

26/94 Ecumenical Councils

(A report from a Synod-Committee.)

1. Synod resolution 26/94 reads -

“This Synod acknowledges the diverse nature of interdenominational Christian organisations within the Diocese, such as the NSW Council of Churches and the NSW Ecumenical Council.

Synod appoints a committee, consisting of Ms M. Tibbey, Deaconess M.M. Andrews, the Rev J.E. McDonald, 2 appointees of the Archbishop and 2 appointees of the Standing Committee, to report to the next session of this Synod along the following terms of reference -

- (a) the nature, membership and role of NSW Council of Churches and NSW Ecumenical Council in the diocese;
- (b) the effectiveness of these groups in presenting a Christian world view, focussing on Jesus Christ and the primacy of Scripture;
- (c) the role of such groups in promoting the social responsibilities of Christians;
- (d) the effectiveness of their relations with Government;
- (e) the relative value of membership of such organisations for the Sydney diocese.
- (f) other strategic Ecumenical involvement.”

Membership of the Committee

2. The Rev. J. McDonald, Deaconess M. Andrews, Ms M. Tibbey were appointed by Synod, the Revs B.G. Judd, B.S. George were appointed by Standing Committee and Mrs L. Hicks and the Rev J. Seddon were appointed by the Archbishop.

The NSW Council of Churches - its nature, membership and role

3. The NSW Council of Churches is the lineal descendant of the first Council of Churches in this State which was formed in 1889. In 1892 the Evangelical Council was set up and functioned for 29 years until 1921. Parallel with it, a Council for Civic and Moral Advancement lasted for six years from 1914 to 1920.

4. In 1922 the Archbishop of Sydney the Most Rev. J. C. Wright strongly urged the formation of a new Council of Churches. Addressing the Fifteenth Provincial Synod of NSW, Archbishop

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Wright said -

“I would hope that those who are keen upon the necessity of immediate evidence of our corporate Christian life would turn their attention in the direction of organising Christian effort by common councils and committees who would concentrate the whole force of Christian conscience to stem the tide of social and moral evil in our midst or to promote movements necessary for the uplift of the community.”

5. The inaugural meeting of the Council of Churches in NSW was held in April, 1925.

6. Membership is open to any Christian denomination that is committed to the Scriptures as the Word of God, and has a desire to have the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ applied to the daily life of the community. The current constituent churches are -

The Anglican Church (Diocese of Sydney)
The Presbyterian Church
The Baptist Union
The Churches of Christ
The Salvation Army
The Fellowship of Congregational Churches
The Reformed Churches of Australia (Classis of NSW)

7. The NSW Council of Churches has accepted its prophetic role to speak to the Government and the community on behalf of its constituent churches, to express distinctively Christian gospel insights. The Council's constitution defines that insight as conforming to "Evangelical Christian Truth". Over the past 70 years the Council's leadership has developed considerable expertise in its approaches to Government.

8. In commending the work of the NSW Council of Churches the Chief Secretary of the Salvation Army, Colonel Keith Parkinson stated (18/4/95) -

“The Council has well-deserved reputation for its resolute and effective dealing with cabinet ministers and government officials. It is likely that some government officials prefer a less resolute approach. The Salvation Army, however, approves the Council's firm and consistent witness.

The Gospel outreach of Radio 2CH is another valuable service which the NSW Council of Churches is able to render.”

9. In a recent letter, the Hon. Milton Morris, a former State Minister for Transport, referred to the significant impact of representations made on behalf of the Churches by the NSW Council in his day, "not only to me, but also to the cabinet of which I was a member". There are present day issues on which the hand of evangelical Christian members of parliament can be strengthened and the voice of the churches through the Council may no less significantly be heard.

10. In the light of its nature and membership, the NSW Council of Churches seeks to act as a "conscience for civic leaders" on behalf of the community as a whole (not just on behalf of the churches). In particular, the Council keeps a watchful eye on proposed legislation, acting as an advocate for the poor and disadvantaged and endeavouring to alert society to exploitation and injustice. Over the past twelve months, the Rev. Dr Ross Clifford has made more than a hundred public statements on behalf of the NSW Council of Churches on Radio 2CH. These have covered a wide range of religious, social and moral issues of local, national and international concern.

11. The Council aims as far as possible to cultivate cordial relationships with the secular authorities. This is not always achieved, possibly because Government ministers and the bureaucracy naturally prefer to deal with more pliable people not noted for a resolute stand on moral and Biblical principles.

12. The nature of the NSW Council of Churches is reflected in its membership - Christian denominations who believe in and uphold the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. Further, they desire to see the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ made known and practised in a holistic manner. To this end all constituent Churches are concerned that the teaching of the Bible should be applied to our educational system; economic and industrial relations; commercial and business life; and living conditions, including the community's leisure and recreation. An example of a recent and ongoing campaign by the Council is in relation to proposals to legalise euthanasia.

