

Gospel & Gender

1. OUR MISSION

- 1.1 Since the meeting of the 8th Assembly in 1997, Gospel & Gender (formerly the Commission for Women and Men) has continued to uphold its mission to assist the Uniting Church “to be a church that fully and visibly affirms that male and female are created in the image of God”. On limited resources and under continual pressure to keep justifying our existence, we have achieved much towards the mutuality of respect, affirmation and appreciation of all people in the life of the church.
- 1.2 In the next 3 year period, we plan to pay further specific attention to the second part of our mission statement as we work to “facilitate the Church’s understanding of the theology of the gospel that calls it to mutuality of respect, affirmation and appreciation”. This focus will entail the development of closer ties with the working groups of Theology & Discipleship.
- 1.3 The work of Gospel & Gender is not yet over. Serious issues of stereotyping, violence and structural restrictions to women’s participation remain. Interconnected with these concerns are the issues of gender identities generally and, more specifically, the ability for various groups to accommodate diversity of such identities. The interrelationship of gender issues and ethnicity has not yet been intentionally addressed in the life of the church. The feminist theological contribution is also yet to be fully integrated into the theology, worship and witness of the Uniting Church.

2. OUR MANDATE

- 2.1. The mandate of Gospel & Gender calls us to:
- claim a voice for gender issues within the church;
 - assist the church to act more justly in relation to these issues across the totality of its life;
 - reclaim and promote the full participation of women in the life of the church;
 - encourage men to seek mutual community;
 - seek and applaud signs of mutuality between women and men;
 - celebrate and model the diversity of the membership of the church;
 - foster study to enable the church to determine the bearing of the Gospel on gender issues;
 - promote the place and use of feminist scholarship in that determination; and
 - ensure that available resources are used to encourage healthy attitudes and behaviours for mutuality across the life of the church.

3. OUR REFERENCE COMMITTEE

- 3.1 Membership of the Reference Committee continues to be drawn from across the Uniting

Church with specific representation from all Synods and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

- 3.2 The Executive is based in New South Wales with equal numbers of women and men as members.
- 3.3 Sue Goodwin and Glenda Blakefield have capably led the Reference Committee as Chairpersons of the Reference Committee (formerly Commission) since the meeting of the 8th Assembly.
- 3.4 The current members of the Reference Committee are:
- Lurleen Blackman (UAICC)
Glenda Blakefield (Chairperson)
John Bleyerveen (Executive)
Jayne Clapton (Qld)
Colin Cooper (Co-option)
Jennifer Elvery (Northern)
Sue Goodwin (WA)
Heather Hanks (SA)
Sandra Houghton (Tas)
- Janis Huggett (Executive)
Rod Pattenden (Executive)
Doug Purnell (Executive)
Lisa Wriley (nee Addley) (Executive; NSW)
- 3.5 The following people have also held membership on the Reference Committee (previously Commission) since the 8th Assembly. Each person contributed much to the life and work of the agency; some since the inception of the Commission for Women and Men itself.
- Warwick Cadenhead
Wendy Eccleston
Judi Fisher
Marion Millin
Elizabeth Ramage

4. OUR STAFF

- 4.1 Christine Cargill as Executive Officer of the Commission for Women and Men and then National Director of Gospel and Gender led the agency through the first 2 years from the last Assembly. This period included the uncertainty of the Assembly agency re-structure and the difficult, important process of finalising various procedural documents for the processing of complaints of sexual abuse. Christine’s significant contribution to the agency/commission is celebrated in a minute of appreciation to this Assembly.
- 4.2 Anita Monro currently holds the role of National Director on an interim basis while the position of the agency within the Assembly structures is consolidated. Anita took up the position at the beginning of 2000. The agency was not staffed for 4 months at the end of 1999.

5. CODE OF ETHICS

- 5.1 A major project of Gospel & Gender in the last 3 year period has been the revision of the Interim Code of Ethics amended in July 1998 and being presented in a revised form at this

Assembly. Christine Cargill has provided significant leadership in this project and continues to provide oversight of it in her new position as National Director of Social Responsibility & Justice.

- 5.2 The development of this Code and its educational implementation represents significant leadership by the Uniting Church as a member of an ecumenical community and of Australian society.

6. PROCEDURES FOR USE WITH COMPLAINTS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

- 6.1 In the last 3 years the following sets of procedures have been developed and/or revised:

- *Guidelines for dealing with a complaint of sexual misconduct made against a lay staff person or volunteer of the Uniting Church in Australia and its agencies through a commitment to working towards being a safe community*
- *Pastoral procedures for responding to an allegation of sexual misconduct and abuse at special events within temporary communities run by the Uniting Church in Australia*
- *Guidelines for dealing with a complaint of sexual misconduct made against a member or adherent of the Uniting Church in Australia through a commitment to working towards being a safe community.*

- 6.2 Revision of the Discipline Regulations has also continued with recommendations being made to the Legal Reference Committee in this regard.

- 6.3 An important part of the work of the task group on the prevention of sexual misconduct project was the development of education material for use in the training of ministers, lay people, congregations and committees in the prevention of sexual misconduct. Of significant note in this respect is that over 80% of ministers in all synods attended training in this area over the past 3 years. These training programs were facilitated by members of the task group and other educators.

- 6.4 Gospel and Gender wish to acknowledge the important contribution of the voluntary task group which undertook the significant work for the prevention of sexual misconduct, namely:

Rev. Dr Jenny Byrnes,
Dr Marelle Harisun,
Rev. Vernon Prowse,
Ms Lisa Wriley,
Rev. Jenny Tymms (1997),
Rev. Marj Roberts (1997), and
Ms Christine Cargill.

