

## **Faith and Unity Commission Report**

### **Report to NCCA Forum 2019**

The Commission followed its regular pattern of two meetings per year in Melbourne. The only exception to this schedule was in June 2017, when the meeting was cancelled due to insufficient attendance. Meeting dates were: 14-15 November 2016; 22-23 November 2017; 20-21 June 2018; 14-15 November 2018; 10-11 April 2019.

All meetings were held at the Centre for Theology and Ministry, Parkville. The Commission is grateful to the Uniting Church and the CTM for allowing us to meet there regularly.

#### **Membership**

The official list of members is as follows:

Anglican Church: The Rev'd Dr Jane Lee-Barker; The Rt Rev'd Dr Doug Stevens; The Rev'd Dr Cathy Thomson; The Rev'd Jacob Legarda (from April 2019)

Churches of Christ: Dr Maggie Kappelhoff

Coptic Orthodox Church: Reverend Father Athanasius Attia

Greek Orthodox Church: Dr Philip Kariatlis

Lutheran Church: Pastor Andrew Brook

Religious Society of Friends: Dr Peter Bennett

Roman Catholic Church: Dr Birute Arendarcikus rsm; Dr Janette Gray rsm; Rev'd Dr Gerard Kelly.

Salvation Army: Major Clayton Spence

Uniting Church: Rev'd Dr Morag Logan; Dr Damian Palmer; Rev'd Graham Perry

The Commission was saddened to learn of the death of Dr Janette Gray rsm on 24 December 2016.

In the middle of 2017 both The Rev'd Dr Cathy Thomson and the Rev'd Graham Perry resigned from the Commission due to new responsibilities in their respective churches. In the middle of 2018 the Rt Rev'd Doug Stevens retired from the Commission. He was replaced by The Rev'd Jacob Legarda from the beginning of 2019.

Rev'd Graham Perry was elected chair of the Commission at the November 2016 meeting. After Graham's resignation from the Commission, Rev'd Dr Gerard Kelly was elected as chair.

The Commission was pleased to welcome to two of its meetings, the President of the NCCA, The Rt Rev'd Philip Huggins. The General Secretary of the NCCA, Sr Elizabeth Delaney sgs, was a regular participant at meetings during her time in office. In attendance more recently have been Elizabeth Stone, interim General Secretary; Laura Cregan, Safe Church Program and Janet Woodlock, Emily Evans, project officers.

In previous years we have been fortunate to have an observer from the Pentecostal movement, in the person of Dr Stephen Fogarty from Alphacrucis College in Sydney. Throughout this triennium he was not able to continue as an observer, and the Commission has not yet found an observer from this movement but continues to look for one.

#### [The Mandate and the Work of the Commission](#)

At the first meeting of this triennium the Commission looked at the Mandate and made some changes. For the most part these were changes made necessary by the revision of the NCCA Constitution.

The Mandate asks the churches to reflect theologically on a) the faith that unites us; b) the Gospel imperative to work towards unity; and c) the way in which our member (and other) churches can move towards greater visible unity in worship, common life and mission in Christ.

In setting out a work plan for the triennium, the Commission was attentive to the six key tasks listed in the Mandate. Most energy focused on study documents produced by the WCC and its departments. Specifically, we prepared a response to *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document* (Faith and Order paper no.125), and *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, a document of the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. Emily Evans, a project officer at the NCCA, assisted the Commission to take up the invitation from the WCC to engage with the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

Towards the end of the triennium the Commission began theological reflection on the matters raised by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. We expect to continue this theological reflection into the next triennium.

The Commission is aware that some of the key tasks in the mandate were not able to be attended to. Both the loss of some of our members and the cancellation of a meeting resulted in us being unable to manage some tasks that we had planned. Thus, we were not able to do any further work on *Australian Churches Covenanting Together*; nor were we able to engage in any depth with the state councils of churches; nor were we able to dialogue and interact with the NCCA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission. The latter interaction has been a lacuna for some time, and we appreciate that questions of location and geography add to the complexity of interaction.

As this triennium comes to a close the members of the Commission have reviewed the Mandate and wish to recommend changes that will help us to sharpen the focus our work for the new triennium. **See Appendix 1.**

#### [Response to \*Moral Discernment in the Churches\*](#)

The Commission studied the Faith and Order study text, *Moral Discernment in the Churches*. Responses were received from the Anglican Church of Australia, the Churches of Christ, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia, the Lutheran Church of Australia, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Roman Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, and the Uniting Church in Australia.

Our response noted the purpose of the study text:

The Faith and Order paper opens with a lengthy introductory section detailing both the background of the study and outlining the purposes of engaging in the study. One stated hope of the paper is that it should “be a tool to aid churches in both developing a deeper self-understanding of their own processes of moral

discernment, offering a framework within which dialogue about moral disagreements can take place” (para 4, p. 2). Another statement of the intention of the study is that it should “identify principles and practices of moral discernment we hold in common as churches and to discover where we diverge. Our goals are to claim the common ground we share, to help us understand how and why we often come to different conclusions, and to search together for ways to prevent our principled differences from becoming church-dividing.” The purpose of the study was later clarified “to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of theological difference and disagreement in order to develop study material and resources that facilitate difficult conversations and theological discussions about moral issues” (para 8, p. 8).