13. Accordingly the current Mission Statement of the Council reads -

"The NSW Council of Churches exists to declare to our community evangelical Christian truth, as it applies to the social, moral and spiritual well-being of our society."

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The NSW Ecumenical Council - nature, membership and role

14. Archbishop Howard Mowl was the first significant leader in the Ecumenical Movement in the Diocese of Sydney. He attended the Amsterdam Conference in 1948, and was President of the Australian Council of Churches for the better part of the 1950s. The first Council, formed in 1946, was called the Australian Committee of the World Council of Churches in Formation, with a State Council in NSW about the same time. Later National and State Councils were set up and these developed in their own right with their own Constitutions with independently appointed representatives. For many years the office of the NSW State Council was in the basement of the old Church House.

15. The Council is now one of six State Councils each having had relationships with the ACC and now linked with the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) and other ecumenical bodies. The basis of membership is set forth in the Constitution which states -

“The Council is based on acknowledgement of the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and the readiness of the churches to fulfil their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

16. The vision of all the Council's action comes out of the Lund Conference Principle, which is “to do everything together except those things which conscience forces us to do apart”. The present membership of the Council is -

The Anglican Church (NSW Dioceses)

The Antiochan Orthodox Church

The Armenian Apostolic Church

The Assyrian Catholic Apostolic Church

The Greek Orthodox Church

The Roman Catholic Church - (Dioceses of Canberra/Goulburn, Parramatta, Wagga Wagga and the Archdiocese of Sydney)

The Romanian Orthodox Church

The Serbian Orthodox Church

The Syrian Church of Antioch

The Religious Society of Friends

The Salvation Army

The Uniting Church in Australia (NSW Synod)

17. The Churches of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (NSW Assembly), The Lutheran Church, and the Roman Catholic Dioceses of Armidale and Maitland all have observer status.

18. As its Constitution states -

“The Council exists -

- (a) to bear witness to the unity of the Church as both gift and calling and, in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to promote a more profound communion (Koinonia);
- (b) to provide means whereby the churches in New South Wales may grow in the understanding and fulfilment of their common calling;
- (c) to support the churches that by joint study, consultation, reflection and action, they may confront men and women more effectively with the gospel of Jesus Christ;
- (d) to promote the unity of the Church in matters of faith and order, life and work, worship and mission;
- (e) to bear witness to the gospel by promoting dialogue with people of other faiths and ideologies in New South Wales;
- (f) to encourage understanding of, and participation in, the world-wide mission of God.”

19. The Council organises in NSW the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the Christmas Bowl Appeal for overseas relief and development and work amongst Aboriginal people in Australia (as determined by the Australian Commission for Christian World Service). The Council is also engaged in the work of resettlement of refugees in NSW.

20. The Council is directly associated with such organisations as the World Day of Prayer, Theological Students' Association, the Student Christian Movement, Prayer on Wheels, ITIM, Inter-Church Councils, Australian Church Women.

21. The Ecumenical Council operates through working groups so that the member churches can come to an understanding of other churches' attitudes. It works with local churches to promote activities. It deals with social issues raised at the Council's half-yearly or annual meetings or with those matters that are brought before it by the individual members of the Executive and agreed to by the Council or the Executive of the Council, or it responds to

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matters brought before it by governments. Such matters include community housing, environmental issues, education, issues surrounding the Olympic Games, the review of legislation affecting church property, and the most recent request, for a response on the review of Community Welfare legislation.

22. The Council serves as a resource body, providing personnel, written material and videos to those seeking information on its work. It also acts as a focus for people encouraging local areas to arrange meetings across denominational boundaries for bible study and prayer, and co-ordinating action in evangelism or social action.

Staffing, Structure and Funding

The Ecumenical Council

23. *Staffing* - The Rev. Dr Ray Williamson, an Anglican, for nine years the Council's full-time Executive Secretary, based in Sydney; Sr Loreto Conroy, full-time refugee resettlement officer; Ms Jenny Johnston (Anglican) part-time, Christmas Bowl Appeal promotion; Ms Gillian Hunt (UCA) part-time Canberra field worker; plus one full-time and two part-time administrative staff members.

24. *Structure and mode of operation* - The Council of the NSW Ecumenical Council comprises heads of churches (on either Diocesan or State basis) and representatives appointed by member churches. There are at least two one-day (Saturday) meetings held each year, one of which is held in a country region. These have an average attendance of 55-60. The Annual Meeting elects the office holders and an Executive of 12 which can co-opt a further 6 from the member churches. The Council determines the policy and program priorities. The Executive meets monthly at the Sydney office to carry out the policy of the Council and to deal with matters which arise between meetings of the Council.

25. Sub-groups of the Executive Committee are responsible for the areas of Finance, Church Faith and Life, Partnership, Social Issues, and Outreach, and a further thirteen sub-committees, such as the Refugee Program Committee, the Olympic Games Social Impact Committee, an Ecumenical Housing Committee and a Media Committee, operate under these.

