

The General Secretary's Report

The Revd David Gill

Recently there landed on my desk a list of ten illustrations showing how the Bible might have been different had it been written by university students. To cite a few examples:

- forbidden fruit would certainly have been eaten, because anything is better than cafeteria food;
- the time and place where the end of the world occurs would be lecture theatres, in October;
- instead of God creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh, He would have put it off until the night before it was due and then staged an all-nighter; and
- the reason Cain killed Abel was they were flatting together, and the dishes weren't getting done.

That last propels us naturally into the General Secretary's report on the NCCA. For as that student-version Cain might well have remarked to his sibling, "Brother, it was one thing to decide to set up house together. But it's quite another trying to make the shared enterprise work!"

In 1994 thirteen churches moved into a new structure they called the National Council of Churches in Australia. It had foundations, walls, a roof, a first set of residents and not a lot else. Four years on, it is appropriate for this third National Forum to assess how things are going in our still rather new national ecumenical household.

Overall, as I see it, we have made a reasonably promising beginning.

First, the family has grown. At this meeting, to our great joy, the Lutheran Church of Australia has joined us. The Baptist Union of Australia now has its President present as an observer in meetings of the Executive and in this National Forum. Several other applications for membership are in process or in prospect. The level of interest from at least some non-member churches suggests that we may reasonably look forward to becoming an even more comprehensive body in the years immediately ahead.

Second, the family is learning to live together under one roof. As I watch the NCCA Executive in action, I see a group of very different representatives of very different churches listening to each other, learning from each other, respecting each other's sensitivities, revelling in each other's company and through it all growing in mutual understanding and trust. Yes, occasionally they do vote, but they try not to, for the emphasis is on trying to discern the mind of the group as a whole, and beyond it the will of God for the Council.

Third, the household has been acquiring the furniture and equipment it needs to give expression to its shared life. The working papers for this National Forum show our various commissions, networks and task groups – some of them, having been set up by the Executive at the behest of the last National Forum, reporting for the first time – coming to terms with their mandates, their agendas and the styles of work that are appropriate for a body like ours.

Fourth, we have given the key to the door to the NCCA's Aboriginal and Islander Commission. The indigenous parts of our member churches know that, in shaping their ecumenical relationships, they are free to move into their own home if they so desire. Equally, they are most welcome to remain as part of the NCCA if that should be their choice. The decision must be theirs. Whatever that choice may turn out to be, this Council will remain deeply grateful for their continuing participation in the quest for the visible unity of Christ's people in this land.

Fifth, we have not been so engrossed in getting the household organized that we've lost sight of what is happening outside the front door. The working documents report last year's very significant joint pastoral letter that, in the face of what some have called "the politics of anger", urged our people to remember some of the things Christian citizenship must entail. They tell of the churches' response to the Northern Territory's proposed euthanasia legislation, their efforts towards authentic reconciliation in this land, their remarkably concerted attempt to stand in solidarity with Australia's indigenous people through the struggles over Wik and native title legislation. In the CWS report we hear echoes of partnerships being forged and strengthened between ourselves and churches and ecumenical bodies overseas. The Council has tried to facilitate Australian involvement in the World Council of Churches, with which we are an "associated council". Rather more effectively, I suspect, it has worked to help our churches receive from and contribute to the Christian Conference of Asia, of which this council is a full member. On a personal note, nothing has given me more satisfaction in these years than to be caught up in helping to strengthen the not-always-very-easy relationship between the churches of Australia and Indonesia. Probably better now than at any stage in the past four decades, the improved relationship owes much to the partnership between the two ecumenical bodies concerned.

It adds up to a reasonably promising beginning. But only a beginning.

First, there are still some potential members of the household who do not see the NCCA as offering a roof under which they would want to venture. This must be of concern to us, for no servant of God's ecumenical movement can rest content while any church "which confess(es) the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures" remains apart from the fellowship.

Let me report, in this connection, what may turn out to be a significant initiative being proposed to help the churches move beyond the constraints of their present ecumenical structures. I was one of those summoned to Geneva, just over a month ago, to sit with representatives of the WCC, regional ecumenical organizations, national councils of churches, Christian world communions, the Holy See, Pentecostal churches, the World Evangelical Fellowship and various para-ecumenical organizations like the Bible Society, to explore the idea of creating some kind of world Christian forum. What is envisaged is not an organization, with members and policies and votes and all the paraphernalia that goes with structures, so much as a network of networks, with all the possibilities that are inherent in the reaching out of various groups of Christians to one another. A proposal along these lines will be put to the forthcoming assembly of the WCC, and to the other interested parties as well. How they may respond remains to be seen. The move is worth watching, however, not only because of what may happen at world level, but also for the possibilities it may open up regionally and nationally as well.

Second, relationships within the household must not be taken for granted. In the latest *In Unity*, pondering issues likely to loom large at the WCC's forthcoming assembly, I have drawn attention to the serious difficulties that are currently threatening the participation of at least some Orthodox churches in the World Council. While there may be a crisis at world level, we can be thankful that relationships here in Australia remain generally good. Perhaps one contribution our delegates can make in Harare is the testimony, from our own experience, that it is still possible for a council of churches to be a community in which churches of both east and west find themselves at home.

However, it would be naïve to assume that a crisis elsewhere will have no impact on relationships here. The lesson is to beware of complacency, to guard against taking one another for granted, for any relationship that is not being worked at constantly is a relationship in trouble.

