

General Secretary's address to National Forum

Saturday 14 July 2007

Part 1: NCCA – IDEA OR IDEAL?

In the first part of this morning's address, I want to ask the question "Is the NCCA an *IDEA* or an *IDEAL*?"

Ideas will always be more powerful than ideals. Ideals disappoint when we fail to live up to them. They quickly become hollow and change from generation to generation. Ideas, on the other hand, are always powerful and remain so even when we fail to realise them fully. While fulfilling an ideal easily becomes an end in itself, an idea points beyond itself to something greater. In that sense our faith, and our belief in the unity of God and of the church, is a powerful idea, which is our witness to the Churches and to the world. As St Paul wrote: "... for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28)

Unity is God's idea

As God is one, so the church is one in Christ. Unity is part of what the church is. It is God's will for humanity. It is essential to the story of our salvation, and integral to Christ's new creation. The way we have broken the visible expression of this unity through our arguments, divisions and separation is not part of our faith, it is part of our human weakness.

We do understand this, because in one way or another all our attempts at preserving our individual Churches are attempts at maintaining unity on a lesser scale. We are adept at expressing unity *within* our Churches in many ways – through our common creeds, our confessions, our denominational culture and church government, and through our worship, baptism, Eucharist, and belief in eternal life. The *internal* practices of our Churches point to our oneness in Christ. *Within* our Churches, we commonly uphold and argue for unity. We need regular prompting to test this common belief outside our

individual denomination, and practice it between our Churches and beyond our usual fellowship.

Beyond the comfort zone

In this respect, the NCCA sits slightly outside our comfort zones, but not so far outside as to be impossible. It has a privileged place, and shows us that there are many different types of believers and different types of Churches. Some are like me, but many are not. Those who are not are still my sisters and brothers in Christ.

Whatever our divisions are, our fundamental unity holds true because it is God's idea, not ours. We know those old jokes about the high walls in heaven that separate the various kinds of believers so that the sight of each other need not taint them. They are faintly amusing because they show a sad state of affairs. The NCCA is the Churches saying 'no' to the lie that God accepts some believers while rejecting others, or places them on a lower plane. The Holy Spirit does not play favourites.

Potent and powerful

As an agent of the idea of unity, the NCCA is potent and powerful. We need it. If it were not here, we would be trying to create it, or something like it. Certainly, there are other instruments that can bring us together but nothing else with the breadth and scale of the NCCA. The NCCA is a broad coalition that brings together the most unlikely partners in the most unexpected ways. At my installation service in 2002, her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir, the Governor of NSW, remarked that nowhere else would she see such an unlikely group gathered except in the name of the church.

Broad as it may be the NCCA is firmly Trinitarian and Christ centred. It is faithful to the church and the historic faith of the church that generations have handed down to generations. It does not try to *be* the church or *replace* the church. The NCCA is the tool of the Churches in the cause of their unity in Christ.

As a tool, we know that the NCCA is not perfect. The *idea* is God's, but the *application* is human. This is why the NCCA is more an IDEA than an IDEAL. Unity is the goal, not the NCCA. If we succeeded in fully expressing our unity then we would not need the NCCA. We would freely confess one God, one faith, one church.

Bridging the gap

Over the last 97 years, there has been much idealism about the ecumenical movement and its potential as an agent of change. Somewhere along the way, as with most movements, it experienced atrophy and fell short of the very ideals that it held for the church. It was waylaid by institutionalism. That's the nature of human ambitions no matter how hard we work. We fall victim to the very circumstances we try to overcome. In some minds, tools such as the National Council of Churches have become yet another drain on the dwindling resources of the national Churches. People sometimes say to me, "Why should we support the NCCA? Why don't we use that money to do something greater in the kingdom of God?"

