AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE
WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Australian Churches' Engagement with the WCC

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An address to an Ecumenical Roundtable marking the 70th anniversary of the WCC, at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Canberra

14 May 2018

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This Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, for me, always brings back a painful memory.

It was 1968, and I had just joined the staff of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. A staff meeting was discussing the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In a moment of madness, I decided to give everyone the benefit of my wisdom.

The Week of Prayer, I told them, was a waste of time. Every year the churches pray for unity and talk about unity, then steadfastly refuse to make the changes that unity requires. It is an annual exercise in hypocrisy, I said, and it should be scrapped forthwith. My new colleagues treated this insight with the respect it deserved: they ignored it. But the moment we broke for coffee, I knew I was in trouble.

For seated at the back of the hall was the World Council's founding general secretary, a Dutch theologian named Willem Visser 't Hooft. Retired but still an awe-inspiring presence around the place, The Old Boss, as he was known, came at me like a bull at a gate.

"The trouble with you young fellers," he began, waving an irate finger in my face, "is, you have no sense of history. Don't you realize how far the churches have come? Can't you recognize an answer to prayer when it's staring you in the face?" What was staring me in the face was one very angry Dutchman, and he didn't look much like an answer to any prayer of mine. But that traumatic moment in my ecumenical education taught me three valuable lessons.

First, if you're planning to make an inflammatory speech, you should always check first to see who may be lurking at the back of the hall.

Second, if you want to make sense of the church, and particularly the ecumenical movement, you had better keep your sense of history well honed.

Third, Visser 't Hooft was dead right: the churches have indeed come a very long way in a very short span of years.

That certainly holds true for the churches of Australia. And a key reason for our transformed relationships is the way our churches have been inspired, encouraged, provoked and resourced through their engagement with the wider ecumenical movement, particularly the World Council of Churches.

I want to outline how that engagement developed, the principal forms it has taken, some of the difficulties that have arisen and, finally, steps Australia's churches might take now to renew their participation in the life of the World Council.

We've been there from the beginning. The decision to form a world council of churches had been made in 1938. An inaugural Assembly was scheduled for 1941, but the world had other things on its mind in 1941. The resulting delay and the carnage of war only served to highlight the startling significance of the organisation that would be born, in Amsterdam, in 1948.

Strong delegations from five Australian churches were there, at the founding Assembly. But we had anticipated it. In 1946, two years earlier, Protestant and Anglican leaders here had formed what they called the "World Council of Churches (Australian Section)" – chaired by, interestingly, Howard Mowll, the evangelical Anglican archbishop of Sydney. The name soon changed to Australian Council for the WCC. In 1960, it became the Australian Council of Churches, and in 1994 the National Council of Churches in Australia. Different names, increasingly diverse denominational involvement, but always reflecting a commitment by Australia's churches to be engaged with the world body.

And how have we been engaged?

1. The power of the sign

The World Council of Churches was utterly unprecedented. There had never been anything like it. After the long centuries of Christian division, after all the blood that had been shed, something dramatically new was happening. No surprise, then, that Willem Visser 't Hooft became Time magazine's Man of the Year, and the founding general secretary discovered his face on magazine stands all over the English-speaking world!

The World Council wasn't only new. It gave hope. Ancient hostilities ending, enemies becoming friends, reconciliation happening -- what a contrast to the trauma from which the world had emerged in 1945, and the cold war already threatening in 1948. In one way the WCC did not need to *do* anything; its very existence was a sign that caught our attention and inspired our imagination.

Of course, It also caught the attention of the more paranoid among us. Some insisted on interpreting the WCC's birth in the context of mounting tensions between Washington and Moscow. There were churches on both sides of the Iron Curtain (Eg the US Southern Baptist Convention and, until 1961, the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate of Moscow) that feared what they might be getting into and so stayed out. The creation of the World Council of Churches sparked into being a fundamentalist US-based counterpart, the International Council of Christian Churches, which has haunted meetings of the World Council ever since.

The sign was powerful indeed.

