



## ***What should Uniting Church congregations do about the campaign against RU486?***

*Rev. Dr. Ann Wansbrough, Senior Policy Analyst, UnitingCare NSW.ACT*  
[annw@nsw.uca.org.au](mailto:annw@nsw.uca.org.au)

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A number of ministers and congregations have received email from an anti-RU486 campaign. **Advice: take NO ACTION on the Anti-RU486 Campaign.**

The President of the Uniting Church has told the media that the Uniting Church said it would not participate in high-profile lobbying efforts to ban RU486 and would not make a submission to the Senate inquiry called into the drug's availability.

"We have already had the public debate about abortion," the church's Australian president, Dr Dean Drayton, said. "The issue is whether or not this particular drug is safe to be released for use in a country where abortion is legally available."  
<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/abortion-drug-battle-splits-lobby/2006/01/19/1137553712926.html>

The bill referred to in the anti RU486 material is about removing the requirement that the Minister for Health authorize any proposed evaluation of the drug. This condition has been uniquely applied to RU486. The proposed change would simply enable the drug to be assessed in the usual way, i.e. by the Therapeutic Goods Administration, to determine whether or not it ought to be available. Medical drugs are best evaluated by objective methods, without political interference. The Bill is not about whether or not abortion should be legal or under what circumstances.

A more detailed critique of the anti-RU486 campaign is provided below.

This could be used as a case study in how to evaluate material coming to your congregation. We suggest some general criteria, and evaluate the anti-RU 486 campaign against them.

### **1. Who sent out the anti-RU486 campaign email and on what authority?**

Our general rule is that the church should not take seriously anonymous emails and should never support campaigns where it is unclear who is taking responsibility for the campaign, or how decisions are made.

*Assessment:* We have looked at the anti-RU486 campaign website (<http://www.aaru486.com.au>) to which the email refers. Neither the email nor the website gives any names of those who run the campaign, either individuals or groups. In effect, the email and website are both anonymous. You should not act on anonymous letters or emails (and that means you should not send them on to other people).

But in case you are not convinced, we will provide the other criteria.

## **2. Credibility – policy**

We also evaluate campaigns as to whether they understand the policy issue. Do they give a fair and honest summary of what parliament is considering and why? Do they refer you to the parliamentary website, to the proposed legislation, the terms of reference of the inquiry, and the inquiry submissions, so that you evaluate the issue?

*Assessment:* A superficial reading of the email gives the impression that parliament is being asked to approve RU486; the arguments in the material are about the drug. The proposed legislation, however, is about allowing RU 486 to be assessed by the Therapeutic Drugs Administration (TGA) in the same way as other medicinal drugs, without interference from the Minister for health. The arguments for or against the interference of the Minister for Health are not considered. The email received by congregations did not refer congregations to the relevant parliamentary information. [http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/clac\\_ctte/ru486/](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/clac_ctte/ru486/) or the submissions received by that committee – available at [http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac\\_ctte/ru486/submissions/sublist.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/ru486/submissions/sublist.htm).

The actual bill and the explanatory memorandum are available at [http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/clac\\_ctte/ru486/tga\\_act.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/clac_ctte/ru486/tga_act.htm). The second reading speech (the speech made by the person introducing the bill to the Parliament) is made by Senator Fiona Nash (National Party), who says she is also acting on behalf of Senator Judith Troeth (Liberal Party), Senator Lyn Allison (Australian Democrats) and Senator Claire Moore (ALP). That is, the bill is apparently sponsored by four women from four different political parties.

Useful material on the Senate Inquiry website also includes a transcript of the day of hearings in December (highly informative), and some of the submissions received.

In Australia's federal system, abortion law is a responsibility of the states; anti-abortion laws should not be introduced into the Australian Parliament under the guise of dealing with approval of new drugs.

## **3. Credibility – scientific evidence**

If a campaign makes factual claims, then these should be supported by appropriate evidence or reference to where the evidence can be found. Evidence is not a newspaper report – it requires a proper study which has credibility among other scientists.

*Assessment:* The website makes claims about RU486 but does not indicate the basis of the claims or the scientific studies on which they are based.. The campaign seems to depend on anecdotal evidence. The links on the campaign website seem to be to

newspaper articles that have no particular credibility or expertise, rather than links to serious studies or articles by people with a demonstrated ability to assess the safety of the drug.

At the Senate Inquiry, even those who want RU486 banned agreed that the Therapeutic Goods Administration, not Parliament, is the proper body to assess the medical issues related to RU486

[http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/clac\\_ctte/ru486/hearings/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/clac_ctte/ru486/hearings/index.htm) .

The anti-RU486 website also makes claims about a study of the attitude of Australian women to RU486, but gives no indication as to who did the survey, when, where or how it was done, the questions asked, or anything else that would enable the credibility of the survey to be assessed. Another survey done recently gives quite different results -

<http://www.arha.org.au/index/RU486%20Newspoll%20Press%20Release%20Final.pdf>

#### **4. Clarity as to the issue and why it is a moral issue on which the churches should speak**

*Assessment:* The campaign appears to confuse medical, moral and political issues. The NSW Synod recognizes that women have the right to make a decision as to whether or not to have an abortion, but urges them to consider this a serious moral issue and to seek counseling before making the decision. If an abortion occurs, it should be by a method that safeguards the health of the mother. See

<http://unitingcarenswact.org.au/advocacy/abortion.html> RU486 should be evaluated by proper trials in the same way as any other medicinal drug or procedure. Public policy on the matter should depend on scientific evidence as to the need for the procedure, and the safety and effectiveness of the procedure compared to alternatives.

RU486 does not seem to raise new moral issues related to abortion. On the basis of the campaign's own statements, there is a period of several weeks involved, which would allow time for a woman to consider the issue carefully and seek appropriate advice and support. The campaign is dangerous, since it attempts to use political pressure to resolve a medical issue, instead of demanding that the drug be assessed by objective criteria, without political interference. At the moment, the TGA cannot even assess the claims about the drug.

#### **5. Support for transparent and consistent public policy processes**

Generally, similar aspects of policy should be dealt with in a consistent manner with minimal exceptions. This is part of the rule of law.

*Assessment:* There is no suggestion in the anti-RU486 campaign that the normal process for evaluating drugs is problematic. Even the critics of the drug agree the TGA has the expertise to evaluate it. Good public policy on medical related matters uses objective processes, and does not depend on the particular beliefs of the Minister for Health at a particular time.

#### **6. Honesty, credibility and consistency within the material**

*Assessment:* The campaign website claims the campaign is about the safety of the drug, includes people who are pro-choice and is not anti-abortion. But the email sent to congregations is clearly anti-abortion. The website also claims the issue is the safety of the drug – but that, even those who oppose the drug agree, is a matter which ought to be decided by the TGA, which has the appropriate expertise. The arguments so far put to the Senate inquiry about the drug focus on the need for the Minister to evaluate its social impact, not medical. So there are deep inconsistencies about what this campaign is really asking people to support and advocate and for what reason. It lacks credibility.

## **Conclusion**

For all the above reasons, I advise congregations NOT to support the anti-RU486 campaign.