments: to love God with heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love one’s neighbour as oneself (Luke 11: 25-28).

In general, we agree with other Christian churches and with the historic tradition about a wide range of moral standards and Christian values. We support the criminal law which prohibits

murder, theft, fraud, rape, sexual assault, and so on. We support basic standards of human behaviour such as honesty, integrity, responsibility towards our fellow human beings and the environment, community, compassion, care for people in need, peace, nonviolent methods of conflict resolution, equality, non-discrimination, respect for the rule of law, and so on. We see the family as important. We make strong stands on social justice issues. We think that the way people use power is important, and have instituted decision-making processes that encourage greater participation.

In some areas of ethics mentioned in the HSC syllabus we would be in general agreement with the other Christian churches.

But we recognize areas of moral debate that some other church deny: questions about abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, and sexual relationships. Family takes many different forms in Australian society. Questions of bioethics are complex and cannot be dismissed with a simple rule about not interfering with nature. Our recognition of debate about such moral issues probably follows from several characteristics of our church, especially the fact that our councils include women and men, lay people as well as clergy.

We also recognize the complexity of the Biblical tradition. Ethics is not a simple matter of collating the “commandments” and turning them into rules for modern living. The Bible tells of God’s presence in human life. The heroes and heroines of the Biblical story are not morally perfect. Yet God loves them, forgives them, uses them in salvation history. Eg King David. The Gospels include stories of people who were considered moral outcasts by the religious establishment. These were often the people who recognized and welcomed Jesus Christ, while the “righteous” rejected him.

Morality is not about what behaviour makes us acceptable to God. It is not about judging other people. God accepts us even though we are “sinners”. “While we were yet sinners Christ died for us”. We seek to live the moral life for the following reasons:

- in response to God’s love
- as an expression of love or care for other people
- as a form of wisdom – seeing what is best for ourselves, our families, our communities, society generally
- as an act of discipleship, living in a way that is consistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ
- as a way of seeking holiness.

In general, we adopt an ethical system based on *principles rather than rules*. In the area of social ethics, the use of general principles is accepted by many churches. In the UCA, we recognize that the use of general principles is also helpful in the area of personal ethics.

## Example: Uniting Sexuality and Faith

(available on the web at <http://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/pdf/UnitingSexuality.pdf>).

This report was prepared by a task group appointed by the national Assembly. It illustrates some of the ways that we go about ethics.

It begins with a chapter on theology, going back to some of the basic understanding of the Christian faith – creation, being in the image of God, covenant with God, the reign of God, baptism and church community.

It has a chapter on the right ways of understanding Scripture, which explores some important passages from the Bible relevant to the issues, including a Case Study on Romans.

It has a chapter that explores ethics, and argues that ethics is about character, not rules.

The key chapter is “Living as friends: seeking right relationships”. It talks about living as friends of God and one another. It sets out the following elements of right relationships, that can be applied to sexual relationships:

- honesty
- trust
- faithfulness
- equality and mutuality
- vulnerability
- freedom and responsibility
- setting limits and self-control
- giving and receiving affection and pleasure
- communication
- discovering intimacy.

With regard to sexual relationships, it goes on to talk about

- sexual passion and setting boundaries
- waiting with patience
- repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation
- sin, abuse, exclusion and brokenness – a discussion of power relationships, child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation

The next chapter looks at a range of situations in which people need to make moral decisions about sexual relationships including: adolescence, single adults, seeking partnerships, engaging in sexual activity, people living together, homosexuality, marriage, divorce and remarriage, and masturbation.

A final chapter looks at questions of sexuality, ministry and church leadership. There is also discussion of how the church can best approach these questions in its education and life. There are policy recommendations to the 1997 Assembly.

## ***Part C When are rules appropriate?***

Principles are appropriate when people are making decisions that affect only themselves. Rules are appropriate at the boundaries of behaviour, where making a personal choice leads to harm to other people who do not consent to the act. In this case, the rules need to be enforceable.

Obvious essential rules in the area of sexuality are the rules against rape, sexual assault, and sexual relationships with people under the age of consent. These rules are rightly part of the criminal law.