- 6.5 The development and implementation of these procedures represents significant leadership by the Uniting Church as a member of an ecumenical community and of Australian society.

7. A-GENDER

- 7.1 *A-Gender*, the newsletter of the agency has continued to be produced 2 or 3 times a year. There was no edition at the end of 1999 because the agency was not staffed at the time.

- 7.2 In line with the agency mandate, *A-Gender* has performed the important roles of:

- promoting networks of women and men concerned with the Gospel message of mutuality;
- sharing new ideas and insights in relation to the Gospel and gender issues; and
- highlighting points for discussion and action.

8. THURSDAYS IN BLACK

- 8.1 The Thursdays in Black anti-violence campaign "demanding a world without rape and violence" continues to be a strong point of witness across the church and into the community as schools, university groups and other community organisations have become involved.

- 8.2 A new kit of resources for promoting the Thursdays in Black campaign was developed during 1999 by Christine Cargill and Lisa Wriley and is now available from Gospel & Gender.

9. PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

- 9.1 Gospel & Gender has continued to monitor the participation of women in the life of the Uniting Church. The results of a survey distributed at the end of 1998 are currently being processed. Preliminary results highlight:

- a significant though not full level of awareness of gender issues particularly among ministry agents;
- some confusion with the meaning of terms such as "inclusive";
- broad acceptance of a range of masculine and feminine imagery for God; and
- some sustained resistance to the values of mutuality between women and men in the light of Gospel values.

10. LITURGIES AND RESOURCES

- 10.1 Gospel and Gender has continued to produce a range of resources that model and promote the mutuality of respect, affirmation and appreciation of all people in the light of the Gospel. These resources have included:

- *Colours True and Splendid*: a collection of reflections from the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity With Women (1988—1998) edited by Judi Fisher and Janet Wood (1999);
- Liturgies for International Women's Day 1999 and 2000; and
- *Made In God's Image*: a resource for bible study and personal reflection on the creation of female and male in the image of God (1999).

11. NETWORKING

11.1 A major focus of Gospel & Gender continues to be the participation in, promotion and maintenance of networks of people concerned with gender issues and Gospel values. These networks include:

- the National Council of Churches' Network on Women and Gender Relationships;
- state and locally based women's and feminist groups within the Uniting Church;
- general women's networks fostered by government and community organisations; and
- women's groups centred in other Christian denominations (e.g. Women and the Australian Church; Movement for the Ordination of Women).

12. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

12.1 While some important achievements have been made, the work of Gospel and Gender is not complete in the arena of the participation of women. We can celebrate the high level of participation of women in some leadership positions within the church, and the growing acceptance of the ministry of women in specified ministries, but we must also note that:

12.1.1 A higher level of the acceptance of women's ministry has come at a time when the "status" of ministers has decreased. It is an observable phenomenon that certain roles become more accessible to women as those roles are seen as less socially significant or important (e.g. general medical practitioners).

12.1.2 Women in ministry (lay or specified) often still face hostility and antagonism from some people with whom they minister because they are women, or do not conform to certain "feminine" stereotypes (e.g. are not married).

12.1.3 The concept of male headship is still being voiced in some significant sections of the church.

12.1.4 In the arena of violence against women, there is significant evidence that people's understanding of their Christian faith (including the idea of male headship) actually promotes rather than inhibits violence against women. The provision of funding by both Qld and NSW state governments in recent years for programs directly targeting the prevention of domestic violence among church people was made on this basis.

12.1.5 The "new" world of the internet, e-commerce and electronic technologies has raised new issues for the full participation of women in community life, and offers a new arena for the perpetuation of new forms of violence against women.

12.1.6 The interconnection of issues of gender and ethnicity to form a grid of injustice for women, especially among those from other than Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, in church and community contexts is still to be addressed adequately in the context of the Uniting Church.

12.1.7 There is a constant need to make accessible resources available to women and men in congregational life whose access to the results of innovative and liberative worship and theology for them may be hindered by the limited education of ministry agents about these perspectives and/or community structures which resist openness to diversity of perspectives.

12.2 It is time to even more effectively address some of the root causes of violence and injustice against women. This task requires that the ways in which we think, act and do theology are scrutinised more carefully for their death-dealing rather than life-giving potential. Questions about the way in which we construct our identities as individuals, as groups, as a church, as part of the body of Christ must be asked in more intentional and central ways.

12.3 In this respect, it is also becoming imperative that other emerging gender perspectives are placed alongside those of women in general and feminist theology in particular. These perspectives also ask questions about the way in which we construct our identities and seek to challenge stereotypes that inhibit the fullness of the participation of women and men in the life of the church. We note the significance of issues such as:

- the linking of gendered stereotypes and expectations to the suicide of young men (particularly in rural areas);
- the suppression of the expression of emotion by men in general and the consequent eruption of suppressed emotion in inappropriate, aggressive, violent and often misogynistic ways; and
- the continuing difficulty in formulating accounts of good relationships between women and men, men and men, women and women.

12.4 As an agency within the National Assembly, Gospel & Gender has a specific role in maintaining and promoting the particular prophetic voices associated with various gender perspectives within the Uniting Church. These voices include those of:

- feminist scholars, writers, artists, seekers of justice and dignity;
- men who are searching for new ways of expressing their masculinity in justice, dignity and hope;
- a range of perspectives related to gender issues arising from differences in culture and ethnicity within the Uniting Church;
- various generational perspectives that offer different approaches to gender issues; and
- other perspectives which raise issues about the nature of gendered stereotypes and look beyond the traditional dualities of masculinity/femininity to a vision of justice and dignity for all people.

Anita Monro (Rev. Dr)
National Director

Glenda Blakefield (Rev.)
Chairperson