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“Dreams and Visions: Considering Our Ecumenical Future”

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INTRODUCTION

This is a very ambitious title for what might seem to be a very prosaic topic. A couple of months ago, when this evening was being put together, Maureen challenged me for a theme for my presentation and this paradoxical title, with its inbuilt tension, emerged fairly quickly. As I address it I want to take a ‘long view’, which might bypass some of the immediate issues and help us think about our perspectives and culture. I would like to be able to tie everything up neatly, but that’s not the way I know life, the church, or the ecumenical movement.

The title of this talk is at once both bold and cautious:

- ‘Dreams and Visions’ evokes God’s prophets and prophetesses who stood against the tide of the times whatever the cost. These the bold pioneers who chart new territory and blaze the way for others to follow.
- ‘Considering our Ecumenical Future’ evokes the more bureaucratic types who always consider options and are more willing to strike a compromise deal. These are the graziers, farmers, and townsfolk who follow the pioneers and settle the land once it has been opened it up. Both types are necessary to a successful society.

In a recent Ecumenical Friends Letter I wrote: “The ecumenical movement works somewhere in the space between the immutability of God’s call to the church, and the change within which it is constantly embroiled. It is an instrument of our time to remind the church of its roots and its destiny. It does not replace the church, and it does not subvert the church – it serves the church in the best sense of that word. It has also played an important role in recent years for the cause of peace and justice.”

By nature I am more like the second type of person – perhaps that’s why I have undertaken the considerable administrative burden of General Secretary in a Council of Churches. The very name we give the role evokes its nature – hardly a prophetic title for an ecumenical leader. Perhaps you also know something of this pull between following your dreams and visions and giving careful consideration to your options. Those who only follow dreams and visions become impossible to live with, while those who always stop to consider every option become painfully paralysed and never seem to move on.

UNITY – DREAMS AND VISIONS

Visible Unity

It’s not hard to discover what the dream and vision of the ecumenical movement is – the visible unity of the church.

I believe in this unity. I still believe it after 25 years in the ministry, the last 5 of them in the ecumenical council. I believe it despite finding myself embroiled in the very attitudes that keep us apart, and in the human sentiments that do not bring healing, but propagate division.

I believe in it in much the same way as I believe in the church itself. I believe in the holy catholic church of the ancient ecumenical creeds.

Whether I believe it in the same way you do, I don't know. I came to the NCCA believing that Christians have a common cause, and that cause is centred on Jesus Christ, in whom we believe and whose name we carry. There is only one Jesus – therefore there can only be one church. I know, however, that people believe many things about Jesus Christ. There are also those who want to be Christian, but who see it as a collection of principles, rather than the saving act of God in Christ.

This is hard to reconcile. It's a paradox. It's like a mirror that has been shattered. Originally the reflection in the mirror was all one piece. Now the myriad of broken shards show bits and pieces of the original. Each bit, however, shows something of the whole, despite there being many sharp, hurtful edges. We must remember the original remains intact. It is only the reflection that is broken. The ecumenical movement is a dialogue in which we explore what that original image means to each community, and to each one of us.

Unity – is the dream changing? Taking the long view

The idea of unity really seemed to flourish in the 20th century, and led to the creation of councils and cutting edge programs. After WWII the church went through a kind of unity Renaissance, much like the nations did with the formation of the United Nations around the same time. Now that drive seems to have run out of some steam.

History is multi-layered. I am not sure how posterity will view the 20th century. The years after the Great War of 1914-18 do seem to show the gradual end of the 'Enlightenment Project' that began in the 16th century. Over 400 years it came to be accepted that within an ordered scientific universe human reason can understand the nature of things, order them, and ultimately control reality in ways beneficial to the human condition. This understanding introduced the once heretical possibility that humanity could remove the need for God and replace it with the power of the mind.

The Enlightenment was largely a Western European phenomenon, and contributed to the success of that civilization as a colonising force. It continues to do so through beliefs in democracy, science, and human dignity that we have adopted as commonplace and self evident universal truths. These truths are, of course, challenged by those who don't share them, and this contributes to wars and rumours of wars that we hear about every day.

To take a long view we should remember that the colonisation of Australia happened during the Enlightenment, and that most Protestant Churches also find their genesis in that period. Even the Reformation cry 'Sola Scriptura' can be interpreted in ways that make our reading of Scripture 'the truth', and wrest it out of the community that read and interpreted Scripture contextually for millennia, to instead locking it down into abstract and immutable absolutes divorced from the realities of human living.