2. Encountering people

In 1961, the Congregational theological college in Sydney welcomed a new principal. John Garrett had been a delegate to the first Assembly of the WCC. Then general secretary of what would become the ACC. Then, for six years in Geneva, director of the Information Department of the WCC. Of all this, we his students were the beneficiaries.

Sometimes it was his stories, of churches very different to ours trying to be faithful in countries far from this. Sometimes it was his local friends of other denominations, who preached in our chapel and regaled us with their company over coffee (Eg. Frances James, the wonderfully eccentric editor of *The Anglican*; Rosalie McCutcheon, of ASCM fame; David Garnsey, Bishop of Gippsland). Sometimes it was one of his former WCC colleagues, visiting Sydney, who was inveigled to our dinner table (Eg Madeleine Barot, a remarkable French woman who during the war had been a people smuggler, leading Jewish refugees across the border from Occupied France into Switzerland). Through these stories and contacts, without quite being aware of it, we his students were realising that that the church of Jesus Christ was so much more than the small bit of it to which we belonged, so much more varied, so much more enriching, so much more exhilarating.

Most of us here, I suspect, could tell similar stories of how, through encounters with people, we met and fell in love with the ecumenical movement. Maybe it was a teacher. Or a friend. Maybe participating in a conference or the work of a committee. Maybe a sustained experience, like involvement in the Student Christian Movement or the WCC's Graduate School of Ecumenical Studies. But the outcome was a desire to learn more, to receive more, to be part of this new thing that was happening.

Whether we knew it or not, in so many ways *people* have been drawing us – and our churches -- into an engagement with the WCC and, more importantly, with what it represents.

3. Escaping our isolation

Seventy years ago, Australians knew they were at one of the ends of the earth. When Geoffrey Blainey wrote *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* what he had in mind was the distance of this land from its colonizing power. But the sense of distance and its effects were more general. Significant things always seemed to happen elsewhere. Significant people always lived elsewhere. Significant ideas always originated elsewhere.

If Australians generally felt that way, the churches did too. There were not many opportunities for contact with churches elsewhere, certainly not churches with an ethos and denominational

background different to our own. We didn't talk about the tyranny of distance, but we surely felt it and our attitudes on many issues reflected it.

Not surprising, then, that when opportunities did offer to find out what was happening, to meet overseas visitors, to discover the new ideas, we seized upon them with gusto. Missionaries on furlough were well received by our congregations. Our students headed to Europe or North America for their graduate work. Addresses by international visitors got a good turn-out.

And now that we had a World Council of Churches, its documents could be studied, its Ecumenical Press Service would keep us informed and we could look forward to occasional contact with its leaders and staff. Australia's churches embraced this solution – partial solution, anyway -- to their long-standing sense of isolation.

4. Participating in structures

The WCC began with 147 member churches, five of them from Australia. Its membership, more than doubled, now stands at 348. Of these, three (Anglican, Uniting and Churches of Christ) are from Australia, while most of our Oriental and Orthodox churches are represented through their patriarchates elsewhere. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member, though it does appoint members to several WCC commissions and there is a Joint Working Group between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church to facilitate relationships.

What has this meant, for Australia's engagement with the Council?

At a formal level, member churches send delegates to the WCC's seven-yearly Assemblies. As Canberra people know better than most, we even hosted one of them. Of those delegates, one or two are appointed to the Council's Central Committee which runs the show between Assemblies. Jean Skuse served as vice-moderator of the Central Committee 1975-83.

Australians have served on a number of the WCC's specialised commissions, committees and working groups. These include some familiar names: Arthur Burns, Joyce Clague, Mabel Wyllie, Frank Engel, John Brown, Davis McCaughey (vice moderator, Faith and Order Commission, 1961-68), Charles Birch (vice moderator, Church and Society Commission, 1975-83), Aghan Baliozian, D'Arcy Wood, Jill Tabart and Gregor Henderson.

Some from our churches found themselves appointed to the WCC's staff: John Garrett, Rex Davis, Harvey Perkins, John Garbutt, Thelma Skiller, Alan Matheson and currently Katalina Tahafe-Williams. And me!

