

2000/2001 and the Australian Churches

The Revd David Gill, General Secretary

1. Centenaries and millennia seem to have special significance for mortals, no doubt because we have ten fingers. God does not have ten fingers, so presumably sets rather less store by such occasions. Divine disregard notwithstanding, our compatriots may be expected to want to mark 2000/2001 as in some way special, and the question is whether the churches acting together wish to plan particular initiatives to help them do so.

2. The centenary of the Commonwealth of Australia and the advent of the third millennium of the Christian era are two quite distinct issues and care will be needed to keep them disentangled.

TOWARDS THE SECOND CENTURY OF FEDERATION

3. Given the significance of 2001 and our past stances on the issue, the churches may be expected to give priority to pressing for a constitutional amendment acknowledging prior occupancy by the indigenous people of Australia. The significance of such an action rests not only on doing justice to the past, but also laying an adequate foundation for a new beginning with indigenous/non-indigenous relationships in this country. A referendum on the issue would need to be timed to avoid entanglement with the Sydney Olympics and in order for it to come into effect on January 2001. It would be a fitting culmination for the present process of reconciliation.

4. The multicultural character of Australia cannot be taken for granted. There needs to be a sustained commitment between now and 2001, from all levels of government and other national institutions, to ensure that Australians of non-Anglo-Saxon background go into the 21st century secure in their sense of equality with other Australians. That commitment to strengthening the multicultural mindset must include a recognition of the primacy of the indigenous culture.

5. The churches will hope for a strong challenge to the complacency of many Australians towards the inequality and disadvantage that still afflicts sections of Australian society - e.g. The growing gap between rich and poor, the continuing denial of human rights to children, women, homeless youth, the mentally ill, prisoners and the unemployed. Under this heading, consideration must be given to the issue of self-determination for indigenous people.

6. Contemplating 2001, we are bound to recall some of the less impressive features of 1988. Welcoming the approach taken by Joan Kirner's Centenary of Federation Advisory Committee, the churches will hope that this centenary is marked by a positive theme that captures the ideal and vision of the community, rather than the insipid, self-indulgent tone of "celebration of a nation" that characterised 1988.

7. What of our churches themselves? It is hardly surprising that we are likely to concentrate rather more on the third millennium of the Christian faith than on the second century of the Commonwealth of Australia! However, the national observances will give the churches an opportunity to engage with people of other faiths, and of none, in a shared conversation about visions, goals and values for an Australia whose identity is still being shaped. As statistically the largest of the faith communities, Christians have a particular obligation to take initiatives in this regard. The absurdity of trying to do so other than together hardly needs stating.

8. A major religious event, or events, of some kind would be appropriate to mark the country's new century. If we don't take the initiative in this, others will. There are two options and it would be desirable not to blur the line between them: either an inter-religious celebration that does not purport to be an act of worship, or a specifically Christian event that is quite clearly an

act of worship, or perhaps both [but separately]. In either case, encouragement and resources could be made available for similar gatherings taking place concurrently around Australia.

TOWARDS THE THIRD MILLENNIUM OF CHRISTIANITY

9. It is worth noting, at the outset, a warning sounded by Konrad Raiser, general secretary of the WCC, in a memo to the WCC Executive Committee. Granted that the Christian calendar has been accepted even outside the predominantly Christian part of the world, Raiser says we should beware of assuming that the change of the millennium will receive universal recognition. "Any Christian observance should be aware of this inter-religious and inter-cultural dimension and should avoid triumphalist claims," he urges.

10. Internationally, Jerusalem and/or Bethlehem will be the focal point for celebrations, and the initial responsibility will lie with the local churches on the spot. The Middle East Council of Churches, which includes in its membership all the churches concerned, has appointed a committee to reflect, plan and coordinate such initiatives and to help the local churches respond appropriately to any initiatives coming from outside the region.

11. In a letter to WCC member churches, Raiser writes: "Preliminary explorations among the churches, regional ecumenical bodies and Christian World Communions, and most notably among the Roman Catholic Church, which will celebrate the year 2000 as a Holy Year, converge on the proposal of gathering the heads of Christian churches/communions in Jerusalem or Bethlehem for a common celebration of Pentecost or Christmas in the year 2000 or of Easter in the year 2001 [when the western and eastern dates of Easter coincide]. Celebrations on the world level will primarily include church leaders and a few other church representatives. But ways should be found to make the ecumenical observance of the year 2000 a matter of the whole people of God in each and in every place. A sequence of occasions for joint witness and celebration could be envisaged, starting from the Week of Prayer in January [note: in Australia the Week of Prayer falls between Ascension and Pentecost] of the year 2000, and proceeding through Pentecost and Christmas and culminating in the common celebration of Easter in the year 2001. The Executive Committee has encouraged us to give priority to fostering such efforts on local and national levels."

12. Some Australian churches will find it important to relate to global denominational initiatives, like the Holy Year. For others, such events in faraway places will have less significance. For all, it should be important to encourage appropriate observances, nationally and locally, in which as many of our people as possible can become involved.

