

The General Secretary's Report

The Revd David Gill, 13 July 1996

1. It is fitting that, early in our life together, the National Council of Churches in Australia should gather in Brisbane. For Australian ecumenism owes much to the churches of the sunshine state.

2. In the early 1980s, by happy coincidence, Australia's three largest churches were led by Queenslanders: John Grindrod was Primate of the Anglican Church, Rollie Busch presided over the Uniting Church, and Frank Rush was chairing the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. For years they had worked together to challenge a reactionary, racist and corrupt state government. All three of them had suffered outrageous attacks from politicians, public opinion and members of their own churches who should have known better. All three bore similar scars. All three had become friends, colleagues, brothers in Christ, partners in ministry.

3. Then tragedy struck. A few weeks after standing down as President of the Uniting Church, Rollie Busch suffered a heart attack that was to take his life. The two archbishops, visiting Sydney at the time, asked if I would take them to the hospital. I will always remember that scene at the bedside: three old friends together facing the mystery of death, together affirming faith in the lord of life. That scene, a gift of Queensland, remains for me, always, as an icon of ecumenism.

4. I recall that icon now not only in gratitude for three special saints of God, not only in deference to Queensland's substantial contribution to the wider ecumenical scene, but also in recognition of that "knowledge of the heart" which led our churches into the NCCA, which has sustained our journey during the two years past, and which goes before us now into the work and worship of this National Forum.

5. Recall for a moment what lay behind the NCCA's formation. When the preceding Australian Council of Churches made way for this Council, it was not just a change of name and structures. It was the churches entering into a covenant with each other and moving, as one of the documents said, "from cooperation to commitment". Three things about the change should be noted.

... OF CHURCHES

6. More than its predecessor the NCCA stresses that it is to be seen as a council of churches. The thirteen member churches determine policy, representation on commissions and committees, and stances on public issues. The heads of those churches participate in meetings of the NCCA Executive, and there is increased consultation with the churches before the Council's commissions and committees make decisions.

7. The churches' enhanced sense of ownership of their council is certainly a plus. Yet we should not forget Archbishop Keith Rayner's warning, at the inauguration, about a possible loss of the Council's prophetic role because of the tighter ecclesiastical control. That warning must be taken seriously. We will sell the ecumenical movement short if we deprive it of its capacity to provoke, to disturb, to renew. More precisely, we will sell the gospel short if we obscure its capacity to provoke, to disturb, to renew.

8. But what is it that makes ecumenism a creative disturbance in our midst? Why does this strange movement stir us to dream new dreams, think new thoughts and contemplate the possibility of new relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ? Ecumenism's challenge, I submit, arises not primarily because of structures that have liberated themselves from the

churches, but rather from the dynamic let loose when churches seek, together, to discern the will of God and to set out, together, to follow the footprints of God in the dust of human history.

... A SHARED MEMORY

9. Australia's new NCC was given a new beginning, a new name, a new constitution. Relationships with bodies like the World Council of Churches and the Christian Conference of Asia had therefore to be renegotiated. But for all the stress on newness, the fact remains that ecumenism in Australia has a history, a memory, an experience too rich to forget.

10. Some delicate footwork is needed to do justice to that history, while remembering that it is a history not fully shared by all the NCCA's member churches. The Roman Catholic Church was not part of the ACC. Other churches were not involved with the developments associated with the Second Vatican Council. We have different ecumenical memories, and the process of building these into a shared memory with which all equally identify will take time and sensitivity.

... UNDER CONSTRUCTION

10. "Don't waste time, do it!" was the instruction to those who brought the NCCA into being. The new council was inaugurated on the basis of bare essentials, with many issues of programme, style and structure to be worked out on the run. Two years later, the NCCA is still a council under construction, as the churches figure out the implications of what they committed themselves to - and discover that other churches sometimes read the implications differently. The resulting conversation - part of which we will conduct during this meeting - is to be welcomed as a legitimate and necessary manifestation of the desire to move "from cooperation to commitment".

THE CHURCHES' COMMITMENT

12. To what have the churches committed themselves? The NCCA's Basis says it well:

"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".

13. Note the key motifs: pilgrimage; confession of faith; the scriptures; a deeper relationship with each other; the unity Christ wills; common witness, proclamation and service; doxology; and the Trinity.

