

**THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA**  
**QUEENSLAND SYNOD**  
MODERATOR: REV KAYE RONALDS



21 June 2013

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Health and Community Services Committee  
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**HEALTH AND COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO  
SEXUALLY EXPLICIT OUTDOOR ADVERTISING**

**SUBMISSION FROM THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA, QUEENSLAND SYNOD**

**The Inquiry's Terms of Reference**

1. That the Health and Community Services Committee inquire into and report on the current regulation of outdoor advertising in Queensland and whether reform, including legislative reform, is needed to protect children from being exposed to sexually explicit and inappropriate outdoor advertising.
2. That in undertaking this inquiry, the Committee is to consider:
  - a. the sexualisation of children and other adverse impacts on children through sexually explicit outdoor advertising;
  - b. the range of outdoor advertising, including roadside billboards, shopfront windows, on public shelters and public transport, and the existing regulation of such advertising spaces;
  - c. the adequacy of the existing regulation of outdoor advertising in Queensland, focusing on the effectiveness of the regulatory model to limit children's exposure to sexually explicit images and slogans;
  - d. the regulatory framework for other forms of media including publications and television that limits children's exposure to sexually explicit and inappropriate advertising and whether such framework could be applied to outdoor advertising;
  - e. previous parliamentary and expert reports on the regulation of outdoor advertising; and
  - f. any recommendations for reform for the regulation of outdoor advertising in Queensland.
3. Further, that the committee take public submissions and consult with relevant local, Queensland and Commonwealth government agencies, business and industry groups and other key stakeholders.
4. Further, that the committee is to report to the Legislative Assembly by 31 January 2014.

## Introduction

The Uniting Church in Queensland welcomes the decision of the Queensland Government to conduct an inquiry into sexually explicit outdoor advertising. The impact of repeated exposure to sexually explicit outdoor advertising on children and society in general is an issue of significant concern to the Church.

The safety of children and young people has always been a priority for the Uniting Church in Australia<sup>1</sup>. This is evidenced by our commitment to providing a safe environment for children and young people in our Church communities. The Uniting Church in Queensland believes that children have the right to a decent and safe life. We believe in the wisdom of preventing avoidable harm.

The Church upholds the belief that outdoor public spaces are there for everyone to enjoy, and that this should not be compromised by inappropriate advertising images and messages.

The Church believes that it is reasonable that outdoor advertising should be subjected to similar regulation to other forms of media in relation to suitability for viewing by children.

## The adverse impacts on children<sup>2</sup>

The Uniting Church in Queensland supports the idea that children, especially in the pre-teen years, should be able to develop at their own pace and in the way most suited to them individually. The Church believes that parents should be supported to raise children according to their own values and beliefs, raising issues of sex and sexuality when they are ready for it.

The Church is concerned that children are involuntarily being exposed to images that will, directly or indirectly, contribute to them being sexualised earlier than is ideal.

The Church is also concerned that publicly displayed sexual images may contribute to the sexual desire of paedophiles and perpetrators of sexual abuse.

## Premature sexualisation of children

“Sexualisation occurs when a person's worth is judged on the basis of sexual appeal and behaviour to the exclusion of other characteristics, when a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy, or when a person is seen as a sexual object rather than a person with their own independent thoughts and behaviour<sup>3</sup>”.

The exposure of children to outdoor advertising which sexualise adults, gives children “the message that being sexy is the way to be successful and feel good about oneself”<sup>4</sup>. Some outdoor advertisements directly sexualise children, for example featuring children playing adult roles, although this is not as common.

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<sup>1</sup> Youth and Children's Ministry Unit, 2006, *The Child Safe Church*, The Uniting Church in Australia, Queensland Synod.

<sup>2</sup> Children are understood to be persons up to the age of 18 years, as defined in international law through the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Psychological Society, 2013, *Helping girls develop a positive self image*, Tip sheet for parents, [http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip\\_sheets/girls\\_positive\\_image/](http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/girls_positive_image/), accessed 19 June 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Rush and La Nauze, 2006, *Letting Children be Children: Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*, The Australia Institute, Discussion Paper Number 93, v.

In many television shows, magazines, and all forms of advertising, there is pressure on children to dress and look like miniature adults. This can compromise the development of healthy body image and self-esteem, especially with repeated exposure.

Generally, parents do their best to support their child's development and to protect them from situations, materials and images which interfere with that development. Children will frequently misinterpret the sexual messages they are exposed to and it is very difficult for parents to deal with these misinterpretations. The Australia Institute reported in 2006 that many parents feel that they are losing the battle<sup>5</sup>.

The Uniting Church supports the Australia Institutes' statement that "children are only likely to be able to develop freely if government assists parents by limiting this sexualising pressure at its source - advertisers and marketers"<sup>6</sup>.

### **Child safety**

Girls, even as young as six or seven, often dress up and wear makeup that makes them look older than they are. For years, a number of top models around the world have been aged in their early teens, but so often look deceptively older and quite sophisticated and sexy. The concern of the Church is that, to a person with paedophilic tendencies, ordinary images of such sophisticated and sexy girls in any advertising might normalise their sexual desires.