Third, thus far we have made no significant ecumenical overtures to our neighbors of other faiths. This is, we know, a delicate subject for some churches, especially those with painful

memories of terrible conflicts in other times and places. It needs to be approached with care. But it does need to be approached. In this exciting new mix of humanity we call Australia, history has given us possibilities that may not always be open to our brothers and sisters elsewhere to work at creating qualitatively new inter-faith relationships. As by far the largest and most secure faith community, Australia's Christians have, I believe, both the possibility and the obligation to risk reaching out the hand of friendship towards the folks next door – be they Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish or whatever.

Fourth, our household has still not figured out how to meet the housekeeping costs. There is no greater frustration for your Executive, your committees and your staff than the constant experience of being asked to do something with nothing. You will have noted that among the National Forum's working papers there is a fundraising proposal that spells out the nature of the problem and proposes one way of tackling it.

Fifth, and most important, it is only a beginning in terms of what we set up this household to achieve. The measure of any council of churches is not the size of its budget, the range of its programs or the amount of attention it gets for itself in the morning newspapers, but what it enables to happen in the relationships of the churches that comprise it.

And what did we set up this Council to achieve? Let me remind you of the NCCA's Basis:

"The National Council of Churches in Australia 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".

"To deepen their relationship ..." – yes, we've been working on that. But we are not into promoting relationships just for the sake of relationships. The churches did not set up this Council to foster warm, fuzzy feelings. We seek the deepening of our relationships "... in order to express more visibly the unity willed by Christ for his Church". Nothing less. With that as the goal, it must be said that the churches' journey together as the NCCA has barely begun.

Significant forward movement on that journey will require of each of our churches a major attitudinal change.

Some weeks ago, an Orthodox friend and I were trying to fathom the reasons for the current crisis in Orthodox/WCC relations. He spoke of a degree of Orthodox disappointment with the way the ecumenical movement has developed. "When we joined the World Council," he explained, "we thought that if we could explain the significance of the Orthodox churches, the way they have safeguarded the faith of the early Church, the other churches would gradually see what we have stood for and, step by step, move towards us. But that hasn't happened. Indeed, some of the things other churches have done in recent years suggest they may be moving further from us, not nearer."

I was about to ask why on earth the Orthodox should assume that ecumenism means the rest of us becoming like them. I was about to, but I didn't, because it occurred to me that in my own church the average person in the pew probably sees ecumenism in not dissimilar terms. Scratch a typical member of the Uniting Church and you will be told "Of course the churches should be one. The UCA is committed to the ecumenical movement". Then ask what needs to happen to

move us towards that end. "Well, er" the response might be, "once the Anglicans agree bishops are an optional extra for those who like that sort of thing, when Lutherans ease up on wanting to split the fine hairs of doctrine, when Catholics agree shelve the pope, once the Quakers get themselves organized, when the Salvation Army sees the point about the sacraments, if the Orthodox would kindly enter the modern world"— when, in other words, the other churches agree to become a bit more like us – "then, voila, Christian unity will be a breeze!"

Such a mindset is not peculiar to the Orthodox or the Uniting Church. Is it not true that most of us approach ecumenism with the expectation that if we just keep on expounding the significance and self-understanding of our respective denominational traditions, then the others will eventually grasp the rightness of what my church stands for and, in consequence, change their ways? My church remains unmoved, while eagerly awaiting movement by the others. Apart from guaranteeing permanent inter-church deadlock, this attitude suggests churches that have managed to insulate themselves against the disturbing recognition that the concomitant of a genuine ecumenical commitment must be an equally genuine openness to change.

The needed attitudinal shift requires fresh initiatives within each of the NCCA's member churches. In Rome earlier this year, I asked colleagues in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity how they thought their 1993 "Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism" had been received and what they planned as an encore. Their response to the first question was that many national bishops conferences were still not sufficiently active in helping their clergy and people grasp the Directory's message about the possibilities there are for ecumenical collaboration. My second question brought the entirely reasonable response that it would be helpful if other churches were to emulate the Holy See's example and produce their own ecumenical directories, spelling out how they severally understand their commitment to ecumenism and what in consequence they severally propose to do about it.

Which brings us to the second point in the NCCA's Basis, with its commitment "to work together towards ... common witness, proclamation and service" as we try to live now in at least partial anticipation of the unity for which we yearn. The National Forum will be reflecting on this commitment at three points, at least, during this meeting: when the Faith and Unity Commission presents its very important proposals for a covenanting process between member churches, when Bishop Michael Putney leads us in considering what it means to be called to common witness, and when Christian World Service challenges us to get our act together in the sphere of Christian service and of competing denominational and ecumenical appeals.

Only a beginning, finally, in terms the task facing the Christian Church in Australia today. Throughout the affluent world, the churches are passing through a major crisis of faith, life and morale, and as we are all too painfully aware here in Australia that crisis includes us.

We must recognize the crisis. We should try to understand it. But we must try not to allow ourselves to be paralyzed by it. Australia's churches must not become so engrossed in their institutional difficulties as to forget that our people in this land continue to yearn for light in the darkness, love in the loneliness, meaning in the madness, and we in the churches continue to be the improbable trustees of a treasure trove of faith and wisdom, of meaning and sanctity, of light and love.

In the NCCA, we have come together to help one another open anew that treasure trove of faith so that our alienated compatriots may, God willing, sense its significance afresh and respond to it anew. In this Council, we are offered a means by which the churches, together, can move towards witnessing more convincingly, towards embodying more credibly, the great mystery of the amazing grace by which we are held in life and in death.

Could there possibly be a more significant, more exciting enterprise on which to have embarked together? Four years down the track, it deserves our renewed commitment.