

The General Secretary's Report

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1. The American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr observed that the only time the Church is really sufferable is when it is at prayer, for when it talks the Church invariably claims too much for itself. The same no doubt holds true for councils of churches and, especially, for reports perpetrated by their general secretaries. I must preface what follows, then, with an acknowledgement – using the well known line from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer – that “we have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done”. But I am not prepared to utter the next phrase: “And there is no health in us”. Our frailties and shortcomings notwithstanding, there is I believe quite a bit of health in the National Council of Churches in Australia and what it represents.

2. Seven important convictions undergirded the transition from the old Australian Council of Churches to the NCCA. They remain fundamental to how this council understands itself and tries to do its job. Recall them for a moment.

2.1 Humanly speaking, the primary actors in the ecumenical movement are the churches.

2.2 Ecumenical structures must be seen as interim, provisional, flexible and responsive to the churches that comprise them.

2.3 A council of churches has to respect the differing convictions of member churches, not least in the way it spells out the ecclesiological implications of membership.

2.4 Membership implies sustained commitment by the member churches -- to the council, yes, but more importantly to one another through the council.

2.5 Decision-makers in ecumenical bodies should be genuinely and authoritatively representative of the churches that comprise them.

2.6 Councils are to focus on fostering trust and deepening mutual understanding, and the reconciled koinonia for which we yearn must find expression in how we deal with each other in ecumenical decision-making even now.

2.7 Ecumenism does not start and stop at the national frontier, so other councils of churches -- world, regional and national -- are essential partners in what we are attempting to be and to do.

3. The first of these convictions inspires the rest and requires unpacking further. The Basis of the NCCA says it well. The council, it states, “gathers together in pilgrimage (note the language of movement) those churches and Christian communities (note who is doing the moving) which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures (note who gives the movers their distinctive identity) 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.”

4. “Churches ... which confess ... and commit themselves...”. The NCCA’s Basis is, in effect, the undertaking entered into by each member church on joining the council; a solemn vow made to other member churches, and to God. A National Forum is the right setting to reflect on how

Australia's churches are going at keeping these solemn undertakings, and on how this council is going as the instrument they have created to help them.

5. But first let us underline yet again the identity of the pilgrims. We are not talking about the officers, staff, committees and assorted activities of the NCCA, not principally anyway. In an important sense the NCCA as such is of no significance. An interim report from the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches, presented to last February's meeting of the World Council's Central Committee, makes the point eloquently:

- * The member churches are the subject of the quest for visible unity, not the council.
- * The member churches teach and make doctrinal and ethical decisions, not the council.
- * The member churches proclaim doctrinal consensus, not the council.
- * The member churches commit themselves to pray for unity ...
- * and the member churches are responsible for developing the sensitivities to sustain their dialogue.

6. Seven years and four days after the NCCA's inauguration, we must acknowledge gratefully the early steps the churches have taken through and around the council. The ecclesial communities that came together in that new mix in July 1994 were right to give priority to building relationships rather than running programmes, deepening their companionship rather than organising activities. As the late Jean Tillard remarked some years ago, trying to broaden the celebrated Lund principle of maximum inter-church cooperation: "It is not enough to do everything together that we can do together. We must also be everything together that we can be together." Without always being fully aware of it, your representatives have been developing ways of praying together, thinking together, arguing together, making decisions together, laughing together, being together, that enshrine gratitude for each other's gifts and respect for each other's sensitivities as well as a healthy appreciation of each other's human frailties.

7. But more. The working papers before this meeting, reflecting the work of the member churches' representatives on our assortment of commissions and networks, offer some exciting possibilities for helping our churches move forward together towards the fulfilment of the vows they have made. For example:

- the covenanting process, developed through our Faith and Unity Commission, which invites churches to use some sanctified imagination and find ways of giving more visible expression to the real albeit incomplete communion they already share;
- the efforts we are making through Christian World Service to encourage greater inter-church cooperation in the area of international relief and development;
- the Social Justice Network's initiatives to help us understand why our churches severally speak as they do on social issues and how they might with more integrity speak ecumenically;
- the solid homework done by our Aboriginal and Islander Commission to help churches find their place alongside all who yearn for the nation's healing;
- and more.

8. Such reports and proposals, it must be remembered, represent only a series of institutional tips on the ecumenical iceberg. The ecumenical movement, thank God, is much vaster than the structures we set up to serve it and the programmes we adopt to advance it. During these days we will be reminded, not least in the joint report of our working partners the state ecumenical bodies, of how much is happening in the wider scene. Some people, sadly, fail to recognise the strength and creativity of the continuing drive towards Christian unity. Some persist in referring to our time as "an ecumenical winter" -- a depiction which is doubly misleading, because it

implies a sunny past, which never was, as well as a bleak present, which certainly is not. On the evidence, it would be more accurate to speak of a continuing ecumenical spring, with of course occasional showers and every so often a storm to make things interesting.

9. In any case, we are on this pilgrimage together not because of the climate of the moment but because unity is the will of God, because a gospel of reconciliation demands a manifestly reconciled and reconciling community, and because -- to use the memorable image of Lesslie Newbigin -- a divided Christianity has about as much credibility as a temperance society the members of which are perpetually drunk.

10. Note, however, the danger that is lurking for would-be pilgrims: the temptation to stop, put their feet up and relax. Too many councils of churches have begun with a clear ecumenical vision, only to become bureaucracies behind which the churches have sunk back into the torpor of denominational business-as-usual. It can happen so easily, and when it does the council in question has ceased to be an "ecumenical instrument" and become an "ecumenical alibi" -- a device that gives all concerned the comfortable illusion of journeying towards unity while permitting the status quo of denominational immobility to continue unchallenged.