I have no pat answer to that, except to regret our blindness to the gift horse. The NCCA is ours to do with, as we will. We can't treat it as a poor relation or an unfortunate hanger on, as though it belonged to someone else, an alien intrusion into the otherwise harmonious existence of our denomination. We are the NCCA, and it is nothing more, and nothing less, than what we make it. Think of it like a bridge that lies beneath the feet of the Churches so they can walk over it to discover who is on the other side. The NCCA bridges the gap driven into the church by centuries of practice, history, and theology. It is a safe crossing place. On it, we encounter other Christians, with other histories, theological nuances, and ecclesial practices. This kind of tool is essential in a multicultural, multi-religious society like Australia.

Listening to the Churches

The NCCA is no better, and no more an ideal, than we are, or the Churches that create it. This National Forum will discuss critical issues in the life of the Council. It's up to you – how do you want the NCCA to do its job? What is the NCCA and what is it here for?

We aren't all going to be happy with everything that happens. There will be sins of commission and sins of omission. That's the risk of every relationship. What you can be sure of is that the NCCA will listen to the Churches as the servant of the idea and belief of Christian unity.

Past, present, & future

This sixth National Forum marks 13 years in the existence of the NCCA. That's not a long time in the life of the average member Church. Some of us have over 1700 years of continuous Christian community. The historic ecumenical Councils of the Church in the 3rd and 4th centuries are not so ancient to our Catholic and Orthodox members. The Reformation from which some take their impetus and shape their responses is as yesterday in the scale of Christian memory. What we now have to confront is how this wealth of continuous Christianity, and the revival and work of the Holy Spirit, will inform who we are today and how we behave tomorrow.

Will we resist the modern tendency to throw away things that don't seem to be immediately required? Will we dare to carry forward the combined riches of the faith of the Churches into tomorrow's world? Will we let those riches inform our responses to the pressing needs of today?

Discovering what works

We can experience a suppressed sense of panic we try to discover what works. People these days are quick to form temporary alliances and follow the advice of experts who claim to have answers. What we so often fail to do is seize the opportunity and tap into the collective wisdom that is available in the ecumenical encounter. In changing times, we can fear for our survival.

We can easily forget God's faithfulness, and imagine that our generation is the first to face such profound questions. The agenda of fear, which is so prevalent in the world, invades the church as well.

In our secular multicultural world, the NCCA has an important part to play. It is an under utilised resource. Fund it, direct it, and use it. Let it be as potent for us as our belief in the unity of God and the unity of God's church is potent. This will require the ongoing will and courage of our Church leaders, and the backing of each of us to see that it happens. I hope that this Forum gives us the opportunity to explore the idea of unity that the NCCA represents, and to shape our vision of what the NCCA can be and do for the churches and for God.

Part 2: Our NCCA – Gathered in pilgrimage

The title of the second part this morning comes from the Basis of the NCCA. Fourteen years ago, a long process of consultation and debate resulted in the adoption of our Constitution. It was a major step forward and it continues to shape the NCCA: what it does, and how it relates to the Churches, and it should still regulate the business of this Forum, and the future that we plan.

To know each other better in all respects...

“To know each other better in all respects” can mean many things, but the Constitution specifically mentions **spirituality, liturgy, theology, history, sociology, and culture**. Have the activities of the NCCA helped us to know these things about each other? We are an amazingly diverse group, representing significant historical, theological, and cultural expressions of Christianity. This is a huge but undervalued resource. After all these years, how well do we really *know* one another? The answer is there in the level of willingness, trust, and mutuality we show in working together.

Although relations between Churches are generally cordial, most of the things we do together remain on the fringes of Church life. The largest parts of our constituencies know nothing about national efforts at unity. They only notice the NCCA when some popular media article quotes it, for example on the war in Iraq, refugees, or industrial legislation. While some are supportive, many regard such quotes with suspicion or even disdain – including people among the membership of our Churches.

As a further example, while this gathering notionally represents millions of Christians, it is telling that we have a shortage of people who are able to help. We have significant trouble filling positions like Treasurer or the Youth Network. Despite their size, some member churches cannot find nominees. Is that because the NCCA is doing things the Churches don't value? Is it because we don't think it's important to work together? We know that our denominational structures are designed to serve individual denominations

and not the unity of the whole church. In this, they are no different to the structures we use elsewhere in society.