The Uniting Church in Queensland strongly supports the statement: "Although strong evidence is difficult to obtain about the risks of the sexualisation of children promoting paedophilia and child sexual abuse, we argue that in this area, society has an obligation to adopt a precautionary approach given the particular vulnerability of children"<sup>7</sup>.

### **The range of outdoor advertising**

The Uniting Church in Queensland objects to the erosion of children's innocence by repeated exposure to sexually explicit outdoor advertisements.

Outdoor advertisements in public spaces are usually placed in locations which maximise the public's exposure to the products/messages being advertised or promoted. This commonly includes large roadside billboards, sandwich boards and advertisements in public transport, at bus stops and in public toilets. It is rare to leave your home or work place and not encounter at least one form of outdoor advertising.

Other forms of advertising, for example on television, in magazines or at the cinema, can be avoided by turning it off, putting it away or not going. Parents can largely control the images and messages their children are subjected to in these situations.

When driving down the street, however, and faced with an enormous billboard featuring a sexually explicit image or message (for example "Want longer lasting sex?"), parents can only hope their child is looking the other way. Parents report that they are often forced into conversations with their child about sexual matters – "what does that mean?" – far earlier than the child is developmentally ready for or mature enough to handle.

The Uniting Church also objects to sexually explicit images and words in outdoor advertising on the grounds that they are simply in poor taste.

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<sup>5</sup> Rush and La Nauze, 2006, op cit, v

<sup>6</sup> Rush and La Nauze, 2006, op cit,

<sup>7</sup> Rush and La Nauze, 2006, *Corporate Paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia*, Discussion Paper Number 90, The Australia Institute, 41.

The Church is concerned that our society seems to be becoming used to seeing this type of advertising. When it first appeared Church members were horrified, but we are now alarmed to find that we are becoming blasé about it. This is of concern to the Church, because we have observed that when the boundaries of decency are moved, all parameters seem to shift. We wonder how close we can skirt around the absolute limits of safe and acceptable standards, before we cross the point of no return. Regulatory standards should therefore tend to be more conservative than liberal in approach.

The Church is also disturbed by the way women are often portrayed in outdoor advertising, for example the "Love and Rockets" billboards. These images are derogatory and sexually objectify women. What do these billboards teach our daughters about how they should dress and act? And what do they teach our sons about how they should expect girls to dress and act?

### **Comments about the regulatory framework for outdoor advertising**

Whether driving down the street, walking up the road, waiting for a bus or taking public transport, children are exposed to the same advertising as adults. It is not sufficient for advertisers to say that sexually explicit outdoor advertising is only directed towards adults, since children's exposure to these messages is unavoidable.

There has been a significant question about what constitutes the relevant audience for outdoor advertising. The Advertising Federation of Australia states that "outdoor advertising is in all instances open to general exhibition. Therefore careful consideration should be given to the choice of content"<sup>8</sup>.

The Uniting Church in Queensland notes that the Classification Board for other forms of media has detailed notes about the types of images, suggestiveness, degree of nudity etc. which are permissible at different classification levels. This approach ensures transparency as well as consistency in decision-making<sup>9</sup>.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee recommended "that the Australian Association of National Advertisers amend its Advertising Code of Ethics to proscribe sexual objectification of men, women and children"<sup>10</sup>.

They concluded that "industry self-regulation of advertising standards needs to include a specific code of practice for outdoor advertising. This code of practice should reflect the particular nature of outdoor advertising, recognising that all members of society are exposed to it and do not have a choice about viewing it. Community sentiment supported the Committee's opinion that there is a need to reclaim public space from any wayward interests of commercial advertising"<sup>11</sup>.

The Uniting Church believes that outdoor advertising be subjected to similar levels of classification as other forms of media – G or PG – in relation to sexual or adult images.

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<sup>8</sup> Advertising Federation of Australia, *Outdoor Advertising Advisory Paper and Checklist*, <http://www.communicationscouncil.org.au/public/content/ViewCategory.aspx?id=310>, accessed 13 June 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, 2011, *Reclaiming Public Space: Inquiry into the regulation of billboard and outdoor advertising*, The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 60.

<sup>10</sup> Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, 2011, *op cit*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, 2011, *op cit*, vii.

## Summary and Recommendations

The Uniting Church in Queensland acknowledges the challenges faced by parents as they raise their children, supporting them to develop at their pace in all areas in a safe environment. To support this, the regulation covering exposure of children to sexually explicit material needs to be consistent in both private and public spaces.

The Uniting Church makes the following recommendations:

- Ensure words and images used in outdoor advertising are appropriate for general viewing in public spaces; specifically they should be suitable for viewing by children.
- Bring the regulatory framework around the use of sexually explicit material in outdoor advertising into line with regulation for other forms of media; that is rating G or PG for all outdoor advertising.

Thank you for the opportunity to express the views of the Uniting Church in Australia, Queensland Synod, in relation to this important and significant issue.

Yours sincerely,

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(Rev) Kaye Ronalds

**Moderator**