Another area where rules about sexual relationships are appropriate is professional ethics. Codes of professional ethics are about how professionals use their status and authority, ie their power, over the people for whom they are responsible in some way. Thus minister, doctors, psychiatrists and social workers should not have sexual relationships with people in their care. This is not about personal sexual ethics but about the appropriate use of power and influence. Similarly, police and prison wardens should not have sexual relationships with prisoners or people they are questioning about a crime, since this is an abuse of power given by the state for another purpose.

Three principles are involved here.

1. Sexual relationships are only appropriate where both parties freely consent to sex.
2. Professionals should not use their professional power, that is, their status, authority and influence to satisfy their personal needs.
3. Where one person has more power than another, the person with less power cannot freely consent.

These three principles lead to the rule that professionals should not have sexual relationships with their parishioners, clients, patients or prisoners. Many professions have complaints and disciplinary mechanisms to enforce the rules.

The code of ethics for ministers in the Uniting Church imposes rules that forbid sexual relationships with those in one's pastoral care. Apart from this, most of the code of ethics is in the form of principles.

The reason some churches have dealt badly with sexual abuse in the past is that they have until recently not recognized the power that ministers or priests have. They have sometimes considered sexual relationships with parishioners to be a failure of personal sexual ethics – a sexual sin - when it is a failure of professional ethics – an abuse of power. However, not even this can excuse churches which have not acted effectively to stop ministers or priests from abusing children, since this is a criminal act.

The NSW Synod in 1982 and 1983 supported the decriminalization of homosexuality between consenting adults because this is consistent with allowing people to make their own moral decisions about sexual relationships. The law should protect people from being violated by others, not impose a particular personal morality on people. Thus Christians who disagreed about whether or not homosexuality is moral or immoral, agreed that homosexuality should be decriminalized.

## **Part D A comparison of rules based and principle based approaches to ethics**

Rule based approach versus principle based approach to ethics

Example: sexuality

<b>Rules based approach</b>	<b>Principle based approach</b>
Is behaviour right or wrong?	Is behaviour appropriate, healthy, in the best interests of the actor and the other person in the relationship?
Usually negative eg no sex outside of marriage	Usually positive, eg a responsible sexual relationship will have the following characteristics:....
Main advantage: offers clear guidance	Main advantage: values the individual as a person able to make their own moral decisions
Main disadvantage: if someone rejects the rule, there is no other ethical guidance	Main disadvantage: Not everyone wants to think for themselves. Some people like rules.
Treats all taboo behaviour as equally bad Eg If sex takes place outside of marriage, cannot differentiate between one night stands and a committed, ongoing relationship with a particular partner	Encourages responsibility Differentiates between different forms of sexual expression outside of marriage eg between one night stands and committed, ongoing relationship with a particular partner – recognizes that there are many different levels of responsibility
Where several taboos are relevant, compounds the level of harm involved in the behaviour Eg don't have sex + don't use contraceptives + don't have an abortion can lead to teenage parents who are unable to adequately care for a child and a family and church that is unsupportive of them because they see the sexual relationship as wrong	Allows a positive or a harm reduction approach – if you are going to have sex outside marriage, then do so in a responsible way eg use contraceptives; encourages acceptance of people, eg support single mothers, caring for children born outside of marriage or after divorce
Encourages guilt, shame – which can hinder responsible behaviour (“as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb”)	Encourages a sense of moral responsibility: eg if teenagers are going to have sex, then they should learn how to be sensitive and responsive, choose an appropriate time and place, ensure there is mutual consent and that neither party is exploited
Encourages people to accept or reject external authority	Encourages people to take personal responsibility for decisions and actions
Law versus grace – gap between teaching about God's grace and the church's response to people who act “immorally”	Coherence between central theology and morality – law subordinate to grace

