



President's Address

by the Reverend Professor James Haire

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The theme of our Fifth National Forum is *At the Cross Roads – Living in a World of Change*.

During my lifetime I have had two crossroads experiences in relation to the ecumenical movement.

The first occurred when I was a student at the University of Oxford. At that time, I became Chairperson of the Youth Committee of the Irish Churches, the Youth Department of the Irish Council of Churches. A friend of mine, an Anglican young woman, was the Secretary.

One summer we held a conference in a country house in the middle of Ireland. It was at the beginning of the "Troubles" in the North. We produced a paper for this conference. All the church leaders from around Ireland were there. We were in a difficult situation. Willem Visser 't Hooft, the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, had referred to Ireland as an "ecumenical wasteland". In our speech we suggested that it was not sufficient for a mainly Protestant organisation to gather together. We needed also the Roman Catholic Church as a full member and we also needed representatives of those young people who were being caught up the paramilitary organisations, both Protestant and Catholic, so that we could have some interaction for peace with them. The church leaders applauded our stance. We were photographed with them, the two of us, and we appeared in *The Irish Times* and in the other Irish papers the subsequent day.

We had our conference and we went back to university, I to Oxford and she to Cambridge. About six months later the church leaders, although in public they had hailed our forward-looking intentions and methods, quietly arranged for both of us to be sacked.

The idea that we should engage with young people who were on the edge of violence, although it seemed essential for us to speak to them of the way of peace, was too much for the church leaders. Both of us felt alienated from the Christian church. We felt that ecumenism was the height of modern hypocrisy. Both of us for a while were entirely alienated from Christianity. I am glad to say that we both eventually came back and my friend who was the Secretary is now a very eminent leader of the Church of England.

My second crossroads experience was positive.

It came about some twenty years later. One Saturday afternoon in the city of Belfast, a bank was robbed by a terrorist group. During a car chase, the car in which the terrorists were involved and the police car following, were engaged in an accident.

A mother was pushing a pram along the road, holding her toddler in her hand, with her baby in the pram. One of the cars slammed into them, and the two children were killed instantly. The mother's name was Betty Williams, and she had a friend called Miread Corrigan. The two of them, as a result of this appalling accident, formed a group called the Peace People. Subsequently both of them went on to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

I was involved on my leave from Indonesia with this group. When a Protestant was killed, Catholic clergymen would carry the person's coffin into the Protestant church for the funeral service. When a Catholic was killed, Protestant clergy would carry that person's coffin into the Catholic Church for the funeral service.

One Saturday afternoon we were engaged in the regular marches which became a pattern of those times, walking through Protestant and Catholic areas, so as to show our unity in Christ. I had a friend who taught scholastic philosophy at the University in Belfast and had recently become Bishop. His name was Cahal Daly. He subsequently became Cardinal Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of the Catholic Church in Ireland. He was not a natural hero. He was a small, scholarly, introverted man, a large leprechaun, as he once referred to himself. One Saturday afternoon we locked arms and walked at the head of a procession through a joint Catholic/Protestant area. Protestant young people were jeering at me because I dared to walk with a friend, a now Catholic Bishop. We were at that time both doing a bit of teaching at the university.

A woman came charging out of a Catholic Church, flailing a great crucifix above her head. She hit Cahal on the back of the head with it, at the same time questioning whether his parents had been married at the time of his birth. She was able to express this idea with a single word. Cahal fell to the ground, blood coming from the back of his head. I asked him if he would like to sit in a shop doorway till we sorted things out. He looked at me with steely eyes, which I shall never forget, and he said "James, put your hand into my pocket, get out a handkerchief, wipe the back of my head, clean me up, and up we get and on we go". He was over seventy at the time. He said to me, "If at this point we fail, if at this point we do not go on, then all that nonsense that we spout from the pulpit will be shown up for the hypocrisy that it is."

That was my positive experience of ecumenism. And I frequently see Cahal's eyes on that road when I think of the ecumenical movement.

At the crossroads we stand here but we need I believe to look at how we are at our particular time, especially theologically.

We are engaged in a review. We want to look at where we should be geographically placed in terms of our headquarters. We want to look at the relationship of the Christian World Service (CWS) to the NCCA.

However, we need to start theologically.