13. The common date of Easter in 2001 is particularly significant, given the strong Orthodox presence in this country. An Easter focus would also help disentangle such specifically Christian celebrations from the various national events surrounding the centenary of federation, which presumably will focus on 1 January 2001.

14. The tone of anything we do will need careful watching. On the one hand, the past millennium of Christian faith and witness gives plenty of cause for repentance. Our often murky history provides little justification for Christian triumphalism. On the other hand, there is much for which we can be genuinely thankful, not least the emergence of the ecumenical movement during the past century with its qualitative change in relationships between the Christian churches. To borrow Raiser's words, the observance of the year 2001 should be oriented towards repentance and forgiveness, commemoration and liberation, thanksgiving and hope. It should also take care to be forward-looking, with a strong emphasis on the young, on the mass involvement of many and on one or two major symbolic events.

PRELIMINARY CONVERSATIONS

15. After initial consideration by the national heads of churches, the NCCA Executive, the Faith and Unity Commission and national and state ecumenical staff, the General Secretary convened a group of creative minds to consider what initiatives might appropriately be taken by the NCCA.

16. The question before that group was not what Christians should do in connection with these key dates, or even what the churches qua churches should do. Christians, can be expected to take many initiatives to mark these dates, and that is all to the good. The question for the NCCA is: what if anything might Australia's churches appropriately plan to do together?

DATES - AND POSSIBILITIES

17. The key dates will be:

- _ Advent 1999 through to 31 December 1999
- _ May 2000 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity/Week of Prayer for Aboriginal Reconciliation/Pentecost, all roughly coinciding
- _ September 2000 - Olympic Games
- _ January 2001 Centenary of Federation
- _ Easter 2001 - common date for all Christians
- _ May 2001 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity/Week of Prayer for Aboriginal Reconciliation/Pentecost

Some of the above dates will be more directly of concern to the churches than others.

18. Advent 1999 through to 31 December 1999: NCCA might encourage watch-night services, providing liturgical material and ideas as well as encouraging denominationally specific input. The world can be expected to go berserk with balloons and fireworks, but the churches should not hesitate to be strongly counter-cultural as they invite people to silence, prayer and waiting before God. Some fairly bizarre manifestations of apocalypticism may be expected, and that has implications for the way the churches will present their Advent message.

19. May 2000: Weaving together the themes of Pentecost, Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and Week for Aboriginal Reconciliation, Australia's churches might engage in a "Pilgrimage to the Heart" with heads of churches gathering symbolically for prayer in the heart of the continent to initiate a spiritual journey by our people across the land. This would underline the fact that the new century requires more than just changes to our constitution, but a spiritual journey by all Australians. The journey motif is important. We would seek to involve all churches, not just those in the NCCA. Help would be given to enable people locally to engage, together, in this movement of the soul. In some way, it is recognised, indigenous Christians will need to be seen to be playing a leading role in it.

20. September 2000: Sydney Olympics. We understand that Sydney churches are planning various activities in connection with the Olympics, and we do not foresee the need for any initiatives by the NCCA.

21. January 2001: Centenary of federation. It would be appropriate for the NCCA to express interest in what the federal government may be planning, and to register its readiness to be involved in appropriate ways. Again, there would be the question of ensuring the availability of appropriate liturgical material for local use.

22. Easter 2001: Common date of Easter. From Easter to Pentecost 2001 would be the culmination of the churches' "Pilgrimage to the Heart". It should include a process of mutual commitment, locally and at all levels, in which Christians commit themselves to each other. Study resources? Prayer resources? Ideas for local movement from cooperation to commitment? Throughout, there would be a stress on the shared resurrection faith and the common pentecostal inheritance.

23. May 2001: Pentecost, Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Week of Prayer for Aboriginal Reconciliation. Culmination of the process begun a year earlier.

A PROCESS

24. There will need to be contact with the Australian Consultation on Liturgy, to see what they may be developing; with state ecumenical bodies; with the ABC and religious media; and perhaps with the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools regarding the phenomena associated with millenarianism.

25. Australia's experience with Taizé-style spirituality as a means for engaging a broad cross section of people in a spiritual journey should be considered, although at what point it might be most relevant to the above scenario is not yet clear. Preliminary conversations with Brother Ghislain of Taizé have opened up a number of possibilities.

26. What the churches can do together in Australia will be governed largely by whether they can make available staff and other resources to enable the exercise. This may be the moment to note that the Council has at its disposal something called the Initiatives Reserve. Currently worth about \$110,000, this was put aside from a surplus following the hosting of the WCC Assembly as "a reserve fund for use at the discretion of the Executive Committee to foster significant initiatives aimed at helping Australians discern the global dimensions of Christian obedience and give local shape to their ecumenical commitment".

27. Specifically, the National Forum will need to indicate whether and to what extent the Australian churches wish to act in concert, in preparing to mark these occasions, and whether and to what extent the possibilities outlined in this document suggest an appropriate way forward. If the response to both questions is affirmative, the responsibility for taking plans forward will need to be defined and located. Recommendations will be offered to the National Forum, and the Revd Tony Doherty, Dean of St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, has been invited to address the National Forum on issues raised in this report.
