
Document No. GEN 1.0

Original

NCCA Forum- President's Report

“Remain in my love! You will remain in my love if you keep my commandments... I have told you all this, so that my own joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete”. **John15:9-11**

It is our hope and prayer that all we think, say and do in the NCCA is attuned to Jesus commandments, which are full of love for us all.

It is our hope and prayer that, breaking through all the demanding aspects of contemporary discipleship, will be our infectious joy in the Lord.

With such aspirations, we gather in Canberra for this very important Forum.

Thank you all for giving this your commitment. Mid-winter in the national capital is not, of itself, an alluring prospect!

But here we are, with important work to do together.

“We live our lives forward and understand them backwards”.

So runs a wisdom which has its relevance for organisations as well as individuals.

The last Forum implemented a new structure and constitution for our NCCA.

We have been living into our new arrangements these past three years, making adjustments for some unintended consequences.

Overall, the changes have given us a more flexible and responsive NCCA: “Less clunky”, as the saying goes.

At this Forum, those of us like the Staff and Board, look forward to hearing your perceptions of what is working and what is not.

We exist to serve our members, within our shared discipleship of Jesus, ever grateful to those who have gone before us and who have contributed to the shaping of our NCCA.

Dear Rev'd Mike Semmler presided over our last Forum as President, with Sister Elizabeth Delaney SGS skilfully guiding us through the constitutional changes.

Before Mike and Elizabeth there were many others.

Brian Howe, faithful supporter of the NCCA and former Federal Minister, reminded us recently of Rev'd Harvey Perkins' pioneering ecumenical work both here and in Asia.

Harvey's focus was always on helping people develop, especially those in deeply distressed communities.

His approach speaks to ours now, albeit in a different era.

That is, a process of action and reflection to ensure we nurture our actions theologically.

"Doing theology contextually is a process of action and reflection fashioned out of historical involvement," Harvey affirmed.

That is what we are striving to do as we honour our Christian faith, respectfully recalling the contributions of all those who have come before us and also offered their faithful witness.

This clarity about our vocation helps us keep our strategy reasonably simple.

Accordingly, as you would have seen, we reshaped the purpose of our NCCA Assemblies to help our member churches better respond to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

As we all know, our absolute best response to these recommendations is a complete necessity.

It has been encouraging to see the success of these Assemblies. People from member churches and wider have come in good numbers. The conversations have had excellent vitality and focus.

Nevertheless, we have a long way to go and so this strategic focus of our NCCA will continue.

Relatedly, our General Secretary and I will continue to represent the NCCA at meetings like those of the National Office for Child Safety, within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

If our churches are to be safe for children, continuing education and a tight regulatory regime are so necessary.

Our strategy is to help us all accomplish this and with other vulnerable groups such as women and children, the differently abled and the elderly.

Reports at our Forum elaborate this priority.

A related internal strategic direction to discern is helping our members respond to the Modern Slavery Act, passed by our Federal Parliament late last year (after lobbying by ourselves, amongst others).

Australia is capable of ensuring there is no form of slavery in our land whether it be through trafficking of vulnerable women and children or exploitation of seasonal workers.

As with child-safe institutions, this involves partnerships with Government and with other organisations.

Through the Christian Conference of Asia and the World Council of Churches, I have been involved in a number of consultations on slavery in our region.

Especially to better protect and prevent people being smuggled or trafficked in Asia, then forced to work in hazardous jobs, without scope to escape.

We have given particular advocacy, including at the United Nations, as regards forced conversions and forced marriages.

Meanwhile, with the new Federal legislation, we want to help ensure that our churches and, in fact, all in Government and in the private sector, interrogate their supply chains to ensure there is no trace of slavery.

These are big issues! Ensuring our churches are child-safe; eradicating modern slavery!

Liz has recently visited the Pacific Conference of Churches for a meeting with the National Councils of Churches of Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga, Samoa, Kiribati and Fiji about concerns about labour rights education, pastoral care and support for seasonal Pacific workers from pre-departure through employment in Australia to re-integration in home communities.