14. What are the obstacles on the way, the barriers to be overcome, the temptations to be resisted? We all know them, but let us name the devils afresh.

FALSE STEREOTYPES

15. On my first day in the office, following the NCCA's inauguration two years ago, I had to cope with an apoplectic phone call from someone who denounced Rome and all its works, quoted the King James version of the bible at me for fifteen minutes straight and warned of the sticky end awaiting all who fraternise with papists. The same day, at the other end of Parramatta Road, Bishop Bede Heather received a similar call attacking Catholic leaders who had started consorting

with people from other denominations. It would be nice to think that one of these days those two callers might meet - they will have lots to talk about!

16. More soberly, *Ut Unum Sint* urges upon us "the necessary purification of past memories". You and I may have transcended the sectarianism and paranoia that marked inter-church relationships in the bad old days, but none of us is free of preconceptions, stereotypes, false expectations - yes, and anxieties too. All of us, separately and together, have many memories that need purifying.

INSTITUTIONAL INERTIA

17. A recent issue of *Ecumenical News International* [Feb '96] carries a telling quote from the General Secretary of the WCC. Says Konrad Raiser:

"The institutional representatives of the churches ... are caught in a framework of rules and norms which have been formulated over centuries to justify or maintain separated identities ... An ecumenical vision that can inspire new commitment and can generate hope must break out of these constraints".

18. Indeed it must. But breaking through such constraints, never easy at the best of times, is particularly difficult when the churches find themselves in trouble. The deeper the trouble, the more tempted we are to hold tight to familiar constraints and turn away from fresh challenges. Australia's churches right now are, I believe, in very considerable trouble. Symptoms vary from church to church, but they include declining numbers, tightening budgets, aging congregations, ambivalence about authority, uncertainty about the substance of the faith, rampant parochialism, hesitancy about mission and, as the bottom line, a morale crisis of very considerable dimensions.

19. A danger in all this, as I have warned before, is that the ecumenical movement gets relegated to the backburner until what appear to be more urgent denominational agendas get sorted out. But ecumenism is not a matter to be thought about when more pressing items have been disposed of. As Fr Banawiratma, an Indonesian Jesuit, reminded a recent consultation of the Christian Conference of Asia and the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, ecumenism is not primarily a matter of programmes, structures or activities; it is first and foremost "a way of being Church". It is that set of perspectives on the faith, that quality of relationships with other Christians, that openness to the whole Church across the nations and through the centuries, within which we wrestle with the fundamental questions of obedience and look for the wisdom needed to put our respective houses in order.

PRIDE

20. How many bilateral encounters have you known where both sides were hammering the table, with each church making maximalist claims for itself as having the fullness of the Christian faith, the fullness of means of grace, the fullness of apostolic order?

21. Why do we do this, when each of us in our own heart is painfully aware of our own church's inadequacies and shortcomings? What would happen, if we could replace the ecumenism of pride with an ecumenism of penitence? If instead of asserting strength we felt able to acknowledge weakness? If rather than demanding each other's acceptance our churches were big enough, trusting enough, to ask each other's help, correction, encouragement and support?

22. What would happen if each of our churches, quite explicitly, would seek such help from others so that it might enter more deeply into that shared tradition of faith to which, severally and together, we are all heirs? That faith tradition, held in common through centuries of unity, contested often bitterly through centuries of division, is richly diverse yet centred on the same cross, proclaiming the same mystery of grace, informed by the same scripture, inspired by the

same saints and martyrs, entered by the same waters of baptism, nourished by the same bread and wine, imbued with the same pentecostal Spirit, gifted with the same charisms, drawn towards the same destiny in God.

23. Finding our way afresh into that shared heritage of faith and faithfulness is an exciting journey indeed. This place where we meet - Grace College - offers us sustenance for the journey, in more ways than one. Over my head is the college logo: a cross, undergirded by the words "My grace is sufficient". That gospel promise, I submit, cries out to be taken with radical seriousness by our churches. The all-sufficiency of grace is not only what makes ecumenism possible. It is also what makes ecumenism inescapable. And it is what assures us that, no matter what the difficulties ahead, our ecumenical pilgrimage together will be one of joy and laughter.