

Contemporary issues in Australian churches

Doings and thinking in churches figured quite prominently among the news during Australia's bicentennial year of 1988. This examination of that news was made by PETER BENTLEY, who, in his position at the National Catholic Research Council, was well placed to observe developments.

Among church issues which became public in 1988 were things like Christians in politics, the National Gathering, attitudes to the Bicentennial, church statistics, and the wealth of denominations (for example see "God's Realtors," *The Bulletin* Nov. 22, 1988).

Some issues and events received positive coverage while others were focused upon because of their potential scandal content. Usually the most popular issues were concerned with sexuality. The ministry of women, medical-moral matters, the sexual misadventures of clergy and *The Last Temptation of Christ* were all issues which were readily taken up by the mass media.

Some issues become public concerns because of the wider implications of the stated church view. An example was the popular coverage and reaction to the Catholic document *Instruction on Respect of Human Life in its Origins and on the Dignity of Procreation* (1987). A comprehensive discussion of the secular media's response can be found in an article by Anthony Fisher in the *Australian Catholic Record* (vol. 64, October 1987, pp400-409).

In this short survey I do not propose to concentrate upon the secular media's selection and presentation of church issues and events. Rather I will comment on the range of issues within six denominations. Many of these issues may have been reported in the secular press (particularly by religious correspondents), but certainly their reasons for doing so would be different to mine.

I have chosen not to examine the Orthodox churches. Other more qualified persons should take this challenge up. (For the beginnings of this debate see Jim Matheson's comments on multiculturalism in *Church Scene* Nov. 25, 1988 p.1) According to the 1986 Census



Catholic "religious" - continuing decline in numbers

figures the six denominations I have chosen represent 87.4 percent of the total Christian population.

The Catholic Church

The 1986 Census officially revealed that the Catholic Church had become the largest Christian denomination in Australia. 26.1 percent of Australians recorded their religion as Catholic, while the previous largest group, the Anglican Church recorded 23.9 percent.

Generally I believe that it can be argued that nearly any issue facing mainline denominations is or will become an issue for the Catholic Church. There are however specific problems and the 1980s have seen these problems become more acute. The decline in the recruit-

ment of men for training as priests has accelerated along with a continual fall in the number of those entering the religious life.

Active numbers of clergy and religious are also decreasing as more men and women serve the church in secular positions or take up specialised ministries in areas other than the traditional ones of pastoral work, teaching and hospital care. State aid is now far more a necessity than when it was first granted.

As the institutional ministry has declined other groups have come into focus. The development of team ministries, communities and covenant groups, lay and women's ministry and the beginnings of a permanent diaconate are responses to the changing



Charismatics - a major issue for Anglo-Celtic churches

church environment since Vatican II. For a wider discussion of the changes and challenges of the church see Paul Collins *Mixed Blessings*.

The development of ecumenical relations has stagnated somewhat, but the question of the common Eucharist is still a current concern.

Ecumenism is still being fostered by Catholic charismatic renewal contacts with other renewal groups. The Catholic Church, more than any other church is also being challenged by renewal and small group movements.

Another significant internal challenge has arisen from the post second world war migration to Australia. Multiculturalism is already a reality in many Catholic parishes with ethnic priests and multiple languages.

A final point of specific, but also general concern, is the role of the individual's conscience. It will be interesting to see how both popular and church positions concur.

The Anglican Church of Australia

The most pressing issue facing the Anglican Church is undoubtedly the question of the role that women should have in the institutional life of the church. Though this issue has widened to include a debate about the nature and authority of the bible, the specific issue is still the proposal to ordain women to the priesthood.

Other issues which have arisen from this proposal are the continuation of ecumenical relationships with the Catholic Church, the threat of schism, the exodus of opponents and proponents of the ordination of women and a debate about the nature of ministry and ordination (promoted especially within the Sydney Diocese).

An issue of considerable potential interest (although perhaps mainly at the grassroots) is the development of the charismatic or renewal movement within the institutional life of the church. The last few years have seen the emergence of renewal groups even within the Sydney diocese.

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1988 witnessed a bitter debate about the ministry of John Wimber and the "Signs and Wonders Movement." Anglican and Uniting Church members have been the main denominational attendees at the Signs and Wonders conferences.