What's the significance, then, of the ecumenical movement being born in the last years of the Enlightenment Project? It is simply a warning to us not to let the ecumenical vision become one where we human beings create, sustain, and somehow manage, the church and its unity. It is also a reminder that the ecumenical movement is often seen as a western Protestant phenomenon, which will wax and wane with the fortunes of the Protestant Churches.

The Enlightenment, however, is not all bad news. In many ways it is the very best of news. The Gospel has been much better understood. Christianity has spread throughout the world. Even while European powers behaved much like other empire builders in history, the Enlightenment

educated the world in terms of justice, peace, human rights, dignity, fairness, equality, and self-determination. That can't be all bad! Used properly these are the very things that will help us get out of the mess we seem to be in.

The ecumenical movement was also born at a time when the world was getting smaller and it was pretty clearly evident that division, competition, and arguments among the churches could not go on as they had in the past. They were a scandal that prevented the church from preaching Christ and practicing the life of faith. The vision that gave the ecumenical movement focus was a church that could preach Christ clearly, without the confusion and negativity that division among Christians creates.

That vision, I think, still exists. It is still the common foundation of our ecumenical cause. It is what I believe needs to be clearly carried forward in our ecumenical life in the 21st century.

World peace

To this vision of unity I think many of us would add the vision of a world where peace and justice are known and experienced by every human being, and we learn to care for creation as God's good gift. We take seriously the vision of ecumenism as being for the world, the whole household of God.

We also need to take careful stock of this vision and what it means. While we should always act with truth and integrity, the ecumenical movement is not the church, and nor is it the Kingdom of God. We should be careful attributing the marks of the Kingdom to the ecumenical movement per se. Such a vision should never be separated from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we must not reduce the peace of God to simply the cessation of human violence.

UNITY – Considering our future

Having grown up in a changing world, at a time when I am told change has never been more rapid, it seems that now in the 21st century things have changed again and in a different way. The change we are experiencing now is **discontinuous** – that is, our previous methods of responding to change don't work any more. Change used to be incremental, even if rapid, but now it seems to take quantum leaps. Things that used to work well now don't seem to work at all.

The view of the Churches about mission is one case in point. Today we scarcely seem to know what we mean by the word. In some Churches everything has become 'mission', and when everything is mission the word has lost its meaning. Among others, mission has reverted to the classical concept of evangelism, and Fairfax press ran a piece in its magazines last weekend about the more aggressive, 'go get 'em and convert the world' style of mission that is now in vogue in the US and in some parts of Australia. The growth in the number of 'missionaries' is exponential, and often the cause of grief to Churches that have existed for millennia in the countries they set out to convert. It's a mission that is often connected with the US hegemony and equates US evangelical Protestant values as authentic Biblical values par excellence. It sometimes even shamelessly uses material aid for those who are suffering to 'buy' their conversion, a contemporary inversion of the Spanish conquistadors who converted whole South American nations at sword point 600 years ago.

Back here in Australia the NCCA's Commission on Mission folded up a couple of years ago because Churches were no longer committed to it. (I note that VCC's has survived.) They no longer asked their mission practitioners to engage in ecumenical thinking about mission, and no one knew whether its area of activity was to be 'mission at home' or 'mission overseas'. There seemed to be no common thinking on what mission meant any more. It will take a little more time, but we have not given up on the subject of mission, and something will rise to replace the

former structure. We decided that pushing what we had to make it perform better was counterproductive, and it would be better to start with something new.

Things have changed, and Churches are generally slow to realise it. Although we have known change all our lives, this change seems qualitatively different to what went before. We can no longer apply the solutions we used to apply – they just don't work any more. To fix this, we mostly try to do more of what used to work well, rather than recognising that it simply doesn't work any more. Anyone who's tried to revitalise a congregational Sunday School or Youth Group in the traditional mould will know this agony! We need to allow new ways of doing things to emerge, running the risk all the time that we might lose what we already have. This is a time for both vision and careful consideration.

I think this need for new ways of thinking and doing has become especially apparent in Australia since the closer ecumenical involvement of the Catholic Church. Just by being Catholic in a non rational but ancient and historic way, it has challenged the assumptions by which many Protestants conduct their Church life. This has always been the case with the presence of the Oriental and Orthodox Churches, but by sheer size the Catholic Church in Australia tips the balance.

I experience this in the NCCA, and although it's difficult let me try and tell you some of what I mean. The tension comes from what some call the 'prophetic voice' of the church. This 'Voice' is usually understood as speaking out against oppression and injustice, particularly in ways that have political connotations. Many long time ecumenists see this as a critical function of an ecumenical council, which they want to be free of the polity that binds the Churches, and can go ahead of them to proclaim the truth and challenge the powers that be. You can see this in the history of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Australian Council of Churches (ACC), and many other ecumenical entities.