David Gill tells the story of Margaret Mead, the American anthropologist who attended the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi, surveying the vast crowd, and then saying: "You people are a sociological impossibility. You have absolutely nothing in common, except your extraordinary conviction that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world" (see Feliciano V Carino and Marina True, eds, *Faith and Life in Contemporary Asian Realities* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2000) 15-16). I would want to add: except that God has called you. We are defined by God. We as churches cannot self-define. I wish to put before us now a challenge. It seems to me that any talk such as we have about "ecumenical summers" and "ecumenical winters" is quite idolatrous. We cannot self-define. It is God who alone defines us. If we continue as separated churches, does not that self-definition as such speak of our turning away from God? I challenge us all, all who call ourselves Christian, to move more quickly along the road to Christian unity. To remain divided, and thus each to point just to ourselves, is a blatant act of turning away from God. Each separated denomination's church headquarters is in

itself a monument to the scandal of Christian division. Recently, I heard from England of the dedication of a new church denominational headquarters office. The Church leader after saying the words of dedication, bearing in mind that it was a denominational headquarters added spontaneously the words "Father, forgive!" I thought that was profound. Unity is central to our faith. Do we take Christian unity seriously? Will we give our all for its achievement? Ask no longer: "Is it safe to move into serious unity negotiations?" Only ask: "Is it safe to stand before the Lord separated from my sister or brother?" Ask no longer: "Which Church do I belong to?" Only ask, "Whose Church do I belong to?"

I now wish to look in practical terms under a number of headings at the implications of all of this.

1. Identity

For many Christians the primary identification mark of becoming a Christian is baptism, though it is not so for all. A number of churches in the NCCA and at least one church not a member of our council, but an observer, have a common baptismal certificate. There have been widespread discussions between the churches through the dialogues in relation to the issue of baptism. So I want to ask the question: "Should not baptism be carried out in common among those churches who have a common baptismal certificate? Should for example, it not take place on the traditional day of baptism? Should the clergy perhaps begin in the small town or suburb or village conducting baptismal services together? And then perhaps, it could even move on to one member of the clergy acting on behalf of all? Is not this a central witness to our faith? Would it not be a powerful expression if baptisms were not to take place on a particular day of the year like Whitsunday throughout the country? Would we not be speaking of who we are really?"

2. Reception of dialogues

Wonderful dialogues and tripartite discussions have taken place in this country. I myself am a product of that, as my own church, the Uniting Church in Australia, was the result of negotiations over a very long time, which sought to bring the denominations together. We have two kinds of dialogues going on. There are the national dialogues in which many of us have played a part taking place, in which a number of churches in this country have made very significant contributions. There are also the international dialogues in which some of us have been involved. But what concerns me most about the dialogues, is not that they are taking place. Indeed they are and that it has been wonderful. However, what has been agreed has not been carried out in full. This is the issue of reception in many cases. The documents have been received by representative bodies of the churches, but the decisions of those dialogues have not gone through to the grass roots of our communities. We see this on the issue of baptism which I have just raised. Therefore I believe that it is important that what we have decided, without breaking any rules, is genuinely received in our parish communities. A number of examples are clear in relation the Eucharist where this is possible. If we are simply engaged in the production of documents, if we do not carry them out to the extent that is required, then I fear that a future generation will regard ecumenism, as I as a young person regarded the church leaders' hypocrisy in my time.

3. Ecumenical Existence

We engage in strong dialogue and yet at the same time our identity as denominations continues to grow at a pace. This is particularly seen in the welfare and community services we provide. We have bought into the competitive tendering and competitive market place of the world. I must say this is something that sorely grieves me as a Church leader. I have, of course, been at times caught up in all of this as many of us have. However, I give thanks to God for those times when we acted together in unity. In Canberra last month I was engaged in the launch of an ecumenical stance on the issue of poverty, trying to put the issue on the agenda for the upcoming federal election.

That was wonderful. We have some excellent community service directors. In many cases that is happening, but not always. In some cases we are competing against each other and we are compelled to compete against each other, and so we must always ask the question. Is it the market place that drives us? Or is it the theological basis why we do what we do?

4. Mission Together

Some of us use the word evangelisation. Some of us use the word evangelism. We relate these words in a variety of ways to the total mission of God to which we are called and to the just and peaceful world towards which God leads us. Can we engage in this separately? Here I am reminded of powerful words that Pope John Paul II said on his visit to Germany, the land of Martin Luther, in 1980. The words of John Paul are: "With respect to the grace of unity, it is a fact that all have sinned" (Romans 3: 23). We must recognise and acknowledge that fact in all seriousness and draw the appropriate conclusions.... If we do not try to avoid the facts, we will realise that human failings are to blame for the harmful division of Christians, and that our own refusals have time and again hindered the steps that are possible and necessary to unity" (German text in *Papst Johannes Paulus in Deutschland (Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls 25)*, Bonn, 1980, pp. 80; 86).

