



General Secretary's Report

by the Reverend John Henderson

Adelaide – 10 July 2004

At the Cross Roads: Living in a Changing World

Part One

Where we are

The General Secretary's report to the Melbourne Forum in 2001 set out a number of points about the situation of the National Council of Churches in Australia at that time. For the most part they still apply:

1. The NCCA is an extraordinary opportunity to do something new and uniquely Australian. We should make the most of this opportunity.
2. The NCCA, while having a wide spectrum, is not yet representative of the whole range of Australian Church communities. We must widen the fellowship.
3. Member Churches are experiencing times of deepening stress, even crisis. How can the NCCA best be useful to Australian Churches at this time?
4. The NCCA is restricted by a lack of resources, which prevents it from operating as it was originally intended to. This results in many of our objectives remaining 'pious hopes', and renders us unable to contribute consistently to public debate in Australia. How do we want the NCCA to look in the future? What sort of Council do we want to have?

In Adelaide in 2004 these points are still accurate. Theologically there is only one church, and 2½ years ago that is what brought me into the position of General Secretary. The NCCA is a marvellous body, skilfully brought together to bridge our separateness and strengthen the dialogue towards unity. We have come a long way:

1. We have broadened the circle – the Council represents three major streams of Christianity: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and what is often called 'Protestant'.
2. We have built a Council that is strongly linked to its member Churches.
3. We have started down the path of a uniquely Australian form of ecumenism.

For some the transition in 1994 from the former Australian Council of Churches to the NCCA came at a price. The closure of some networks and commissions was felt as a personal blow. Hard decisions were taken and carried through to bring the NCCA to birth.

Work begun by the ACC is, however, continued by the NCCA, and there is still work to be done as we consider how we nurture the development of the NCCA. Christmas Bowl, and along with it the Christian World Service Commission, is the largest campaign brought forward. The proposed incorporation of CWS is a major item for this Forum. Parts of the NCCA operation that have a larger financial base, such as CWS and to some extent the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander Ecumenical Commission, formerly the AIC, can overshadow work that is carried out with fewer resources. Faith & Unity, Social Justice, Mission, and Gender receive very few resources. Youth has received a little more. Newer initiatives such as the Decade to Overcome Violence really struggle to get up and running and are barely financially viable. They have to go begging for their supper.

This gives a sense of imbalance to the operation of the NCCA. As we address this imbalance we need a co-operative and open spirit. Ecumenism is by nature a process of dialogue – internally and externally. This is what we expect of others – we must demand it of ourselves. Agendas need to be open and honest, and difficulties worked through patiently as we listen to each other and arrive at the best outcomes we can. No one gains if we are defensive or territorial about our particular point of view. The task of unity can be undone by the very passion that drives it if we become too fixed in our ways.

The imbalance of the current situation is a source of struggle for me as General Secretary. There have been joys, but also disappointments. Although the NCCA is 10 years old, we carry historic issues that go back much further. Some fight battles that are no longer relevant and we are in danger of ‘missing the market’ in terms of what is happening in Australian Christianity. We are not as ‘light on our feet’ in adjusting to change as I had hoped we would be when I first took this position. There are so many stakeholders, official and unofficial, at so many levels in so many places that consultative decisions are very difficult to make, and once made, difficult to carry out as people struggle to accept them. The people involved in the life of the NCCA are so passionate about the cause for which they work they do not take kindly to apparent setbacks brought about by paying attention to competing interests.

It is a tragedy of contemporary Christianity that we can see ourselves as competitors. It is a travesty that ecumenical interests should ever succumb to such a spirit. Government policy and societal pressure try to force a spirit of competition on the Churches. The ecumenical movement, however, should be an influence against this.

I welcome the discussion about CWS incorporation at this Forum because it is a discussion about clear and accountable governance, and about good management of a precious resource. Our objective in this discussion must not be institutional survival but the benefit of those for whom the work is done. It is not about campaigns, buildings, or budgets, but about solidarity with people. It is also about the ecumenical vision, and this is another reason I welcome the discussion. How will the NCCA carry out its objectives? Are the established means the best? How should we plan for the future? Incorporating CWS as part of the NCCA ‘family’ may bring about a shift in the way we define the NCCA and how it goes about its work. Delegates will be asked to consider these questions and others as we work through the agenda items.

