



President's Address

7th Forum of the NCCA, 9-13 July 2010

by Bishop Michael Putney

This is the seventh forum of the National Council of Churches and the second to be held in Canberra. Moreover, the Council was inaugurated in 1994 here in Canberra. This makes our meeting an historic one. We have returned to the national capital, and to the place where we began.

The words 'national' and 'Australia' in the title of our Council are obviously words intended to express our identity and our mission as a national body drawing together in a Council representatives of the vast majority of Australian Christians. Therefore, the national capital is at least symbolically if not also in reality of some significance for our Council.

This return to Canberra provides us with the opportunity of reflecting on the achievements of the Council since it was inaugurated. The three objectives of the National Council of Churches in Australia announced in Canberra in 1994 were:

- a) to encourage and enable churches to develop their existing relationships;
- b) to encourage and enable the member churches in the light of the gospel to give prophetic leadership to each other and the community;
- c) to promote other important relationships eg with other world religions.

It would be a valuable exercise for each of us here today to reflect upon the history of the Council as we know it and to point to positive achievements that satisfy one or other, or even all of these objectives.

I certainly would point to the signing of the Covenant in Adelaide at the Fifth Forum of the National Council as a very tangible and potentially very fruitful consequence of the formation of the National Council of Churches here in 1994. One could also point to the memorandum of understanding between the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission and the National Council of Churches signed in 2005, as a tangible example of commitment to the prophetic role of the Council. The representation of the National Council on national Muslim-Jewish-Christian bodies illustrates the capacity of the National Council of Churches to exercise a particular function that no other group can. It is the most comprehensive representative of Australian Christians in dealings with other world religions.

There would be many other achievements which received less publicity but were none the less of great importance for the ecumenical movement in Australia. I wanted to name some such positive achievements because we can easily forget that as the National Council of Churches in Australia there are some things we can do that no other body can do. Each of those words has its importance. We are a national body. We are a Council drawing together, for deliberation and decision making, representatives of Christian churches. We exercise this role in and for Australia.

At the same time I think we need to reflect upon what we have yet to achieve and that to which we might need to commit ourselves with increased energy after this Forum. Therefore I will point to a number of issues that I think become obvious when one participates in Executive meetings of the Council and even in this Forum.

Firstly, I began my address by drawing attention to the significance of our meeting in the national capital. We went to great trouble to invite the then Prime Minister to address our gathering and alerted the Leader of the Opposition that we were doing so and that we would in turn invite him, if our first invitation were accepted. In fact, we were put on hold which is something politicians sometime have to do. It then became impossible for us to put our own program on hold while we waited and waited. Therefore we withdraw the invitation, and alerted the Leader of the Opposition's staff. What is significant for me is that we were not recognised as the most important Christian body to meet in the national capital this decade as I would like to claim, and so seen as a modest priority for the Prime Minister's calendar.

I say this not with any sense of pride but simply because we are the National Council of Churches in Australia. I am not ignoring the fact that some Christians, churches and communities are not part of the national council but the majority of Christians are represented by this council. However, our national profile and our national "clout" is obviously not as great as we would like and maybe not even as great as some other national bodies representing a lesser number of Christians. Perhaps, in fact, no Christian body is of such significance that the Prime Minister's office would believe that he would need to accept an invitation to attend.

Australia is a secular country and the influence of Christian churches is diminishing. How they respond to that diminishment varies. This Council acts towards politicians and governments in one way. Other groups engage with them much more directly as lobbyists. Some would argue that our style makes us a less significant partner for the federal government than such more politically engaged Christian bodies. However, again it would be very difficult for any Christian body, no matter how prestigious or politically active it might be, to become an essential part of the agenda of a federal government given our contemporary Australian culture. All of this is worthy of our reflection because if we truly are the national Council of Churches then ideally someone in Canberra should think we are worth talking to.