Gap between personal ethics and social ethics, since most churches recognize that social ethics requires principles rather than rules (eg to deal with questions of economic justice, environmental policy or workplace relations)	Coherent system that deals with questions of personal ethics and social ethics in a similar way
Rules often seen as unrealistic eg rules have nothing to offer people who do not accept the faith, and are often rejected even among the faithful (eg most church members, in all churches, accept contraception, no matter what their church teaches about it)	Principles can be implemented in ways that are realistic and continue to encourage people to be responsible.
Rules offer no hope to people in difficult situations eg when marriage is seen as something that cannot be broken, it is hard to deal with	
Rules generally do not deal adequately with situations where more than one rule or value is at stake. This can lead to enormous moral failure – such as the failure of some churches to deal appropriately with sexual abuse by priests. Sexual abuse is seen as a sexual failing, rather than being recognized as misuse of power.	Principles can take account of complexities and recognise what is at stake for the church and the community in situations such as sexual abuse by clergy. However, this is one situation where straightforward rules have their place – our code of ethics forbids sexual relationships between ministers and their parishioners. Sexual abuse is understood as a misuse of power, rather than a sexual failing. The rule follows from the principle of not abusing power.

## **Part E Developing principles**

### **1. In much of our work we combine the following elements:**

- What do the **people in the situation** say about it (or what is happening to the earth?) eg what are outworkers telling us about the way they are treated by the people they supply with garments made in their homes?
- What **ideology** supports injustice (eg to workers, or supports war, or supports environmental damage)? What is wrong with this ideology (**ideological critique**)? Human rights analysis, structural or social analysis, policy analysis.
- **Theological critique** – self suspicion. How does ideology misuse theology. How has theology been distorted by ideology. What do we really believe about God and therefore about what is appropriate in this situation?
- **Middle axioms** – general directions, principles to guide action, criteria for evaluating public policy eg on industrial relations, environment, war.
- **Action**. No point in discussion if it is not translated into advocacy, change, etc.
- **Praxis** – **theology, thinking and action being integrated so that they each influence the other. Ethics is about living.**

All of these can be found in *Uniting Sexuality and Faith*.

## Appendix Resources on other ethical issues listed in the syllabus

### Violence, war and peace

*Uniting for Peace* <http://nat.uca.org.au/nsrj/issues/peace/index.htm>

NSW Synod resolution on terrorism 2001 <http://unitingcarenswact.org.au/advocacy/peace.html>  
(also has information on the “Decade to Overcome Violence” initiated by the World Council of Churches)

Also, Assembly resolutions in 1982 and report on Nuclear Disarmament 1988

<http://nat.uca.org.au/nsrj/SJResolution/PeaceDisarmamentCommonSecurity.html>

### Bioethics, eg cloning, genetic engineering, IVF, euthanasia

UnitingCare NSW.ACT discussion kit on Euthanasia includes Synod resolution 1995

<http://unitingcarenswact.org.au/advocacy/euthanasia.html>

Other resolutions on a range of issues <http://nat.uca.org.au/nsrj/SJResolution/BioMedical.html>

### The environment

Assembly 1991 resolution *The rights of nature and rights of future generations*

<http://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/statements/statement1991.htm>

Some discussion papers, submissions to government etc using these principles (NSW Synod )

<http://unitingcarenswact.org.au/advocacy/environment.html> and national Assembly

<http://nat.uca.org.au/nsrj/issues/environment/index.htm>

Other resolutions <http://nat.uca.org.au/nsrj/SJResolution/EnvironmentEnergyResources.html>

### Work ethics and business/professional ethics

Unemployment –national Assembly 1994 <http://nat.uca.org.au/nsrj/employment1994/main.html>  
(Section 13 has been adopted by the Assembly)

Industrial relations – national Assembly 1991

Church as employer – NSW Synod 2001 <http://unitingcarenswact.org.au/advocacy>

A number of discussion papers etc are available at

<http://unitingcarenswact.org.au/advocacy/unemployment.html>

Code of ethics for ministers – national Assembly 2000

<http://assembly.uca.org.au/assembly2000/proposals/prop48.htm>

Other resolutions <http://nat.uca.org.au/nsrj/SJResolution/EconomicJusticeEmployment.html>

