



NCCA 7th Forum
Shaping Our Ecumenical Footprint
9-13 July 2010

General Secretary's Address

Let us hold fast to a confession of hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together." Hebrews 10:23-25

We often recognise that as the people of God we are on a journey, in a way our theme implies that for if we are shaping footprints then we are moving somewhere to be making them. Our churches often use words like pilgrimage and indeed that word is part of our basis, part of our reason for existence.

The NCCA gathers together in pilgrimage those Churches and Christian communities which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and commit themselves

[i] to deepen their relationship with each other in order to express more visibly the unity willed by Christ for his church, and

[ii] 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.

Each one of us has journeyed a long way since the last time we as Australian Churches met together in Alexander Headland. Some of us were there. At that time I was in attending my 3rd Forum and sat in a table group with Philip Wilson, Philip Huggins, Cecil Schmalkuche, who are here as well as Aimee Kent and Tanya Richards by the end of the Forum we had grown in our fellowship and as friends. Back then I was also one of the six elected to the Executive for what was to be a second term not realising that by the 7th Forum I would not be seated around the tables listening but sitting or standing on this side of the room.

14 months ago when I commenced as General Secretary I received greetings cards and letters from people some I knew and many I had never met. One letter remains fresh in my memory, from the hand writing I knew it was from an elderly person who recalled how he and his wife were in St Christopher's Cathedral for the Inauguration of the NCCA. He commented how wonderful the event was and said as the Mantle passed over the congregation we felt that we were apart of what all that the churches were doing. There was energy and a hope of the unity for which our Lord prayed.

Hebrews reminds us *Let us hold fast to a confession of hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.*

During this past year I have wondered what has happened to the enthusiasm and the hope that was in the churches then last Saturday I went out to Wattle Grove to St Thomas' Cathedral of the Indian Orthodox Church, for St Thomas' Feast Day Celebrations, the timing was perfect for I was able to share with the members of the church something about the NCCA and I discovered a joy and excitement from young and old that their church was about to be part of something exciting.

But the same excitement doesn't seem to be present or stirring in all the other member churches. As General Secretary I am attempting to spend time with each Head of Church. In recent months I have heard these comments, I am trying to help my church to understand what it means to be in the NCCA and how we can be ecumenical. Another told me in the last two weeks "we don't really have people that are able to attend the Forum they don't have the sort of experience that is required." Yet another on a

real positive note said being involved in the NCCA and in Dialogue with other churches has helped me understand and appreciate them better.

So thinking about our theme what is the shape of our Ecumenical foot print? As I see it is visible in some way in our covenanting together. Last night there were comments about it not taking off but its ecumenical shape we are still growing into. About two weeks ago I was talking with Ray Williamson and he said what do you think of this and read me an outline for a covenant. I commented that it sounded good, some of it was part of our NCCA covenanting together and some of it was very adventurous in the area of recognising each others ministry. Ray then told me this was a draft discussed in 1978 by the Australian Council of Churches nearly thirty years before the one signed in Adelaide in 2004.

Clearly God's Spirit is at work in our Churches inspiring and guiding us into closer relations. So as NCCA churches we have the task still ahead to discover how we grow into our covenanting in ways that praying for each other and with each other is natural and a deep desire for assembling together.

One of the most significant assembling together that I have experienced in this role was in January when the churches in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane came out and stood side by side our brothers and sisters in the Coptic Orthodox Church displaying the Ecumenical footprint as they participated in peace marches through our cities streets and displaying a glimpse of visible unity.

During these last three years the Executive has watched an exciting new development in the Safe Church Training Agreement. The Training agreement is all about resourcing, facilitating, sustainable, quality and accessible Safe Church Training with the aim of making the Australian church a safer place for ministry. The financial resources of the NCCA are limited yet this training agreement is taking off with new regional church bodies signing up nearly every week. This has grown to the extent that it can now afford to fund Peter Barnett as a part time National Coordinator. The activity of the training agreement is shaping a distinctive ecumenical footprint.

The NCCA like any council of churches exists to serve the churches. We serve by providing the space for you the churches to meet together in order that the churches may deepen their relationship so as to express more visibly the unity found in Christ. Possibly the biggest challenge in providing the space of this Forum was in getting people to be here and sadly this forum is all the poorer for the absence of many of our heads of church as well as many of the Orthodox. In the last few days illness and even a family death means that two who were coming have been unable to attend.

The NCCA also provides a n ecumenical space so that you the churches may work together in the churches witness of proclamation and service. It is unfortunate that this aspect is becoming increasingly more difficult to do. The NCCA relies on the resources provided by the churches which includes the time and gifts of your people. At times people say yes to be part of the NCCA working team but then due to a variety of other commitments the NCCA moves further away from their priorities. This then leaves us in the office attempting to complete the projects that have been started but with inadequate resourcing. The Growing Churches in the Australian Context working group is just one example of this.

Good work is produced when the churches work together. This is evident through the work of the Social Justice Network. The enthusiasm and experience of the members of the Network is amazing and each year it produces an excellent resource with which to promote discussion and hopefully responses in the churches. Last year they produced Hope for the Common Good – Beyond the GFC. This year the resource will be addressing witnessing to peace in a violent world.

Resourcing is also limited by finances and in the last three years the financial situation has meant the inability to fund the position of youth officer which for a variety of other reasons has also seen the

disbanding of the youth network. Recent budgetary restrictions will impact further on our resourcing with us no longer able to support the honorary role of the Secretary to the Faith and Unity Commission.

In the papers you hopefully picked up that the Executive has identified the need to change the shape of our meetings so that a better hopefully more fruitful ecumenical space may be provided. That is why tomorrow we will be working in the three areas Faith and Order, Mission and Public/social issues. I am thrilled at the direction and the vision coming from the churches to reshape in this way but it possibly means that the NCCA needs to look seriously at its structures their shape and how these will be realistically resourced.

The pilgrimage of more visible Christian Unity is only achieved by the churches together taking one step at a time. What steps do you see in your church and what is perhaps the next step that needs to be taken.

What is the next step for the NCCA member churches to take together?

Let us hold fast to a confession of hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.”

Tara Curlewís

10 July 2010

This report was accompanied by a power point slide show.