These, and others, not only represented us to the WCC. They have also played a role in representing the World Council back to the churches in Australia.

5. Responding to human need

Even during the war years and immediately thereafter, when still "in process of formation," the embryo World Council became a significant instrument by which churches were able to act together in response to Europe's turmoil. Refugee resettlement became a key task, especially for Australia, one of the principal refugee receiving countries. It drew our churches into a close working relationship that lasted decades. The WCC's Commission on Interchurch Aid, Refugee and World Service, like its counterpart here, was not just one more do-gooder NGO. It was a tangible expression of the commitment to Christian unity, with its sleeves rolled up.

6. Wrestling with issues and ideas

The most enduring aspect of our engagement has been at the level of issues and ideas. Some confronted us via the WCC's formal study processes (Eg Church and Society, Faith and Order, Mission, relations with other faiths, etc). Others were raised by WCC decisions and policies that provoked us to a deeper understanding of Christian responsibility in a complex, changing world (Eg being the Church in communist countries, the Israel/Palestine conflict, the struggle against apartheid).

Of course, participating in the global ecumenical community not only enriches the churches. Sometimes it disturbs them as well.

A good example of the former – enrichment -- is the landmark Faith and Order study on Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry. After decades of work involving not only member churches but Roman Catholic and Pentecostal theologians the final document was adopted, in Lima (Peru) in 1982. What made it so special was not only the near consensus, at least on baptism and eucharist, but the new and provocative question it posed to the churches: what is the extent, it asked, to which your church can recognise in this text the faith of the Church through the ages?

An example of the latter -- disturbance -- was the Program to Combat Racism (1969), which set the cat among ecclesiastical pigeons with its humanitarian grants to groups of the racially oppressed. The PCR lost the World Council some support, at least in white member churches, but it ranks as the most effective thing the WCC has ever done to raise a major moral issue before the Christian conscience.

The traffic of issues and ideas has not been all one way. From time to time, Australia's churches have impinged on the thinking of the wider fellowship. Frank Engel, in the early 1960s, was an energetic advocate of the land rights of indigenous people, before the WCC became aware of the issue and long before it registered on the agenda of Australia's juridical and political systems. Charles Birch, as a keynote speaker at a WCC Assembly, spoke powerfully of the looming environmental crisis as far back as 1975. The way we went about enabling the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches to become full players in our national ecumenical structure attracted interest, though regrettably not emulation, from the world body. Even on mundane matters like how to run meetings, Australians found themselves tutoring the World Council in the delicate art of consensus decision-making

We can claim, I believe, that through these seven decades, our engagement has not been without significance to the WCC itself.

But … difficulties are making themselves felt.

This relationship has never been without its problems. Through the past three decades, a number of them have become increasingly apparent. Some need to be addressed by the WCC. Others, however, are beyond anyone's control.

1. **The spiritual crisis of the West** impinges on all aspects of the churches' life, ecumenical relationships included, and there's not a lot we can do about it. You know the results: morale down, numbers down, budgets down, public impact lessened and most churches, in survival mode, focussing their attention inwards. The World Council is not alone in feeling the impact.

2. **The WCC is no longer so remarkable**. After 70 years it is just one more part of the religious landscape. And it is no longer unique, with many other organisations now playing on the same field (Eg World Christian Forum, strengthened world denominational bodies, regional ecumenical bodies, ecumenical structures dealing with mission, communication, theological education, ethics, etc). Churches cooperate on many fronts. One might even argue that the WCC has been too successful for its own good! Meanwhile, Australia's sense of isolation has been diminishing. We travel more. Our kids take gap years to meet the world. And now, as an overseas visitor remarked to me recently, the whole world lives here! No wonder Australian church people don't turn out so much for international speakers. No wonder references to a world council of churches strike fewer sparks.

