

# President's Address

## **The Revd Dr Lance Steicke**

Archbishop Keith Rayner and I were guest speakers at the March meeting of the South Australia Council of Churches. The topic: *Is Ecumenism still an Issue: Where to in the Future?*

Is Ecumenism still an issue? I said it has waned as an issue for interest and excitement, and as a priority in people's thinking and activity. If the question were, should ecumenism still be an issue, my answer would be a strong and definite YES.

Archbishop Keith said: 'young people are not particularly concerned about Christian unity'. 'The question for most young people', he said, 'is no longer, Which religious tradition is best? Or does church unity matter? The question among most young people is, Does religion matter at all? Does Christianity matter at all? Does God matter?'

We've come a long way. But that journey hasn't always been easy and straightforward.

Joseph A. Burgess in *In Search of Christian Unity* (P. 11) says, 'Ecumenism in recent years has been an anomaly of progress and frustration'.

It's very interesting to report evidences of that same progress and frustration very close to home. Both the Lutheran-Anglican and Lutheran-Uniting dialogue are currently in a state of progress with considerable excitement. Some light seems to be shining at the end of the tunnel. But only a few years ago both dialogues were in frustration. The Lutheran-Anglican went into recess because it was felt nothing more could be done. The Lutheran-Uniting floundered and threatened to totter altogether.

It's difficult to understand this anomaly of progress and frustration. Is it due to institutional inertia and/or the self-interest of church leaders? I daren't try to answer the question. I simply let it hang.

I would not have predicted 50, 40, 30, even 20 years ago that we would be where we are today. The development has exceeded all expectations.

What is my vision for the future?

**1. Restoring the Centre.** Already something of that is happening - a concern for the centre, the essence, the heart and core of what we're on about as church. If you think about it, it's this that has divided us to a fairly great extent. Most, if not all, movements within the church and sectarian groups, arose because of a deficiency within orthodox or established Christendom. But with the emergence of these movements, denominations and sects, the emphasis was often off-centre. How easy it is for us, and how tempting, to devote our time and effort to what is peripheral and off-centre. My vision for the future is one whereby the churches will give themselves more fully to core issues, to the centre. And, of course, that centre, those core issues, focus on the common confession of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures and the interpretation of the early Christian Creeds.

**2. Rediscovery of the gospel.** This, of course, is not unrelated to the previous point. In fact, it's very closely allied to it. I probably betray my Lutheran roots in this. The essence of the Lutheran Reformation was the rediscovery of the gospel. This is seen clearly in the emphasis on grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone. We are saved alone by the grace of God solely through faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. This, the gospel, was important to Martin Luther. It's important to me. I believe it should be important to all of us. Every generation is in danger of losing the gospel. How can we help each other rediscover it, preserve it, stand on it, proclaim it? Does the NCCA have a role in this regard? And, if so, what is it?

**3. Serving each other in a mission context.** Jesus said to the church, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you'. And then he breathed on his disciples. And he continues to breath on us and on the church to this day. The breath of Jesus. The Spirit of God. The sound of a rushing mighty wind, a breath. On Pentecost Sunday I told the congregation that I was serving at the time that I had thought of getting into the pulpit, going BREATH, and then sitting down and letting them ponder on that. There's life in breath. Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation is evidence of that as one person breathes life into someone no longer breathing. Jesus breathed the breath of the Spirit into his disciples. The early church, filled with that breath of Jesus, that Spirit, went out and they turned the world upside down. They witnessed to Jesus, as he had told them to do. Witness, mission, evangelism is crucial. Bring two or three or more Christians together and what should they immediately want to do? Worship and evangelize. We are probably not ready to do a great amount of mission work together as churches, but what about:

- a) common approaches and strategies
- b) research into Australian culture, the context for mission. Friday's Seminar is a good example of this.
- c) Working together as at Seaford
- d) Planning together: You go here, we'll go there. Rather than set up side by side

**4. Helping the churches be the church.** How can the NCCA better serve its member churches and the cause of church cooperation, covenanting and collaboration in Australia?

Karl Barth (Thielicke I BELIEVE P. 235) says, 'The church lives from her function as herald, she is God's company. Where the church is alive, she must face the question of whether she serves this function or whether she is an end in herself. If the latter is the case, the church usually begins to taste "sacral", to act pious, to become priestly, and to taste sour. Anyone with a sensitive nose will smell and find it dreadful.'

Is the NCCA serving member churches and helping them in their function as 'herald'? Because of particular and different confessions the task of being 'herald' is no doubt denominational, but resourcing for the task, sharing homework, providing challenges, motivation, mutual encouragement, prayer – this can come from a common pool.

How can the NCCA better serve its member churches?

This is a key question. And a key issue. The Constitution asks it of us.

The first two of the four Objectives of the Constitution say that the NCCA is to encourage and enable the member churches to do this and that. That's where the emphasis lies – the NCCA serving the member churches - 'through prayer, dialogue and shared engagement in mission'. It is to include 'the areas of spirituality, liturgy, theology, history, sociology and culture.'

How can the NCCA better serve its member churches?