Our response followed the schema of the document and allowed our Australian churches to identify the methods they each use for moral decision making and the sources used in moral discernment. We also noted the factors that cause division within churches and between churches.

The following comment from the Orthodox Church expresses well the sentiment felt by all members of the Commission:

To the extent that this document sheds light on the significance of, and need for, a better understanding of moral discernment as practised within one’s own and others’ traditions – in the hope of overcoming historical tensions – it is an important first step. Indeed, in light of the many and growing moral dilemmas facing humanity and the world at large, this WCC study document needs to be furthered as all churches will continue to face increasing challenges in this area, another factor underscoring not only the need, but also the value, for continued reflection on moral discernment.

The Commission commends to the NCCA member churches the document *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, and the response of the Commission to this document. **See Appendix 2.**

#### [Response to \*Together Towards Life\*](#)

The Commission studied the document *Together Towards Life*. Responses were received from the Anglican Church of Australia, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia, the Lutheran Church of Australia, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Roman Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, and the Uniting Church in Australia.

The responses from Commission members highlighted the importance of situating mission within the context of the triune God. This allowed for a broader understanding of mission. Indications of this broader understanding are evident throughout the document, notably in the place given to mission from the margins; in the emphasis on the cosmic dimension of mission and the care of creation; and understanding of mission embracing the unity of humanity and not just adding to the membership of individual churches. The commission members were able to affirm the document’s convergence statement that despite differences in the way evangelism is understood among churches, it is grounded in the life of the local church where worship is inextricable linked to witness and fellowship.

The Commission commends to the NCCA member churches the document *Together Towards Life*, and the response of the Commission to this document. **See Appendix 3.**

#### [Theological Reflection after the Royal Commission](#)

The Commission has begun to engage in theological reflection after the Royal Commission. It is hoped that over the next couple of years, members of the Commission might be able to provide short reflection papers that could assist churches in their own theological reflection on the issues raised by the Royal Commission. The breadth of issues is quite remarkable and will impact on all churches. The Commission hopes that these reflection papers will also deepen our ecumenical engagement with each other, and help us to grow in unity.

To date reflection papers have been offered by the Salvation Army, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Anglican Church. These papers may serve as a resource not just for individual member churches but for the communion of churches.

#### [Week of Prayer for Christian Unity](#)

The Commission has responsibility for adapting the materials for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Each year a small working group prepares local materials based on the international materials that are prepared by the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. The local materials provided are: Ecumenical Order of Service; reflections for the eight days; sermon notes; poster and prayer card.

The Commission would like to acknowledge the members of the working group: The Rev'd Canon Richard Tutin (convenor); the Rt Rev'd Doug Stevens; The Rev'd Meredith Williams; and Dr Carmel Pilcher rsj.

Initiatives have been taken to publicise the Week of Prayer and these resources. We thank those at QCT who have established a Facebook Page to garner interest in the Week of Prayer. Nevertheless, each year we find ourselves having a discussion about the apparent decline in participation in the Week of Prayer among local congregations.

We would like to recommend that local churches take the opportunity to evaluate their own church's engagement with the Week of Prayer and to look for ways to promote it among their congregations. One practical suggestion is that church leaders in each of our capital cities come together for prayer during that week, and that it be hosted in one of the city churches.

#### [Contributing to the Work of the NCCA and its Commissions](#)

The Commission provided advice to the NCCA secretariat on various matters:

- The theological basis for a series of statement on Peace and Peace-making
- The values framework for the Safe Church program.

#### [Dialogues involving Australian Churches](#)

The Commission has tried to be aware of the various bilateral dialogues in which our member churches are involved, as well as international dialogues. As fewer of our members have direct involvement in the bilateral dialogues this has not been as easy as previously. However, it is becoming clear that some dialogues that had met over many years are no longer meeting, and that some of those that continue are floundering.

The Commission will undertake in the next triennium to get a fuller picture of current bilateral dialogues, and if appropriate, organise another Forum on Bilateral Dialogues.

#### [Work Plan for the new triennium](#)

The Commission seeks endorsement from the Forum for the work plan for the new triennium:

- Theological reflection after the Royal Commission
- Watching Brief on the work of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC and its application/implementation in Australia
- Theological Foundations for the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace
- Liaison with state ecumenical councils on developments with *Australian Churches Covenanting Together*
- Involvement with the Safe Church Conference
- Organise, if appropriate, a Forum on Bilateral Dialogues
- Maintain a watching brief on current and emerging NCCA issues

#### [Recommendations](#)

1. That the Report of the Faith and Unity Commission be received.
2. That the proposed amendments to the Mandate of the Faith and Unity Commission be approved.

3. That NCCA member churches be encouraged to study the document *Moral Discernment in the Churches*, and the response of the Commission to this document.
4. That NCCA member churches be encouraged to study the document *Together Towards Life*, and the response of the Commission to this document.
5. That local churches take the opportunity to evaluate their own church's engagement with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and look for ways to promote it among their congregations.
6. That the Work Plan for the Commission be endorsed