This 2004 National Forum is a moment when we stand at a vantage point, have a look at where we have been and where we are going, and set policy directions that help us move forward. I encourage you, as delegates, to make it your responsibility to look at the big picture. As you engage in this Forum you are reviewing the NCCA on behalf of Australia’s churches. This will culminate with the final session on Tuesday morning when I hope we will piece together where we have come and where we want to go. Please be here for that. Please be here for every session. If our dialogue is to make sense, and if you are to understand the discussion, you need to give your time to listen to others, even if their subject isn’t your favourite. What you do in this Forum, and your attentiveness to the agenda, will reveal the strength of our future and the commitment of Australian Churches to the ecumenical vision they have given the NCCA.

Part Two

Where we are going

1. Remain true to our purpose

- **The NCCA is to encourage and enable member churches** (Const 4:01.a&b)

These are the primary words used to describe our objectives. The NCCA is not a Church (3.01) – therefore it does not assume the marks of the church or act as a Church. It does not replace the church but exists between and among them.

As an encourager and enabler the NCCA is a reminder and an expression of unity (4:01.a.i). Christian unity is in the first place a spiritual unity in Christ. This Council is meant to explore what unity is. Spiritual concerns must come first.

- **The NCCA helps us know one another better** (4.01.ii)

Knowing each other lets us do things together. Doing things together helps us know each other better. We meet each other to listen, talk, and feel encouraged. Here we express and explore similarities and differences, and develop the unity we have.

- **The NCCA must address those issues to which the Churches direct it**

The objectives of the NCCA list a number of key issues – evangelism, morality, speaking out against oppression, solidarity with Aboriginal and Islander peoples, and responding to human need and the cause of justice, peace and creation. The programmes and actions of the NCCA must be built around these clear directions.

- **The NCCA does not have a monopoly on unity, or on ecumenism**

Australian Christians are now talking and acting together in many different ways. Only a few of these relate to what is formally called the ‘ecumenical movement’. Jesus’ disciples once came across someone from outside their group casting out demons in his name. They tried to stop him, but Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.” (Luke 9:50) Similarly we should not discourage those who are working for Christ, even if they come at it from a different angle and sometimes we want to correct them. We should celebrate the gifts God gives to the church which are far more diverse than we sometimes are.

2. Be a truly national body

- **The NCCA can assist Churches in their national focus**

The way Australian Churches organise themselves varies widely. It takes sensitivity to bring them together in a co-ordinated way. Many Church leaders bear immense responsibilities with threadbare resources. The NCCA must be a place where leaders can find support, encouragement, and equipping for their task. Attending NCCA meetings should not be a drain but an asset to their time and leadership

- **The NCCA needs to build recognition as a national body for the Churches**

If Christians across Australia are to be convinced of the ongoing relevance of the NCCA, given the broad range of ecumenical activity, it must know what it’s on about. It must broaden its appeal and carefully craft its language so that it is able to speak across the spectrum of Australian Christianity without being too tightly tied to its own history and a single expression of unity.

- **The NCCA needs to understand the national agenda**

With the limited human and financial resources available to it, the NCCA must be careful about where it spends its energy, to keep faith with those who support it, to remain faithful to Christ, and to have the best effect on the formation of Australian national life. An organisation such as the NCCA could easily sink without trace – what gives it presence and credibility is the voice and backing of the Churches.

- **The NCCA must not duplicate work that is best done on a state, regional or local level**

While the NCCA's operation must be situated in a particular place, a key challenge is to identify and remain focussed on national issues. Otherwise the time and energy of the NCCA is dissipated before the real work has begun and we cut across really good things being done by someone else. Personal and local interests must give way to the national agenda. In my brief time I have seen some outstanding things happening in States, regions, and local places. We are not competing for these things. The NCCA's task is different. We should be pooling our resources and sharing our tasks, not competing for them. For the good of the Churches we need stronger linkages and less duplication on all levels. We need strong relationships that bind us together across difference, and are not based on issue and programme specific funding.