This leads to my second reflection. Not even the churches themselves which are members of the National Council seem to be as passionate about its existence and its mission as the title would imply. It is sometimes hard to get a quorum for executive meetings. This raises real questions about a council of churches that does not so capture the imagination of the churches that they would think that they could not afford to be unrepresented at its meetings.

Such a council of churches needs to look at its agenda. If it is not dealing with the issues that really matter to the churches and doing so in a way that they cannot do alone then in what sense is it genuinely a council of those churches? If it is dealing with agenda coming from elsewhere or generated only from within its own structure then it ought not be surprising that the churches might think that, while it is a good thing that it exists, it in fact is not going to make any impact on their church life. If this is so, they will not be motivated with any urgency to participate in all of its meetings all of the time, as one would hope.

This is a great challenge for the Council and one that it began to tackle at its last Executive Meeting. The desire generated to address this question has influenced the agenda for the Forum.

Is the National Council of Churches really doing the work of the churches? In theory they should want to come together nationally as a council to address those things which confront them all in our Australian context. If it is not helping them to do that, it is surely not satisfying one of their basic objectives in the formation of the Council.

On a more spiritual level, if it is not drawing them closer together so that they can point to a real achievement of deeper ecumenical awareness, collaboration and spiritual union with each other, again it is not satisfying a fundamental objective for which it was established. There is always a danger that no matter how hard we try, a council becomes just one other body alongside the churches rather than an actual coming together of the churches.

Thirdly, among others the Orthodox Churches in Australia are under-represented at this Forum and usually at the Executive Meetings. This is a great sadness because we need to hear all the voices of our member churches if we are to fulfil our mandate. This is not just the mandate accepted at our inauguration but the mandate that comes to us from God. We need each other and we have to find a way of enabling Orthodox Christians to participate in a manner that will make them want to be part of us. It would be tragic if they or anyone else came to Executive Meetings and to the Forum only out of some notional ecumenical duty. We are the National Council and councils are meant to capture and shape our desire to work together both for Christian unity and to carry out our mission in our own country.

Fourthly, as we celebrate the centenary of the modern ecumenical movement this year we need to remember that the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910 generated the enthusiasm that led to the formation of the Faith and Order Movement and the Life and Work Movement which in turn led to the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 in Amsterdam. It was missionaries who began the ecumenical movement.

The poor relation throughout this great and exciting history was the World Missionary Council which did not join the World Council until much later. There are Christians who are not very interested in the ecumenical movement but are interested in evangelism / evangelisation. They are not very interested in the National Council of Churches because it can seem to be concerned with what they would see as a bureaucratic form of ecumenism rather than the urgent mission of proclaiming the Lord Jesus to our secular country.

Their absence from the ecumenical movement and our Council challenges us to look at our own priorities. The original impetus for Christian unity was the need to be united for the sake of the mission of proclaiming the gospel. The first two objectives of our National Council of furthering relationships that would draw us closer together and of enabling us to fulfil a prophetic mission in our country together, must be given appropriate weight in our agenda and in our deliberations. But prophetic mission must include offering the gift of Jesus Christ himself to our nation.

Finally, we will lose the impetus that began in Canberra in 1994 if the National Council of churches in Australia is just one more business meeting. The Executive Meetings and the Forum must not become just more meetings that tired and busy Church people have to attend because of their ecumenical commitment but which in fact offer them very little that is of value for their own churches. We do not exist just to do business.

We must not let our return to Canberra become just one more item on the 2010 calendar of events. The Forum needs to be the occasion when we reclaim the enthusiasm with which this

Council was inaugurated and commit ourselves to whatever changes we need to make in our mission and our agenda in order to ensure that it is worthwhile being members of the National Council of Churches in Australia and actually coming to its meetings. Will participants leave here on Tuesday, not just happy about the time they spent with interesting people talking about interesting things, but aware that through their participation, their churches grew closer together and learnt from each other how to take up together our mission in this country? Anything less is the beginning of the end for the Council not the end of the beginning as this return to Canberra should signify.