11. With this in mind, and noting that 2004 will mark a decade from the NCCA's inauguration, I wonder if this National Forum might do well to ask your new Executive, assisted by the fresh eyes and as yet uncorrupted mind of your new General Secretary, to undertake a review of how the council is measuring up to the objectives set for it. Let me push my luck a bit further and suggest several concerns such a review would need to include within its field of vision.

12. First, a deficiency of the NCCA is that some members of the family still feel unable to gather under its roof. Yes, it is more inclusive than the old Australian Council of Churches, but the Serbian Orthodox Church, several Protestant churches like the Baptists and the Presbyterians and the whole Pentecostal stream, remain outside. When any church is absent from the growing fellowship of Christ's people, that fellowship must be considered sadly incomplete.

13. A second challenge is that our council finds itself operating in working relationships that are seriously unbalanced. Most of our key ecumenical partners -- the WCC, the Christian Conference of Asia and most NCCs in the Asia region -- comprise only Protestant, Anglican and in some cases Orthodox churches. While trying to foster a comprehensive ecumenism at home, we find ourselves having to draw insights from and work together with a largely Protestant ecumenism elsewhere. One consequence is that we need to remain ready to share the experience we have gleaned from our privileged ecumenical mix in this country with less inclusive partners elsewhere. Another is that we must continue to take special care to ensure that the ecumenical imbalance abroad does not lead, by default, to a similar imbalance of substance and style developing in the NCCA.

14. Third, through these years your efforts through the NCCA have been hamstrung by a lack of resources. As the Finance Committee recalls in its report, the task group responsible for planning the new body had alerted prospective member churches to the anticipated requirements, in staff and program costs, of the objectives they were setting for the council: \$400,000 a year, in 1993 dollars. Member church contributions to the council have never reached even half that figure. My hope had been that the churches' greater sense of ownership of the council would translate into a matching financial responsibility for it. In that, clearly, I was naive.

15. The result is that some of the council's key objectives remain pious hopes, with little prospect of much being done about them in the foreseeable future. Our Commission on Mission, Social Justice Network and Network on Women and Gender Relations struggle to operate with no staff support at all. The Faith and Unity Commission and Youth Network have minimal, very part-time staff support. Budgets of most commissions and networks have no provision for travel, which makes the "national" in our title at least questionable. A further consequence is that committees and staff are, by default, having to seek funding from sources other than member

churches. To the extent that they succeed, their very success must start to call in question the emphasis on the organisation being a council of churches and introduce the risk -- which our Christian World Service commission is already grappling with -- of funding sources subtly influencing the NCCA's policies and priorities. More than churches perhaps have realised, a council's self-understanding and its sources of income go hand in hand.

16. Fourth, the NCCA has not yet discovered an effective way of bringing the churches' views into the public forum, when matters of national or international importance are up for debate. This is partly because the council has no staff capacity for media work, so what is done happens in someone's spare time using whatever amateur skills he or she can muster. But it is partly too because constitutional constraints on the making of public statements, devised to ensure that what the council says truly echoes the convictions of its member churches, require consultation and therefore time. The media does not work that way, however, with the result that -- as the report of the Aboriginal and Islander Commission observes -- the churches' voice at times may have been muted. Our intention -- that the NCCA should express what the churches think, not what a commission or a general secretary thinks the churches ought to think -- is absolutely correct. But a viable way of achieving this laudable goal has yet to be found.

17. Fifth, the challenge in Australia today is to discover an ecumenism for a time of stress. Our churches are in trouble, like those in Europe and North America. Numbers are down or at best static, in many denominations. Budgets are tightening. We feel less significant, more peripheral to the nation's life. There are conflicts in a number of churches, not least over questions of authority. Morale is suffering. At such times, introversion is an all-too-natural response, with ecumenical commitments put on hold until what seem to be more urgent issues can be sorted out. But of course ecumenism is not an item that can be moved up or down an agenda. It is a way, it is the New Testament way, of being Church. It is the gospel-inspired set of relationships and commitments within which, severally and together, we wrestle with the question of what obedience to Jesus Christ requires of us, in good times and in bad.

18. Finally, let no one underestimate the wonderful opportunity that stands before us. Tim Winton, in his novel *The Riders*, has his lead character, an expatriate Australian, pondering the countryside in Ireland. "It was a small, tooled, and crosshatched country," he muses. "Every field had a name, every path a style. Everything imaginable had been done or tried out there." But his homeland, he remembers, felt different. "In Australia you looked out and saw the possible, the spaces, the maybes". Other countries may have long histories behind them. Modern Australia's history has barely begun. The national identities of others may be set in concrete. Ours continues to evolve. Those dramatic possibilities, those spaces, those maybes, combine to make Australia an extraordinarily exciting nation to be part of right now.

19 They also make this, as Hugh Mackay told us yesterday, an extraordinarily exciting context in which to try to serve Jesus Christ. A society in flux, a national identity under construction, a nation whose history lies before us not behind, offers our churches untold possibilities for redefining their imported relationships, reconciling their separated memories and reworking ecclesial identities that were shaped for times and places far from here. My hope for this council, in these days and in the years ahead, is that it may become an increasingly significant sacred space from which Australia's churches together are inspired to look out and glimpse what are for us "the possible, the spaces, the maybes".