**Sexual ethics and Marriage and Divorce** See the 1997 resolution of the national Assembly at

<http://nat.uca.org.au/nsrj/SJResolution/HumanRelationshipsSexuality.html#anchor232473>

On homosexuality see <http://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/pdf/homosexuality.pdf>

**Extract from *Uniting Sexuality and Faith*  
pages 36-38 Uniting Church in Australia  
Sydney 1997**

Full document is available at

**<http://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/pdf/UnitingSexuality.pdf>**

### ***Adolescence***

5.9. Adolescence is a time of profound physical, emotional and sexual change. Sexuality is a key issue for teenagers as they are drawn into relationship with others. It is a time of great vulnerability for most young people and may involve such experiences as:

- a growing awareness, understanding and exploration of their bodies (sometimes through masturbation);
- a wish to have their desirability as sexual persons affirmed;
- a longing for the particular kind of connectedness which comes from having a girl or boy friend;
- a desire to express their sexuality with a partner, possibly in genital intercourse;
- confusion about their sexual identity;
- a sense of isolation and loneliness;
- conflict over the messages of the media and popular youth culture which promotes freedom and the exploration of sexual expression and the expectations of their family or their own expectations;
- a sense that the Church has a negative attitude towards any sexual expression;
- concerns about the effect that intimate sexual activity with a partner (or absence of it) might have on a desired relationship;
- confusion and frustration in making wise and faithful decisions about appropriate levels of sexual activity and in developing a positive understanding and expectation of marriage;

- a sense that the Church is silent about their dilemmas.

## **How can the Church community help adolescents?**

5.10. For young people to maintain self-esteem through the period of adolescence, the Church community needs to:

- be a community which is seen to be living out its baptism 'as a loving community of Christ, nurturing one another in faith, upholding one another in prayer and encouraging one another in service';<sup>42</sup> (42. 'Baptism Service' in *Uniting in Worship*, p. 29.)
- promote sexuality as a normal healthy aspect of being human;
- provide an environment in which young people know they are accepted by adults as well as by their peers;
- recognise the strength of young people's hormonal drives and the possibility of their confusion about their actual desires;
- assist young people to develop communication and negotiating skills which will help resist unwanted pressures and free them to make appropriate decisions;
- provide an environment in which young people can develop friendships and enter into activities with others, without the pressure to pair off or to engage in genital sexual expression;
- provide role models who have integrated their sexuality into the framework of their Christian discipleship;
- provide opportunities where young people can experience a wide range of people who model flexible gender roles;
- help young people appreciate the different needs and perspectives of others;
- listen carefully to the concerns of young people in a way that respects their privacy and vulnerability;

- answer clearly and carefully questions on matters of sexuality and help young people find the information they need by referring them to appropriate people;
- encourage young people to build relationships characterised by self-giving love, justice and responsibility, while being mindful of the needs of those who feel excluded from such relationships;
- recognise and name the power of sin in the sexual lives of its people;
- be a community which demonstrates reconciliation as mistakes are acknowledged and God's forgiveness made real in the life of the community.

### *Single Adults*

5.11. We are all single at some time in our lives. People are single for different reasons. We cannot speak of single people as a group as if there is some common understanding of what it means to be single.

5.12. Single people within the church community offer valuable examples of lives lived in the fullness of the gospel. While the Church upholds the centrality of marriage, it has never taught that marriage is an essential prerequisite for faithful Christian discipleship.

5.13. Some of us are single because we have chosen or felt called to be celibate. Some have not had the opportunity to marry or are not yet able to form a committed relationship. Some of us have been divorced or widowed. Others have been hurt in relationships, or have experienced the pain of the breakdown of the relationship of their parents or friends.

- Single people have a legitimate need for intimacy and community. There is a danger of stereotyping single people who choose to share accommodation or engaging in sexual activity. Similarly, the single person who lives alone needs that choice respected.
- Single people may often feel marginalised by the Church community whose life tends to favour families and those who are married. Sometimes their loneliness and isolation goes unnoticed. The exclusion of single adults from adult groups

of married couples is painful for those of us who are single.

