

The state of the Christian cause in Australia

A paper prepared for the Australia's Christian Heritage National Conference, at the invitation of Professor Stuart Piggin

In offering a view of the state of the Christian cause in Australia, I do so like a boy who has shinned up a tree outside the football ground, watching the action through a gap between the grandstands, and trying to judge by the crowd reaction which way things are going when the ball disappears out of sight. With that disclaimer, what do I see? How does the Christian cause appear to be faring, from my particular vantage point up the 'tree' that is just one national Christian network?

But first, what is the Christian cause? Is it the survival of the church? Is it the 'success' of the church? Is it the maintenance of whatever power the church has in the decision-making structures of society? Is it the proclamation of the gospel? Is it social transformation? Is it the Kingdom of God? Our answer to that question shapes how we think we're going.

For me the key questions are not about how many people are 'going to church', or whether the church is losing its status in society, but whether the followers of Jesus, individually and corporately, are living in a way that constitutes evidence of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Amongst other things, this will be manifested in

- the quality of relationships within the church - unity, love, reconciliation;
- our attitudes to others - love, empathy, respect;
- our ability to express the gospel persuasively - in terms that are true, winsome and make sense of people's personal experience, and the global realities around us; and
- how we love and serve our neighbours – especially the poor and the vulnerable.

What follows is just a list of observations and guesses about the state of play, from my perch in the tree.

Responses to marginalisation

The marginalisation of the church and Christian beliefs has arguably been good for the church in a number of ways.

There seems to be a growing recognition that 'going it alone' and concentrating exclusively on our own distinctives is a 'luxury' we can't afford in the face of a common threat. In some countries at least, where the church is actually a persecuted minority, broad ecumenical collaboration that includes say Catholics, evangelicals, Orthodox and others is more common than it is here. We know that the early church grew dramatically in the face of suffering. Perhaps it should be no surprise if the marginalisation of the church has a galvanising effect on our willingness to work together.

There is a growing willingness to collaborate across denominational and other categories, certainly at the local level where some really creative things are happening by way of joint initiatives to reach and serve local communities. Prayer retreats draw together pastors from different traditions. Overseas missions and locally based parachurch bodies are establishing working arrangements with local churches to access resources and to implement programs.

Theologically, evangelicals and Catholics find common ground in opposition to some social trends, not just in predictable personal issues such as marriage and family, but in relation to major public policy matters from industrial relations to the treatment of asylum seekers. Global issues such as the rise of radical Islam, poverty, and war reveal more areas of agreement and arenas of joint effort, pretty much across the spectrum.

The Micah Challenge campaign, initiated by evangelical aid organisations but actively supported by a broad coalition of churches, exemplifies an openness to working together across old divides on a level usually reserved in the past for a Billy Graham campaign. The Micah Challenge aims to hold the government to its commitment to the UN's Millennium Development goals, including the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. It reflects the growing consensus about the importance of justice in the total biblical framework, as evangelicals have steadily recaptured over recent decades their historic commitment to a wholistic gospel.

From the beginning when chaplains were appointed to the colony and acted as magistrates as well as parsons, the church has been linked in various ways with 'the establishment', and enjoyed privileged status in relation to laws relating to education, taxation and so on. Today the church has to argue its case at every point. It's good for us. Campaigns like Jubilee 2000 (an international campaign led by Christians for the cancellation of the unpayable debts of the world's poorest nations) and the Micah Challenge have demonstrated that the church can win a hearing and exercise leadership in the public sphere. There are other recent signs as well, like the invitation to the Archbishop of Sydney to give the Boyer Lectures, and the impact of a remarkably unified church voice on issues such as the treatment of asylum seekers, and industrial relations.

At the same time it has to be said that other responses are less positive, arguably driven sometimes by fear rather than faith. It's difficult to avoid the impression that the politics of fear, in the face of Islamic fundamentalism, the flow of asylum seekers and the threat of terror have found fertile ground amongst some Christians as well as the wider community. The loss of the privileged status of Christianity, and the ascendancy of 'tolerance' as some kind of ultimate ethic, act as a subtle inhibitor to the confident advocacy of biblical values.