It is "refusals" which have caused the Church not to be able to operate together in terms of its mission. We in our land at this time find ourselves in what is sometimes called a post-secular world. The unity of the church is necessary for the sake of the Gospel. This post-secular world of ours will continue to be exciting, and very demanding. It will be a world in which religious aspirations are treated as needs to be satisfied in the market-place, in other words, where faith is not taken seriously because the only thing taken seriously is the satisfaction of the market. For that world the Christian truth questions need to be dealt with between the churches with honesty and urgency. For all the churches will need to deal with them in the world.

5. The Heart of the Faith

We live in an age where Christian faith is culturally marginal. In that situation there is immense temptation for the church to realign itself with the culture of its time. We are thus tempted to engage in understanding human existence from entirely humanistic points of view, or in attempts by the church to understand purely in terms of its own activities, or to go along with all attempts of humans to search for God purely as an expression of its own self-worship. Into that world comes the Gospel from beyond. Here is the graceful yet inexplicable act of God by which humanity is rescued from itself. In our situation, to hold onto the heart of the faith is the very essence of our life, and I believe churches are called to support each other in being able to do that. Too often, the theological discussion in the churches on the relationship between the Gospel and the culture of our time is not supportive, but polarised. We all need to help each other in this difficult area of Christianity and culture. Sometimes we will hold onto the purities of the Gospel and yet we are weak in communicating the faith. At other times we are so gobbled up by the loss of communication that we lose the Gospel. It is the most difficult issue for the Western cultures at the present time. In Western cultures it has actually been much more problematic than the cultures of Asia and Africa in the last two centuries. As Horton Davies reminds us, orthodoxy alone can lead us to intolerance, while liberalisation alone can lead us to the diminishing of revelation (see Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Newman to Martinean, 1850-1900*, Vol. IV. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), 288).

The divide in this country is often between those who engage in different ways of interrelating the gospel and culture. We need to give each other mutual support. In fact when the movement went forward toward the formation of the Uniting Church in Australia from the 1950's it did so by ceasing the operation of comparative theologies (that is, how to relate churches to each other)

and by going back to the much more fundamental question of re-expressing the gospel in our time. We need the help of each other in our approach to mission.

6. Receiving and Giving Overseas

We need to look at all of this in a deeply theological way. There is interaction between our ecumenical council and many ecumenical councils around the world, including the international councils, like the WCC in its relation with the Vatican, and also, regionally, the Christian Conference of Asia and its relation with the Catholic Bishops Conferences.

Through Christian World Service, we engage in solidarity. We need however actually to ask the question: "What is God saying to us through our relationship with these councils?", and we face the same question as the early church faced in relation to its mission. The churches in Africa and the Asia Pacific are growing. We do not know how large Christianity has grown in China, but it's probably larger than we imagine. The church in which I served in Indonesia, though tragically affected by the Muslim Christian violence, is now larger than it was before the violence began.

What is God saying to us?

Probably one of the most challenging questions we have to learn, is that it seems to be the way in which God deals with us is that God goes from the powerful and the religiously experienced to the outsider, to the marginalised. Is it now that we will understand the Gospel better when we see how it takes place in Asia, in Africa? If that is the case, then our inter-relationship with Asia, Africa and the Pacific is far more important than simply the distribution of our solidarity through CWS and the Christmas Bowl. It has to do with being Christians in a universal church. Of course, we engage in material aid and political and social support for people in great difficulty, as is often the case in Asia, Africa and the Pacific. However, we also learn, not because their experience is so incredible, but because the Spirit is there, working in their midst and strengthening their particular situation. So in humility we see where things are actually happening. It is not a matter of comparison, simply a matter of giving thanks that the Spirit of God is there and can strengthen us.

7. Structure: a theological issue

The NCCA is engaging in a review and this forum is an important part of that review. However, the review must be theological, in that we must see what God is seeking for us, and the results must be about our common obedience to what God is saying to us, as God has bought us together in this National Council of Churches.

Ultimately this is an act of Christian obedience for each of us, and therefore commitment to the needs of the National Council of Churches is an expression of that obedience. Each of our traditions has different ways in which we express obedience. But here is an expression of obedience as to what we believe the will of God is.