Dare I suggest that we need to work a lot more and a lot harder at such things as:

1. The affirmation of each other. We have been good at condemning each other, not so good at affirming.
2. Allied to this is the removal of condemnations. Lutherans and Roman Catholics took a giant step forward when they did this in the Joint Declaration on Justification. But we have a long way to go.
3. Are member churches open to admonition about the limitations of their own traditions? I know I'm very sensitive in this area. And I suspect we all are, some more so than others. Now we must defend our own traditions and our convictions, our confessional position. But what about that which is not an essential part of our confession?
4. How can there be interchange of clergy (and acceptance of each other's ministry) given our different standards for the ordination and calling of clergy and our different stands on ministry. Lutheran-Anglican dialogue has been working hard on this.

5. Are we working on the right agenda? Or are there are other issues and agenda items before us which we should be tackling?

### **5. A greater sense of belonging.**

Konrad Raiser in *To Be the Church* says, (P.5) 'An initial general – and sobering – observation is that for many member churches, particularly in the southern hemisphere, the World Council of Churches is a distant organization about which they know very little'.

This applies within denominations. Congregations often know very little about the work of the wider denomination. Denominations know little about the NCCA. It is a 'distant organization'.

My visit to WA last year made it clear to me that those in the West see the NCCA as something in the east, far removed from them, not interested in them. How can the West own the NCCA? What can we do to create a sense of belonging, of ownership, of commitment?

How do we deal with the communication gap? Getting the message to the churches and from the churches into its various parts.

Konrad Raiser, (P. 12) 'None of the churches can face these challenges alone'. He had been talking about such things as evangelism, education, church-state relationships, church-to-church relationships on the national level, denominational defensiveness, training capable ecumenical leadership, involvement of youth in the ecumenical movement, etc. What evidences are there of the churches in Australia facing the challenges before us together? How can we do so? What is the role of the NCCA in this? What can the NCCA do to help churches face the challenges of the day together?

**6. An evaluation of structure.** I realize that the NCCA is only seven years old. But that does not preclude us from considering an evaluation of our structures. You will gather from the above that I have focused on essence, identity, purpose, vision. But structure cannot be omitted or by-passed entirely.

The Executive recently debated our premises. Do they serve us adequately? Would we be better off outside of down-town Sydney? What are the implications of a change – to the churches, to the staff, to the work?

The Executive has also discussed earnestly from time to time finances and resourcing. It should be no secret that income is not what it ought to be from the member churches and that income is hardly keeping pace with requirements and expenditure.

What are the options?

- Increase income. Efforts have been made, but reality is different.
- Decrease expenditure.
- Streamline for greater efficiency and more effective ministry.
- Take up the even greater (and, of course, harder) question, are we over-ecumenicalized (!) in Australia? Do we need the two tiers we have now – full and complete State organizations and administrations, dependent to varying degrees on assistance from the national body especially so far as CWS is concerned, and a full-blown national structure with all that goes with it?

### **7. The scope of the ecumenical movement.**

I have basically spoken only of the wider ecumenical scene. I have not touched the local or grassroots level. Is there any co-relation between what happens at the local level and on the state or national level? Can we be quite out of kilter with each other's thinking? Can the leaders of the church be way out there with their thinking while the grassroots is still wondering whether

a Catholic boy and a Lutheran girl can hold hands with each other without committing ecumenical sin?

Or is it the other way round? The grassroots is way out ahead with their thinking and practice leaving the leadership lagging behind.

The disparity between local and other levels varies from time to time, place to place, and issue to issue. Let me really stick my neck out and say that I'm not too convinced that the NCCA or its predecessor ACC has done too much to alter or influence the thinking of grassroots Australian Christians to any great extent. Nor am I convinced that grassroots Australian Christians have contributed anything vital to the NCCA. I am not pronouncing judgment. I am not saying whether this is good or bad. I believe it's a fact.

Lack of resources may force all of us, national, state and local to look at greater streamlining and more efficiency of administration for the future.

## **8. The need to rekindle the ecumenical vision.**

Konrad Raiser talks about 'the need to rekindle the ecumenical vision'. TO BE THE CHURCH, P. X. The last millennium, he says, was 'the millennium of Christian division' with 1054 and 1517 being the outstanding dates.

I might add that the first millennium wasn't all that crash hot either.

Is it a utopian dream to think this new millennium will be any different?

The twentieth century could be classified as the century of the quest for Christian unity. At varying stages in the century the ecumenical vision was very much to the fore.

But what is the ecumenical vision?

- Is it rooted in WCC, NCCA, denominations, local churches, dialogue?
- Is it a leadership or a laity issue? Bishops or grass roots?
- Is it to do away with differences? I would never want to deprive the world of Orthodox worship, but I don't want a world where Orthodox worship is the only option either.
- Is it visible unity, as most Catholics would want and expect and many others would aspire to as well?
- Is it full fellowship, altar and pulpit fellowship, even though structures and denominations might remain?

I don't believe we would have consensus for one moment on what the 'ecumenical vision' is that we would want to rekindle.

And perhaps that is a good place to conclude this address. Not only because I'm probably over time, but also because I leave up in the air the very issue that brings us together, the question, why? Why have we come together? Why have we formed an NCCA? What for us is the ecumenical vision? What are the issues we should work on? What is central?

May God bless us richly as we tackle the agenda and the issues we do do together in the name of and on behalf of our respective churches.