26. The NSW Ecumenical Council appoints an observer to the monthly meetings of the NSW Council of Churches and this is reciprocated.

27. *Funding* - The annual budget of the NSW Ecumenical Council for 1995 is \$163,848, of which the Diocese of Sydney's budgeted contribution is \$4,300. The budgeted contribution from the churches is \$42,248 - Anglican Dioceses \$12,100, Roman Catholic Dioceses \$13,400, Uniting Church \$13,148, with \$3,100

being budgeted from other churches. These contributions are voluntary. The Council receives funding by way of a grant for education, deputation, promotion, and administrative work it undertakes for the Christmas Bowl from the NCCA's Commission for World Christian Service, amounting to \$100,000; \$12,500 for the work done on the Commission on Faith and Order and the Commission on Mission and the balance of \$9,100 comes from donations, investments and sales. A further sum of \$44,500 is received from the NCCA for the refugee resettlement officer.

The NSW Council of Churches

28. *Staffing* - The Council has no office or full-time paid staff. The Archbishop of Sydney is the Honorary President of the Council, and other heads of churches are Vice-presidents. There is a part-time paid administrative Secretary, Castle Hill Anglican layman Mr Ron Ford, and a new position from July 1995 for a part-time Public Affairs officer, Mr Wayne Magee. All other positions are unpaid. The Rev Barry George (Anglican) is the immediate past president; newly-elected president is Baptist theological lecturer the Rev. Dr Ross Clifford, who since 1993 has been presenting the social issues comments on Radio 2CH which for many years were given by the Rev Bernard Judd. The treasurer is Mr Hector MacFarlane (Presbyterian) and the assistant secretary, Mr Tim Tunbridge (Anglican).

29. *Structure and mode of operation* - The Council, consisting of the Heads of Constituent Churches and/or their elected representatives (a potential total of 43 persons), meets monthly. Its Executive Committee (14 members) also meets on a monthly basis in between Council meetings, as does the Broadcasting Committee which oversees the Christian programs on 2CH. Another sub-committee deals with education issues.

30. *Funding* - The Council's expenses are met by the Constituent Churches proportionately on the basis of their representation on the Council. For the year ending 30 April 1995 the Diocese of Sydney's contribution was \$5000.

31. *Radio 2CH* - For the past 63 years the NSW Council of Churches has been responsible for broadcasting an extensive schedule of religious material through Radio 2CH - vastly more than any other Sydney commercial radio station. Administrative changes have occurred during these six decades but the schedule of Christian broadcasting continues as in the past. In fact, since February 1995 it has been significantly increased in content. At the time of writing a cumulative total of 318,000 different people listen to this radio station during the course of a week.

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Effectiveness and relative value of diocesan membership

32. *The Ecumenical Council* seeks to build bridges between a wider grouping of churches than the membership of the Council of Churches. This Council's aim is to be obedient to Christ's high priestly prayer "that they all may be one" (John 17) and to promote and bear witness to the unity that is in Christ." (Eph. 4:1-6). There is an emphasis on the reading and hearing of the Word of God, fellowship, prayer, and a seeking of mutual understanding of the different churches' teachings and traditions.

33. The NSW Council of Churches is specifically evangelical in its charter. Evangelicals already have an essential unity. The Council's primary object according to its constitution is "to foster and make manifest to the world the essential unity of those who hold and proclaim evangelical Christian truth." In practice this has mainly been in relation to social issues. The Council acts effectively in the many matters on which there is complete agreement and does valuable work. The chief means of proclaiming the Gospel message has been through Radio 2CH and through encouraging others in their united witness.

34. On the whole, although robust debate and occasional disagreements may occur, because of their respect for the authority of Scripture and the enduring validity of Biblical moral values, the members of the Council are able to represent its member churches in making concerted approaches to government and bureaucracies, encouraging what is seen as good and opposing evil in proposed legislation or administrative decisions.

35. The Council of Churches greatly values the significant contribution made by the Diocesan representatives, who play a leading role in the Council's work and witness, both numerically and in their level of participation.

36. It is the view of this committee that both Councils play an effective role in their particular spheres. Such effectiveness cannot be measured, as Christian influence and opinion is not always acceptable to the government or the community.

Conclusion

37. The two Councils are very different in their historical origins and development, in their range of membership, their ethos and agenda. While both agencies stress that Christians must engage with the world as salt and light, reflecting kingdom values and shining as lights in the darkness, this is sometimes blurred by the ambiguous use of theological vocabulary. For example, Synod members will applaud the enthusiasm of both Councils to be "the salt of the earth and the light of the world", but when pressed,

members of each Council will often define their understanding of those phrases in differing terms, leading to different outcomes.

Recommendation

38. Because this Diocese embraces a breadth of Anglicanism within its borders, this Committee is of the opinion that it is of value for the Diocese to belong to and take an active role in both Councils.

For and on behalf of the Committee

JOHN MCDONALD
Secretary

15 July 1995