3. Be open to change and innovation within its established purposes

- **The NCCA must be willing and able to listen to what is happening today**

The ecumenical movement of the 20th century gave us birth, and we celebrate that. We have a strong legacy and loyalty to the pioneers of the movement to Christian unity. On its own, however, that is not enough to make sure we remain relevant. Past actions and structures are not necessarily what we need now. The principles may remain the same, but the way they are expressed or worked through may change. The NCCA must be open and receptive to the world of the Churches, the challenges, joys and frustrations that confront them, and their involvement in society. Australia is changing. Are we listening?

- **The NCCA must be flexible**

Institutionally there is always the temptation to do things a certain way because they were done that way in the past. Established structures are hard to fine tune or dismantle, as occasion may demand. It can even sound ecumenically heretical to do so, and it has intrigued me to discover that we do have our heresies – we just call them by different names. Tough decisions will be necessary for the ongoing relevance of any organisation. We need courage to decide how the NCCA should operate to make sure it remains true to its core purpose.

- **The NCCA must be thoughtful**

While structure can both enable and frustrate, there is always the temptation to pick up the issue of the moment that seems so urgent and spend our energy on it to the neglect of less immediate but often ultimately more important issues. Spirituality, for instance, will often give way to activism. Modern people understand activism. Funding can be found for action, but rarely for contemplation or theology. We must be thoughtful about these things, and make sure our work is balanced.

- **The NCCA must determine agendas & programmes using clearly established policies**

This means being able to clearly say both 'yes' and 'no' when we have to. We may have to say 'no' to worthy causes and actions when we not equipped or directed to take them on board. People who are frustrated in their own Church should not use the NCCA as an alternative bypass route to get things done.

4. Use resources wisely

- **The NCCA must do things that are useful to the Churches in carrying out their mission**

We are uniquely placed to bring Churches together around important issues of discipleship. If we carefully think them through and present them properly, we may find that there are ways to support the work of the NCCA other than through unspecified budget contributions. Money is getting harder to come by, but there are still funds for certain tasks. If Churches act together, through the NCCA, more might be done at a lower cost to each than if we act alone. This is most apparent when some Churches do work in a certain area, and then the NCCA works in that area as well. If we come together we can develop outcomes that benefit all Christians. Some examples are the development and implementation of policies to prevent sexual abuse, work in maintaining government concessions under Tax Law, & representation to government on public policy issues that concern the whole community. We need to co-ordinate these things – we are not competitors but colleagues. I might also include items such as interfaith work. It is happening all around the place but no one seems to have the big picture.

- **The NCCA must be realistic about what it can do with what it has**

Through good stewardship in the past NCCA Ltd is the holder of real property. There are funds and bequests, and a (dwindling) reserve. The NCCA is not meant to amass great wealth, or to be isolated from the struggle of the Churches to make ends meet. God makes a little, even nothing, into much, but we have a tendency to take on massive programmes with no resources. We raise false expectations of what can be done and we put an unreasonable strain on our workers. In future we will have to say 'no' to these things unless it can be shown there is a way of supporting them.

- **The NCCA must care for its workers**

NCCA is full of dedicated people who give time and energy above and beyond the call of duty – committee persons, paid staff and volunteers. We should honour and celebrate their contribution, but also learn not to take it for granted. Conflicts can arise when care is not taken. Issues of governance, accountability, and reporting must be dealt with efficiently and in a businesslike manner.

- **The NCCA must not continue to operate with deficit budgets**

Forecasts in 2004 predicted less than 2 years ongoing operations at the current level of income/expenditure. Responses have included a reduction in NCCA staffing levels with no corresponding reduction in programme or campaign work. This is a dangerous situation. We are in danger of programmatic operations being funded to continue, while the core operation of the NCCA is drastically under funded and understaffed. We need people to do the work.

AT THE CROSS ROADS – LIVING IN A WORLD OF CHANGE is a Forum to help us step into the future. It will not always be comfortable. Sometimes we will disagree. Old campaigners may wonder whether we are giving away more than we are gaining. Newcomers may scratch their heads and wonder what it's all about.

We meet here as people called out and set apart by our Churches, and by the God of the church, for the work of this Forum, the work of Christian Unity. As delegates you have work to do over these 5 days – work that will not wait for anyone else to do it. All I ask is that we do this work prayerfully and with resolve, conscious of our responsibilities, respecting one another, doing the best we are able, and at the end to rest from a job well done. As we meet together may we be faithful and accountable in our response to Christ's declaration that he has made us one.