

## FAITH AND UNITY COMMISSION

### BROADENING THE THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE: ISSUES AND PRINCIPLES

At the request of the then General Secretary, the Revd John Henderson, this paper is offered as an initial response to the perceived need for the NCCA and its members to engage with Christian people and organisations that are active in Australian society but not members of the NCCA.

#### *Issues*

- There is a dynamic, growing, public expression of Christianity beyond the NCCA membership. For example: the Australian Prayer Network, the Australian Christian Lobby, the Evangelical Alliance. The Faith and Unity Commission has welcomed the Assemblies of God in Australia as an observer to its meetings, thus bringing us into dialogue with the Pentecostal movement. Internationally, we recognise the important connections being made as part of the Global Christian Forum.
- These groups are often suspicious of the NCCA and many of its members, and consider traditional ecumenism to be too church focused, with only weak public Christian commitment.
- For their part, the NCCA and many of its members are suspicious of the methods used in these groups, and of the theological foundations underpinning their activities.
- Despite these mutual suspicions bridges are being built between these two broad groups. There are important instances of cooperation and mutual engagement on specific projects (rather than the traditional workings of the NCCA's commissions), such as the Safe as Churches project.
- Within each of the member churches of the NCCA it is possible to discern different streams of theology, ranging from the more systematic to the more practical. Furthermore, members of our own churches may also participate in these new expressions of Christianity.
- The new form of Christian engagement evident in these new movements may suggest to the NCCA and its member churches that we are witnessing the birth of a new or alternative "ecumenical" paradigm (although these movements would not call their engagement ecumenical). This new paradigm takes as a starting point personal testimony about experiences of faith rather than dialogue about doctrines and creeds; it is less formal and less academic; it often challenges the Enlightenment paradigm regarding faith and reason; and it proposes a different understanding of mission, more forthright in its proclamation of moral values.

#### *Principles*

- The NCCA should be a participant in this new multilateral conversation, willing to bring its own gifts to the table and to receive the gifts of others.
- Such participation becomes possible where the NCCA can discern that there is sufficient common purpose existing between itself and any one of these new movements. For example, they "confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures" and are committed "to work together towards the fulfilment of their mission of common witness, proclamation and service, to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (Basis of NCCA).
- The NCCA should be willing to enter into broader partnerships on particular issues of national or shared interest.

- Building trust among all participants should be a priority. Without this trust Christians of different persuasions will remain suspicious of each other and continue to deliver contrary messages to the Australian public.
- The NCCA and its commissions should be ready to engage with other Christian groups using new and different methodologies, with spiritual/religious experience as a starting point. This need not diminish the traditional work of the commissions.
- Encounter with other Christians is always an opportunity to renew and purify our ecumenical commitment. Engagement with these newer Christian movements may be an occasion to develop our understanding and practice of spiritual ecumenism, with a strong focus on Christ and the Spirit.

Prepared by Faith and Unity Commission  
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