- People going through the grief of widowhood may experience an acute loss of sexual warmth and expression. The loss of the intimate 'other' is a major adjustment for someone used to giving and receiving tenderness in everyday life.
- Some separated, divorced and widowed people question the trust others have in them; some feel the rejection of church groups as moral censure. As one recently divorced woman said, 'the loneliest time of the week was standing around outside after church on Sundays'.<sup>43</sup> (43. 'Report of the Year of Listening' in *Sexuality - Exploring the Issues*, chapter 14.)
- Sole parents, whether they are widowed, separated or have never been married, have the same need for intimacy and suffer different kinds of pressures. They may also know loneliness and are often bereft of adult support.
- One form of oppression in society is the habit of hosts finding an equivalent single adult to 'partner' a single guest for an event. It is as if the community is embarrassed to have people unattached.
- There are some single adults who are the life-blood of the Church community who may at times be exploited because they are seen to have fewer commitments than other members.

### *Seeking a Partnership*

5.18. Many young adults and single people desire marriage or some other close partnership.

- Some are still quite young and are not ready to commit themselves.
- Some are alone because they have rejected or been rejected by a potential partner or for some reason a desired marriage has not occurred. Some have never been approached by a potential partner or have failed to choose one for themselves and this can be a source of pain.
- Many single people choose to be chaste until they are married. In other words they have decided to forego genital sexual expression. This does not mean that they forego all sexual expression, for they may desire the warmth of

sexual affection such as hugs and kissing. Single people who make the choice 'to wait' need to be respected and supported by the Church. Of all places, the Church community should provide such people with affirmation.

- Many will experience a number of relationships as a way of seeking the right partner. Sexual expression may well play a part in such relationships.
- Many single adults, for various reasons decide against chastity, but are not promiscuous. For them chastity is not realistic. In an age of effective contraception they question the legitimacy of 'drawing the line' at genital sexual expression.
- Some single people find that close emotional intimacy which does not include genital activity is in fact a more significant expression of intimacy than genital activity.

5.19. For all single people, guidance for appropriate behaviour can be found in the principles developed earlier in this Report, especially in assessing the depth of intimacy and commitment in their relationships.<sup>45</sup> (45 Chapter 4.) Caution and honesty will be required for them to be sensitive to the effects of their behaviour on others.<sup>46</sup> (46. Karen Lebacqz, op. cit. explores in particular the place of appropriate vulnerability in such relationships. The Church cannot stand aside from being there for them as they work through the complexities of their choice.)

### ***Engaging in Sexual Activity***

5.20. The Task Group believes that the decision on whether or not to engage in sexual activity involves searching for an answer to this primary question: How can our actions in this situation best reflect the love, faithfulness and grace of God that comes in Jesus Christ?

### ***People Living Together***

5.21. The Church acknowledges that many couples live together either prior to or instead of marriage. There is some indication that this trend is a reaction to the failure of traditional patterns of partner selection, courting, marriage and family. Many young adults have experienced the failure of relationships in their parents' generation, and have resolved to approach marriage cautiously and critically. They are

still struggling with the question of what constitutes a long-term relationship.

Because reliable contraception is available many are sexually active while they work through the meaning of commitment. They still have high hopes for their own relationships and are seriously working out what long-term commitment means. For many, including church members, this premarital living together has the status of betrothal.

5.22. For others who wish neither to observe sexual abstinence nor be promiscuous with all its attendant risks and abuses, the possibility of a stable sexual relationship is important. For many who have had unhappy marriage experiences, living together is an important way to explore new relationships. It is important that the quality of these relationships be assessed on the basis of love, commitment and care for each other. Other criteria might include the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness and self control. Marriage is no guarantee of their presence, nor living together a sign of their absence.

5.23. The phrase 'living in sin' is an alienating concept that fails to take seriously the situation and the questions that people are asking today. It has the effect of denying the complexities and seriousness of people's choices. It fails to reflect ethically and theologically on the uniqueness of people's relationships. It can even lead to a denial of ministry to people within the reality of their everyday experiences. Their relationships are in need of affirmation and building up in faith like every other relationship.