Can the NCCA help Churches break beyond these boundaries to know and trust each other better? Those of us who are regularly, even daily, involved with the affairs of the Council do learn to trust each other. That happens because people work together on projects, committees, and tasks. Our commitment to each other must be more than a slate of names for a committee. How can we be intentional about our commitment to each other?

We are facing many great tests in the life of our Churches. I will just mention a few:

- Changes in the way we think about ourselves and our role in society
- Internal struggles that impact on our life and witness – such as the persistent ‘worship wars’, debates over the roles of men and women, the place of same sex relationships, tensions over social justice issues, and empowerment of the Indigenous voice in Australian theology and Church life
- There are severe crises in some countries of origin, such as the war in Iraq, the current instability in Palestine, and global warming in the Pacific. These directly affect individuals and families of NCCA member Churches
- There is ongoing tension in Churches with congregational theologies that are trying to support national structures. The reverse applies to Churches that have a global self-understanding that are trying to find ways of building Australian communities.
- Some Churches are closing congregations, disposing of property, as they identify an aging membership.
- There is a decline in denominational allegiance based on ethnicity or historical associations. This presents both a problem and an opportunity for preaching the gospel.

- There are big changes in leadership, at home and abroad, that bring changes in direction. This often has a direct impact on ecumenical involvement. This is ongoing, and we are still unsure of the impact of the latest statement from Rome.
- Churches experience schisms, clergy malpractice, lawsuits, and a myriad of things that we all wish didn't happen in the Church but do. Apart an impact on individuals, there can be a severe affect on national personnel and resources.

In these times of change, shouldn't the NCCA be a resource? How can we learn from one another and discern the mind of Christ in difficult times? Many things already happen informally and the NCCA has done a lot to build relationships between leaders, but could we – should we – be more intentional about offering each other mutual support through the opportunity that is our NCCA?

To give prophetic leadership to each other and the community...

For many people, prophetic leadership is the NCCA's reason for being. They have a huge expectation that an ecumenical council is a prophetic council, speaking and acting decisively on matters of peace and justice. 'Prophetic leadership' is a passionate voice and courageous action that is confrontational when required, and unwavering in the cause of truth to the point of unpopularity.

Ecumenical councils have sometimes been empowered to act this way because they have been at arm's length from the Churches. When things have gone too far Churches have disowned, or even withdrawn from their Councils. This happened, for instance, in New Zealand, where Churches lost confidence and they closed down the Conference of Churches down nearly 2 years ago.

We must remember that when the Churches reached agreement in 1994, they firmly linked the new body to their leadership and polity. The Council is not a free agent, but exists within and because of the world of the Churches. This has been a strength, but sometimes it also limits what the Council does.

Given its nature, to what extent can the NCCA act 'prophetically' while keeping the confidence and commitment of its member Churches? This is up to you – the member Churches. You can ask the NCCA to act prophetically on many issues. Three of the most frequently mentioned are:

- **Climate change** and global warming. This presents significant issues for our collective theology and our community morality.
- **Indigenous Australia** and the scandal of disadvantage. Historically the Church has been involved with Australia's Indigenous people, and today a majority are Christians. Their disadvantage is a scandal of our own making in our own back yard.
- **Palestine/Israel** and the huge injustices and violence people are experiencing there. Sylvia Haddad is here from the Middle East, and we are looking forward to hearing what she has to say about peace in Palestine/Israel. Christians have always felt vitally connected to that land and peace there could disable so much violence elsewhere in the world.

While these are the issues of the moment, and I hope we can do a lot more about them, there are also many other issues that are equally concerning. For example:

- The emerging climate of **terrorism** and fear and its growing impact on human rights and democratic principles
- Unresolved or emerging **bio-ethical issues** such as abortion, stem-cell research, and euthanasia
- **Social ills** such as Substance abuse, gambling, and pornography
- **Consumerism**, the god of mammon, and the worship of everything associated with it

We should add the matter of **interfaith relations** to this list. The NCCA's Constitution specifically mentions it, and therefore it is something that the Churches have asked the NCCA to work on. We are doing this, but there is a strong need for more resources and a greater focus.