3. **The WCC has developed internal problems**. These became painfully apparent, to some of us, at the time of the Canberra Assembly (1991). I summarised them, in my subsequent report to the ACC, as:

    - Confusion about the Council's identity. ["Does the WCC still understand itself first and foremost as a council of *churches*, with the (then) 318 member churches setting the priorities and determining the ethos? Or is it a network of Christian individuals gathered around an array of worthy causes, with the churches seen as the primary targets for their good intentions? The former, say the WCC's Basis, Constitution and origins. The latter, proclaim some of its current ways of work"]

    - Blurring of the Council's vision. ["Lacking the clear focus of the World Council's earlier years on what ultimately unites us, the Assembly tended to attribute ultimacy to penultimate identities and causes like age, gender, nationality and ethnic identity, with well-nigh paralytic consequences for the nominations process…. Perhaps this was a delayed manifestation of the theological confusion of many churches in recent years, coming as it does just as the WCC's pioneering generation is passing from the scene."]

    - Insufficient competence in the Council's leadership. [Those with leadership roles at the Assembly seemed chosen "for a tangled set of reasons most of which had little to do with whether candidates possessed the gifts and graces needed to direct a world council of churches". And regarding the 150 odd members of the new Central Committee, elected to run the show between assemblies, "By my estimate about 25% (of them) will land on their feet and know what they are doing. Others of course will learn. But they had better learn fast …."]

That was as I saw things in 1991. Nothing substantial had changed, when my dealings with the Council ceased a decade later. What the situation may be today is for others to say.

4. **The ecumenical scene has changed.** In 1948, the Roman Catholic Church viewed the new world body warily and kept its distance. With Vatican II, Rome became a major player (arguably, *the* major player) on the ecumenical scene. Yet its national bishops' conferences are not members of the WCC. Notwithstanding Pope Francis' impending visit to the Ecumenical Centre next month, that seems unlikely to change. Likewise, Pentecostal churches for the most part have kept their distance. Without the full participation of these two substantial parts of the Christian family, the World Council looks increasingly anomalous. Yet, for the time being anyway, it's all we have.

5. **How to do more with less** is now a major problem for the Council. Since 1948 its membership has more than doubled (147 to 348 churches). Since the 1970s, its budgets have been slashed and its staff more than halved. Tightened finances mean the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva is now being carved up for use by non-church organisations as well. Yet the high expectations placed upon the WCC remain. The situation is not sustainable, yet a solution is hard to envisage.

6. **Australia's place on the map** is not likely to change either! We are on the way to nowhere, which limits contact with Geneva-based staff. WCC-sponsored events tend to take place in cheaper venues far from here. Also, as far as the world's ecumenical structures are concerned, we are part of the Asia region. Involvement with the Christian Conference of Asia has been enormously important for our churches, but it does have a downside. When the WCC ponders who from Asia might be invited to a leadership role (Eg there have been 10 presidents from this region – India 2, Indonesia 2, Sri Lanka 2, China 1, Japan 1, Korea 2 -- but as far as I know never any thought of anyone from Australia) or to a meeting, it tends not to think of us. This seems unlikely to change. We are glad to be glad to be part of the Asian fellowship, but that's not where others sometimes see us and our participation in the World Council suffers accordingly.

There is not a lot we in Australia can do about the problems I have just outlined. But there are some issues we can and should address. I have a little list!

1. **Beyond ecumenical consumerism**

Let me quote again from my report to the ACC on the Canberra Assembly. "Australia's national inferiority complex means its churches are still inclined to think of themselves only as beneficiaries of the wider ecumenical movement rather than contributors to it as well. We need to help our people achieve a change of mindset, away from mere ecumenical consumerism towards a recognition that we ourselves may have something to give as the World Council finds its way."

Yes, as noted earlier, our churches have made some input on the world scene. But, with less reticence and more forward planning, we could make more. This has implications for the way our churches choose and prepare delegates to Assemblies, nominees for WCC committee appointments and participants in other WCC events, the requirements we place upon them for subsequent reporting back, and the way those reports should then be weighed carefully by the churches they represent.

2. **Grooming our leaders**

Linked with the above point is the need for experienced and theologically competent representatives. Taking part in a WCC Assembly, for example, is not easy at the best of times. Delegates experienced with decision-making in their home settings suddenly find themselves dealing with unfamiliar rules of debate, a multiplicity of languages, diverse denominational hang-ups, cultural sensitivities they'd never dreamt of and a workload that makes the fittest wilt. It's not a game for amateurs!