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Other issues of significance include the attitude of the church to remarriage of divorced persons (in particular Anglicans, who usually end up being advised to go to a Uniting Church if they want an uncomplicated second church marriage), the communion of unconfirmed children, the compatibility of Freemasonry and Christianity (particularly in Sydney), increasing division within evangelical circles - what is an evangelical today?, decreasing census figures and the population move away from established Anglican areas to non-church areas.

The Uniting Church

The Uniting Church recorded an allegiance of 7.6 percent in the 1986 census. For a church of eleven years it has certainly become established and stereotyped. John Harrison's aptly titled book *Baptism of Fire* provides a readable and succinct account of these controversy filled years.

Generally the areas of conflict in the Uniting Church centre around social issues. (A current wider conflict at present concerns the Victorian Synod's Division of Social Justice report *I was in Prison...* The report seems to have stirred up a hornets nest with Victorian prison warders.)

Throughout 1988 Aboriginal issues and Bicentennial questioning were the dominant concerns. Whether the Uniting Church should celebrate or protest the Bicentennial year was a matter of motion and debate to little united effect. Thankfully the Church's close relationship with the Aboriginal and Islander Congress will eventually lead the way to more understanding and reconciliation.

An issue which could become the Uniting Church's equivalent of the Anglican's ordination of women is the Church's position on homosexuality. The responses of various local churches and others to the 1985 Assembly Committee report on *Homosexuality and the Church* were released in 1988.

The whole process of consultation illustrated the dimensions of belief concerning not only homosexuality, but the

nature of Christian ministry and ethics, the bible's authority, the Church's relationship with the world and the membership and/or employment of people with different beliefs and lifestyles.

While the question of the ordination of women was settled before union there are still problems of placement and acceptance. The early affirmative action policy did not really help to develop attitudinal perceptions.

Change will continue to occur especially as more clergy move into specialised non-parish ministries. This flow will increase as more Uniting Church ministers obtain higher degrees and look elsewhere for a position or ministry to suit their new professional skills.

The ordained and the non-ordained will have to accept and prepare for changes to the traditional parish ministry.

Like other mainline churches the renewal movement has made a significant impact on church life. Theologically there has been bitter debate over the practice of "second baptism".

As well as outward ecumenical challenges there is also the internal. Fundamentally though, the continuation of the uniting emphasis will be a key challenge in the next decade. The debate over the proposed introduction of bishops has wider significance than our internal church ordering. What indeed is the future of the Uniting Church?

The Presbyterian Church

The Presbyterian Church was ranked the 4th largest Christian denomination in the 1986 census (3.6 percent). Like the Uniting Church, Presbyterianism is still consolidating after the split of 1974-1977. Indeed denominational switching of both clergy and laity is a continuing problem.

Theologically the Presbyterian Church is now stereotyped as a conservative evangelical body. The dominance of the evangelical party has ensured conflict over the training and appointment of women as ministers. The 1988 General Assembly deferred the matter until the next General Assembly in 1991, by which time state assemblies and presbyteries would have discussed the issues. The continuing legal jumble over the date of the actual split over church union has only added to this potentially explosive matter.

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Traditions within this new-old church will have to be carefully discussed if further fragmentation is to be avoided.

Other Presbyterian concerns are the supply of future ministers and training procedures. Controversy has plagued even the new hymn book *Rejoice*. Is it too modern in its language and selection?

Another matter of greater debate is the compatibility of Freemasonry and Christianity (as with the Anglican Church). All these areas lead to the question: "Is the Presbyterian Church renewing its traditions or changing its practices?"

The Baptist Church

The Baptist Church is the equal 6th largest Christian denomination according to the 1986 census. The Orthodox Churches claim 2.7 percent and the

Baptist and Lutheran Churches 1.3 percent each.

In an editorial early in 1988, the Rev Tom Cardwell stated: "In recent years Baptists have been divided by some matters of controversy". He cautioned readers to be aware of the devil's diversionary tactics and pointed out the need for a spiritual resurgence. (*The Australian Baptist*, April 27, 1988.)

These comments came after some months of heated debate about the charismatic movement, especially within the Baptist Church. Healings, speaking in tongues and the testing of spirits were discussed, praised and ridiculed. In the April 3 edition of *The Australian Baptist* the editor closed the correspondence on the matter.

Interestingly the First National Baptist Charismatic Conference was held in 1987. It is unlikely that this issue will go away and the future may witness fragmentation.