These, and many other issues, are of concern to the Churches but we do not necessarily have agreement on them. How will we talk about these pressing things and find a common cause? Until we do the nature of our commitment to each other will remain in question. Is our fellowship strong enough to sustain difference, especially on matters that arouse our passions and our fears? When we are ready to debate this kind of thing then our fellowship will be strong enough to do a power of good and perhaps be truly prophetic.

The NCCA always carries out its prophetic work in the name of the Churches. It awaits the direction of the Churches. It doesn't replace the Church, nor is it a means for individuals or groups to bypass blockages in their own Churches.

Getting things done

Like most great ideas, the NCCA lacks the physical resources to do everything people expect it to. That's not a complaint – that's just reality. We share this reality with the national organisations of most member Churches. A few years ago we stopped adopting deficit budgets because not only is it bad practice but our reserves were dwindling. We have invested thought, time, and energy into doing more with less – for example in Sydney we now occupy 50% of the office space we did 12 months ago. All projects, and meetings like this Forum, have to be self-funding. Due the continuing and generous support of a few we are doing OK – just – but there isn't much fat on the bone. Some of the Commissions and Networks will tell you in their reports that they don't have enough to fulfil their mandates.

Just after the last Forum, despite a decision to do more in the area of mission, at its own request we wound up the Commission on Mission. Most Churches had stopped sending representatives and those who remained felt they

didn't have the ear of their Church leaders. It was time for that body, which had existed since the 1920s, to close down. In the reports this afternoon, some of you will hear about a new project called 'Growing Churches in the Australian Context'. This project will take up some of the work formerly assigned to the Commission, but in a new, and I hope sustainable, way.

The NCCA cannot increase its activities without additional resources. Initiatives like the Safe Church Project have raised money directly from Churches and participants to seed their ongoing project. For the next stage, they must look outside for funding from insurance companies and related bodies. Material support for this project has already come from beyond the formal membership of the NCCA, and from parts of member Churches that do not normally give us funding. It seems that a range of participatory projects that involve a wider audience will increasingly exist alongside the formal membership structures of the Council.

Without new streams of money or assistance in kind we are forced to choose between projects and issues, or to let them limp along half-heartedly. If this Forum gives clear direction to the NCCA to engage in issues where you feel it is not doing enough, then I beg you also to determine how you will concretely support the work. It is not right to raise expectations that things will happen only to later find out that there is no one to do them. All of us who work in national organisations know how expensive and hard it is to achieve even a small result in the geographically dispersed Australian Federation.

Today's world prefers practical solutions to lots of talking. Resources are easier to find for working groups and specific projects than for traditional standing Commissions and Networks. Incredibly, we run the Social Justice Network and the Gender Commission on \$1500 each per year. How much do you really expect those dedicated people to do when they have so little back up? It is amazing what people achieve with so little. The kits and information that flow out far exceed what you would think we could do, thanks to those who put in so much effort. That includes relatively new things such as our presence on

the web, which we have done without additional funding. There have been casualties, however, such as stopping the regular paper copies of In Unity. We must either change what we do, or find the resources to do them better.

Conclusion...

How important is Christian unity to the Churches? What do you want the NCCA to be? What do you want it to do? These are questions for us at this National Forum, as we meet under the theme 'Life Together'. Does this theme speak the truth about us?

During the Forum, we will become a community at the Alexandra Park Conference Centre. There will be worship, reports, stories, workshops, small groups, denominational meetings, meals, special talks, and business sessions. At least three parallel processes will take place. There will be the formal business sessions, there will be the thinking led by our facilitator Trevor Smith, and there will be the informal dialogue of delegates, guests, and visitors.

Take the time at this Forum to appreciate moment and the gift of Christian unity. Use it as an opportunity to get involved, to hear and to be heard, and to grow in serving God. I hope we enjoy this event, but I also hope, and pray, that the legacy of this meeting will be a clear and sustainable message for the direction and priorities of the NCCA for the next 3 years.

*John Henderson
General Secretary
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