Recalling Harvey Perkins, this focus on migrant labour and related issues regarding advocacy for refugees and asylum seekers, derive from our "historic involvements".

In this context, our twice-yearly meetings with National Church Leaders have tended to take on a more pastoral and relational focus, whilst still offering helpful input on relevant matters. (The next, on September 24, for example, is with the Human Rights Commissioner, Edward Santow regarding responses to the Religious Freedom Review led by the Hon Philip Ruddock, to which we made submission).

It is obvious that National Church Leaders in contemporary Australia need our prayers, our love, and our best support as they strive to honour the Gospel amidst many complexities.

We are holding our Forum deliberately in the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C).

Again, strategically, we are working to revitalise the original vision of the ACC&C and its link to our NCCA.

Bishop Stephen Pickard and the ACC&C Board have been wonderfully supportive.

You will have seen from NCCA Newsletters that we recently held important Roundtables, such as those for Sudanese and South Sudanese Church leaders and for Women Church Leaders at the ACC&C.

To consolidate this revitalised link, I was appointed Director of the Centre for Ecumenical Studies at the ACC&C, following on the excellent work of the Rev'd Dr Ray Williamson.

The hope is that, by the time I conclude as NCCA President, the link to the ACC&C will have helped us to better do our theology "contextually in a process of action and reflection fashioned out of historic involvement".

There is enough in place as regards ecumenical and interreligious common understanding, which is the result of careful dialogues, for us to now apply these common understandings in relation to the major issues of our time.

As well as those named, this obviously includes a co-operative response to the climate crisis and to the prevention of violence: be that domestic violence; the violence which can result from religious extremism; or the risks posed by the possession of nuclear weapons, now being "modernised"!

We cannot be people of faith in our time without being practically concerned about such matters. We pray for a "Just Peace".

Our strategic task in the NCCA is to try to foster the kind of partnerships which will be helpful, in the passionate love of God for all humankind.

Our confidence is, guided by the Holy Spirit, if we are clear about our vocation and clear about what we want to achieve, we need not be timid or risk-averse.

We can expect (as is the case) that we will attract good, talented people to work with us.

We can expect that the resources will emerge to help us do what is needed.

This final reflection encapsulates where we are currently.

It has taken quite some time since the last Forum to get clearer about our strategic focus. It has also taken some

time for our new NCCA Board to “find its feet”.

We have stretched our resources, including our Human Resources.

We are now in the place where we need to enhance our resources if we are to fulfil our vision (and thus, what seems, the necessary response of contemporary discipleship).

We have asked a lot of our fine part-time General Secretary, Liz Stone and our Finance Director, Deidre Ashe; National Coordinator of Safe Church Program, Laura Cregan; Executive Assistant, Noelene Osora and our other gifted staff we have brought on to assist with various tasks Rev Janet Woodlock, Emily Evans, Peter Williams and Vera de Vere.

Our Board members have all contributed, perhaps more than was expected in our voluntary capacities. I thank Bishop John Henderson, Ms Anne Hywood, Mr Thomas Ling, Rev John Gilmore, Mr Rob Floyd, Mr Geoff Officer and Fr Nabil Kachab. I welcome Fr Abanoub Attalla as a Casual Director replacing Fr Nabil.

We have agreed to keep the same leadership team in place for the period ahead, so there is organisational stability.

Recognising the pressure on our members' own budgets, we are grateful for all the contributions we receive.

With the Board, I know our next task includes finding the resources that help us fulfil our vision and strategic focus.

Personally speaking, when receiving the offertory whilst presiding at worship, I say, often just quietly, “of your own do we give you Lord, with grateful hearts”.

We journey on, trusting in the sovereignty of God, seeking to remain in Jesus' love, keeping the divine commandments, till our joy is complete.

Staying close to Jesus and looking at the world with His transfigured gaze, we know that “what the world needs now is love, sweet love.”

This is the journey we pray to be renewed for at this NCCA Forum.

In closing, may I formally thank our Staff, our Board and you all for your many contributions to our NCCA.

By the grace of God, in ever deeper unity, may we better meet the needs we see in our fractured human family.

Amen. May it be so.

Bishop Philip Huggins.