The tension that now exists, however, is that the NCCA, rather than being free of the polity of the Churches, is bound to that polity. Even more than that, it is bound to the polity of 15 member Churches. That is, it can publicly do nothing in the name of those Churches that has not been agreed to by them in advance. Neither can it act in its own name, since it's authority to act doesn't come from itself, but from the Churches.

This situation has been agreed to by all those who have joined the NCCA since 1994. It's not a case of one Church forcing it on the others. It has, however, substantially changed the character of the NCCA when compared with the former ACC, far more than many people realise, even within the organisation. The fabric of the current Council is held together by the trust of the Churches that the various constituent parts of the Council will abide by this limitation. It's a responsibility that rests particularly heavily with the General Secretary, and sometimes makes him seem like a 'wet blanket' or overly cautious, when a bold, independent stroke might seem to be called for.

I think this will continue to change the focus of the NCCA and its activities. To some extent it has become more inward focussed. That is, it exists for its members, to promote and explore their unity in Christ, before it takes them into common action. It has been possible for the NCCA to continue many of the functions of the ACC, but not all. We have recently managed to retain Christian World Service, and Christmas Bowl, within the NCCA's formal structures. That's been an important decision, and a good one, but it will also continue to challenge us with what seem to be two different directions running within the life of the Council at the same time.

All this I regard as healthy. Apart from the vision of unity, a key value of the ecumenical movement is **dialogue**. This is one of the main things I have appreciated learning since becoming

General Secretary. Dialogue is a ‘non-rational’ activity. Active listening, non-judgemental reception, accurate presentation of one’s own views, riding out storms of emotion, anger, or grief, learning to share one another’s stories. Dialogue, in many ways, is an exercise and lesson in life and it is qualitatively different to many other, directed activities. I am not just talking here about theological dialogues, which we often direct towards particular outcomes or agreements, but simply the dialogue of the Churches within the safe ecumenical space of the NCCA, the dialogue of commission and committee members as they get to know one another, the dialogue of staff members who arrive to work at the NCCA with all sorts of different expectations and purposes, the dialogue of supporters, volunteers, and ecumenical partners around Australia and the globe.

I suppose all I have done here is introduce a few thoughts, but I want to finish with one that affects the VCC, and all of us who are involved in the life of ecumenical councils in Australia.

Considering our ecumenical future – State / National relations

I have already said that things have changed and we can’t just keep doing more of what we have done in the past and expect it to go well. Something that has not changed, however, is the multiplicity of structures that make up the ecumenical movement in Australia. These point to cultural issues that need to be addressed.

It is up to the ecumenical movement to show unity among its own constituent parts, and we can apply that directly to State / National relationships in Australia.

I suppose you could say that we respond to both the blessings and the curse of Australian federalism. It’s great that Australia is one country, and it’s a miracle that it ever happened at all. It could easily have gone the other way. It’s a frustration, however, that within that federation we hang on staunchly to our varying structures and ways of doing things.

I have no solution to this. At some stage in my life I have lived and worked in 5 Australian States and both Territories, and I cannot believe we are as different in culture and traditions as some make out. We are remarkably similar in our approaches. Sometimes we maintain our sense of distinction by the intentional choice to ‘be different’, rather than through any type of necessity.

This is reflected in our ecumenical councils, which after all reflect their constituent Churches, which are very often diocesan or congregational churches that are not structured on national or state lines.

This makes it all very difficult, but we all speak the same language and worship the same God. I think it’s a great challenge to the Australian ecumenical movement, and one we have to take up, to get past previous agendas, and build up genuine working relationships where each part contributes to the whole. There are no formal structural links between us at present. Whether we need these or not I’m not sure, but I do believe we can share our work more, resource each other more, and trust each other more with projects, ideas, people, and things that we produce. We challenge our Church leaders to think ecumenically, and our former President was fond of quoting Archbishop William Temple who said the ecumenical movement has succeeded when Church leaders think first of attending an ecumenical event before going to their own denominational activities. Well, that’s the kind of thinking we also need among Australian ecumenical councils, that we think first of each other before we simply attend to our own activities. We want denominations to build ecumenical accountability into their workers. Maybe we should build responsibilities to other ecumenical bodies into the job descriptions of our own Council’s workers.

Thank you for this time, and I am happy to answer whatever questions you have.