8. Interfaith Relations

A very good Australian national dialogue between Australian Jews, Christians and Muslims is taking place. The partners with the NCCA are the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry. The dialogue was officially launched in March 2003, after 12 months of formal preparation. It has been a very important dialogue and has also been paralleled with other state and regional dialogues and other dialogues nationally. Here the outstanding features have been:

First, there has been an immense openness.

Second, there has been a great tolerance and the ability to support each other when attacks are made on particular groups. That is to say, there has been a great interest in harmony.

Third, there has been great mutual integrity, that is the respect for the integrity for each faith. Difficult issues have been dealt with. Real interaction has taken place and the twin foci of harmony on the one hand and integrity of each faith on the other has been upheld.

There have been practical outcomes of all of this. The Journey of Promise has taken place. Parallel to the NCCA the National Heads of Churches went to the Lakemba Mosque after the 11 September 2001 on a Friday morning immediately after Muslim prayers, and we together assured the Muslim community, probably the largest Muslim gathering in any one place in Australia, that we as Christians were a people of peace, as we believed that Muslims, also like Jews, were also peoples of peace, and that they need fear nothing from Christians within Australia. After the arson attacks on churches and mosques in the southern part of Sydney, Muslim and Christian leaders went round apologising to the other group for what had occurred and assuring them of our mutual support.

There also have been attacks on Jewish centres in various parts of the country, including attacks on a Jewish cemetery in Adelaide. Again the support of Muslims and Christians for Jewish people together has been important. There is no doubt that here lies one of the fundamental issues not only for Australia, but for the whole world. Internationally the danger of a clash of cultures particularly between Christianity and Islam is something that is very real. This also applies within our own country. For the simple truth is that, if we in this country are not able to work out harmony with integrity between our three faiths, and with other faiths as well, it is highly unlikely that many places in the world will be able to do that. For the fact is that we have much less of a historical burden in this area, and therefore we are clearly called to be an example of harmony to the world. It is not easy, but certainly worth working at and the discussions so far have been very worthwhile. And we especially would like to thank our sisters and brothers in the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils and in the Executive Council of the Australian Jewry for all that has been achieved up to this point.

9. Church and Society

We are caught up in the "Missio Dei", that is in the action of the Triune God who chooses to be God in serious solidarity with those who turn away from God and to call them back to God. The church is called to exist solely through the solidarity of Jesus Christ with those who are alienated from God. This occurs by Christ going into the extremes of alienation on our behalf, so that we might through him come close to God.

How is the Christian Gospel to be expressed in the situation in which we find ourselves?

In this country in recent years, we have lived through the unfolding situation of the violence in Indonesia. We have seen the emergence of the Democratic Republic of East Timor. We have lived in a world of terrorism, both in terms of the events that have occurred since the last Forum, on 11 September 2001 and 10 October 2002 in Bali. We have also seen the development of the war in Iraq. Indeed, it has been quite remarkable, that for the first time in ecumenical history in this country, the NCCA at the time of the beginning of the Iraq war, expressed great sadness and concern about the action of deploying troops. In this situation the public role of the NCCA is important. It is very significant that there should be interaction with parliamentarians and public servants at the Federal level, in addition to all the work that is done by the ecumenical councils in the states. Traditionally in our society, a number of institutions acted as forums through which there could be interaction with the community. In recent times some of these have found it more

difficult than in the past. For example, this has at times been so of the ABC and of some of the universities because of their perception of their commercial needs. It is therefore important that the NCCA makes sure that there is engagement with the primary ethical issues of our time. Recently, a report of The Australia Institute underlined this.

We live in a deeply ambivalent age, an age of high technology and of medieval conflict, an age as strangely confident of the saving powers of the market place as a previous age was strangely confident of the saving powers of collectivism. In this age, we in the church are called to speak of, and live out, the wonder of God's condescension, in the intention of God to identify with us. God calls us to God's very self. God chooses to be in solidarity with us. God does not wish to be alone in celebrating the wonder of God's inexpressible love for humanity. God in Christ calls into existence an earthly body of his Son, in order that humanity may rejoice with God in the harmony and peace that God has given. We are called to a life of praise that embraces all of our personal and social life, in all its practical, ethical, religious, political and intellectual aspects. For that reason we are called to express ourselves in relation to the all the social issues of our situations.

This praise is a praise which stands counter-culture, over against the idolatrous self-worship of individuals and nations in our time. We in our time especially are called to stand against that self-worship, to express the true praise of God alone, the praise of all our life both in private life and public life.