Some Baptists advocate and practice social activism

Generally Baptists are stereotyped as conservative Christians. However, the links to American fundamentalists and the promotion of creation science are not universal. Though many Baptists would be in favour of Bicentennial celebrations there is still a movement of support for Aboriginal rights and culture, especially in Victoria. Two state churches - those of South Australia and Victoria - can ordain women - even though other states may be opposed.

A key question for Baptists today is their continuing distinctiveness and identity. Ken Manley in his paper "Australian Baptists Today" (in M. Petras ed. *Australian Baptists, Past and Present*, 1988) covers this issue and also a host of other concerns.

A final point which is a concern for all the denominations mentioned, is that the rise of non-Christian religions since 1945 has paralleled the fall of the Christian numbers.

The percentage of Baptists as recorded in the census returns has remained very stable, but in real terms this does not indicate positive growth. There are probably as many active Muslims and Hindus in Australia as there are active Baptists.

The question of which groups or denominations are minorities is now not only related to the generally perceived sects and non-Christian religions. The challenge to dialogue and theologise in a multi-faith context will overtake the search for identity and the Australian inculturation movement before it becomes established.

The Lutheran Church

The Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) has remained a small but stable denomination. Numerically, it is similar to the Baptist Church and facing the same pressures. The LCA is more established in Queensland and South Australia. In November 1988 the Lutherans celebrated 150 years "in this part of the world" with a Festival of Faith. Also in the year a new corporate logo was introduced. The Christian cross incorporates the Southern Cross.

Signs of change or challenge are evident in the LCA. In 1988 a committee was appointed to study the Church's use of the gifts of women in its total ministry, and also Scriptural principles in relation to the ordination of women.

In July however the President of the LCA affirmed that women cannot be termed Elders yet because that title is only given to men in the bible.

The questions of women's ministry is practically linked to the declining num-

ber of Lutheran pastors. According to a report from the "LCA Men-for-the Ministry Campaign" if the next seven years are the same as the last then the LCA will be short 55 positions (it is now 25 short). A new four-year course designed for men over 40 commences in 1989.

Other issues which have surfaced include the question of bishops (their title and role); ecumenical relations, especially with the Anglican and Uniting Churches and the involvement of Lutheran pastors in inter-church marriage. Guidelines for pastors on co-celebrating were released in late 1988.

Like the Presbyterian Church, the LCA is concerned with its spiritual

state. A report "Vision 90" depicts the basic problem as Lutherans seeing themselves as people of God. More common difficulties include an ageing church population.

It should be quite obvious that there are many common problems and issues facing the Christian denominations in Australia. Hopefully we will be able to dialogue, examine and learn from each other's experiences rather than continuing to rely on the limited experiences and resources of our own particular denomination. All our denominations are part of the Australian Church and indeed of the Church Universal.

Steps to the Seventh WCC Assembly

As of this month, we begin a regular feature which will detail preparations for the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, to be held in Canberra in February, 1991. The material has been prepared by Sue Williamson of the WCC's Australian office.

Planning for the Seventh Assembly is well under way. There are just two years before the event which will bring together some 4,000 people from 307 member churches from every part of the world.

One of the first major preparative meetings for the Assembly will take place after Easter when 39 people from churches around the world who make up the Planning Committee, will gather in Canberra under the chairmanship of the Rev Dr Avery Post, President of the United Churches of Christ in the USA.

They will arrive in Sydney on March 29. A liturgical welcome on Thursday evening, March 30, at the Pitt Street Uniting Church, is open to anyone who would like to attend.

Following the Canberra meeting, members of the WCC Committee will be speaking in different cities around Australia. The WCC President, Dr Emilio Castro, will address the Australian Anglican Bishops' Conference on April 8.

Also on April 8, there is day for parishes who have joined the "Assembly Line" to meet with Dr Avery Post and the Rev William Perkins at the Strathfield Campus of the Catholic College of Education.

How you can be involved:

Parishes are invited to "join the Assembly line". This will mean them joining in prayer for the Assembly, being kept in touch with preparations, having the opportunity to have speakers from the Assembly visit them, participate in the study programme and also to send someone to participate in the visitors' programme at the Assembly.

Already committees are being set up to prepare youth and women's activities for the Assembly and to prepare for the enormous task of providing for media coverage before and during the Assembly. A creative arts consultation is taking place in Canberra in March.

If you want to be involved, contact:

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