This may sound like elitism, but churches that most effectively participate in the WCC are those that identify and then prepare people to become, for the long haul, ecumenical leaders. In decades past, the world's Student Christian Movements played a key role in preparing ecumenical leadership. We can't count on diminished SCMs to do that today, so responsibility for it devolves by default upon the churches themselves.

3. **Owning our structures**

One of the problems with the old Australian Council of Churches – one we tried to fix, when transitioning to the National Council of Churches in Australia – was that it sometimes spoke and acted like a quasi-independent Christian entity *alongside* the churches. Instead, we resolved, the NCCA should be and should appear to be an embodiment of the churches themselves acting and speaking together. Heads of churches needed to be in the decision-making meetings, public statements needed to reflect the churches' views, agencies needed to be seen as the churches in action together.

Remember that scathing question Visser 't Hooft threw at me when he had me on the carpet? It was not "Don't you realise how far the WCC has come?" or "Don't you realise how much the Geneva staff has achieved?" It was "Don't you realise how far *the churches* have come?" The churches, under God, are the prime movers of the ecumenical movement. Ecumenical structures serve us badly when they do not make that crystal clear.

If national and state ecumenical councils of churches here are fully owned by our churches in that way, it will have repercussions for Australia's engagement with the world body. If they aren't, that will have repercussions too.

4. **Clarifying our vision**

As indicated, one of the problems of the world body has been a certain blurring of its ecumenical vision. I am not altogether confident that ours is currently much clearer.

Many will happily endorse ecumenism understood in terms of enhanced tolerance, better understanding, common stances on (some) social issues, and (some) ventures in cooperation – but stop there. The influential journalist John Allen exemplified this when he argued, in the *National Catholic Reporter*, that pluralism is the way of the world, churches should rejoice in the cooperation thus far achieved, and nobody should expect Christian unity this side of the Second Coming.

Slogans like “reconciled diversity” are embraced, but I suspect sometimes because they are understood – actually, misunderstood – as offering an alternative to visible unity. Their appeal, perhaps, is that released from the need to wrestle with complex issues and make substantial changes, each denomination can remain pretty much as it is while waiting for other churches to see the light and recognise it as part of the *una sancta.*

Or a commitment to the visible unity of divided churches gets subsumed into something else. My own denomination, unhappily, provides a current example. From its formation 41 years ago, the Uniting Church has had a national commission or working group specialising in ecumenical affairs. No longer. Instead, there will be an entity that deals with “seeking common ground” – common ground with other churches, common ground with other faiths, common ground in the quest for meaning with those who have no religious affiliation. This in a denomination that has unity as its very raison d’etre, when there is already widespread confusion about the very different goals of the quests for Christian unity and interfaith understanding.

The current situation points to a need to go back to basics, to rediscover ecumenism’s founding vision. As our Week of Prayer for Christian Unity recalls, the Lord’s prayer was not that his people might be friends, or cooperate, or form councils of churches. It was that they may be one, with an intimacy reflecting that of the triune God. Settling for anything less must be considered a standing denial of the gospel.

That was the conviction that put fire in the feet of our ecumenical ancestors, all those seven decades ago. That’s what led them to resolve “We intend to stay together”. And that’s what drew Australia’s churches into an engagement which was then, and remains still, a sign of hope in a divided, conflictive world.

So let me, belatedly, retract the rash words I spoke in Geneva half a century ago. Do not scrap the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This week and all it stands for remains of tremendous importance. It summons us to a vision we need to reaffirm, and embody afresh, today. For it echoes the very heart of our reconciling God.

The Revd David Gill, ordained in 1965, served on the staff of the Australian Student Christian Movement and the World Council of Churches. He was general secretary of the National Assembly

of the Uniting Church in Australia and the Australian Council of Churches (from 1994, National Council of Churches in Australia), and pastor of Kowloon Union Church, Hong Kong.