It would be odd not to mention the divisive issue of homosexuality in the churches, especially the ordination of practising homosexuals. If homosexuality is the central focus of our attention we are in deep trouble. Yet it is a big issue to be sure, both ethically and theologically, pointing up as it does deep underlying contradictions about how we understand the church's relationship with Scripture and culture.

If theological conservatives are perhaps vulnerable to fear about moral issues and their children, and to pharisaism in the weight they put on certain sins, theological liberals are vulnerable to the fear of being out of step with the culture, and the temptation to accommodate too readily to the prevailing climate of relativism which has clearly made deep incursions into the church, both among theologians and the people in the pews.

The shape of the church

A huge variety of expressions make generalisation almost impossible. Much of church culture is quite out of touch, so that vast numbers of people would sooner risk life and limb than enter a church building on a Sunday morning. That includes churches of all kinds, contemporary as well as traditional.

But there is also a growing 'missional' character to parts of the church. This is most easily seen perhaps in the 'emerging church', which has cut loose radically from much church tradition. The attendance of 600 people at 'Dangerous Stories', the first national 'emerging church conference' in July 2005, testifies to the vitality of the movement, and its determination to find more culturally relevant and missionally effective ways of 'being church'.

The concern for effective mission and evangelism is not exclusive to the emerging church, even though it takes very different forms elsewhere. Some of the large 'mega-churches' are anything but countercultural, and yet they do have a focus on evangelism and mission, on

reaching their communities. Equally there are traditional churches clearly focused on evangelism, the Sydney Anglican diocese being the most prominent, but with a different approach again. But nothing less than radically new forms will reach far beyond the church.

Evangelism retains its status as the ugly sister in large parts of the church. A major national congress on evangelism in 2004 brought together several hundred enthusiasts, and a diverse range of offerings reflected some creative thinking about evangelism in different contexts. The Alpha Course – a series of small group discussions aimed at helping people explore the Christian faith – has been taken up by hundreds of churches, and has undoubtedly been effective for bringing into a vital faith many people already in churches or on the fringes of the church.

It's difficult though to avoid the conclusion that the church as a whole is still rather short on ideas and conviction about communicating the good news of Jesus to contemporary Australians. Reaching people on the fringes of society especially, as Jesus did, is another story. The 'preaching model' is not going to work for them.

Many parachurch agencies are doing good work in all sorts of ways. Tremendous pioneering work has been done by groups like the 'Community of Hope' at alternative spirituality festivals, where the time-honoured principles of cross-cultural mission are being implemented – studying and understanding the culture, then contextualising and communicating the gospel in the terms of that culture.

It's been suggested that the best thing many of us can do may be simply to become more aware of where God is active in our own lives and spheres of action and relationships. Then sharing our faith and sharing our lives become intermingled in the context of everyday relationships and conversation, where life and faith can make sense of each other.

Denominations will continue, but denominationalism is no longer the key locus of identity and loyalty for more and more Christians. People go wherever they can find something that seems to fit with their personal or family needs, temperament, theology and other factors, and congregations look for resources and models wherever they can access them, whether on the internet, or as is often the case, in other networks.

The shift away from denominationalism is illustrated by places like Tabor College. Founded in Adelaide by Dr Barry Chant as a multi-denominational charismatic training centre, Tabor has campuses in Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Perth, with firm charismatic roots but a curriculum, faculty and student body that is quite diverse. The growth in student numbers (around 1,500 around Australia) is a sign of the breakdown of stereotypes about charismatic and Pentecostal theology and spirituality. It is also a sign of the missional focus of hundreds of young people, and a commitment to undergoing training that is grounded in the bible but with a strong practical component.

In such places the polarisations between 'word' and 'spirit', Reformed and Pentecostal, the rational and the experiential are being broken down. Perhaps that would have happened a lot sooner if the gulf between the average church and the work of global mission had not been so great. Returned missionaries from overseas know well the inadequacy of a one-sided rationalistic 'western' approach, and the reality of spiritual powers that challenge and are challenged by the gospel.

Concerning that 'gulf' between churches and mission agencies, a landmark statement was issued by a group of mission leaders at a national missions forum in 2004, expressing 'sincere regret for the tendency of many mission agencies in past years to ignore or supplant the rights of churches in regard to mission efforts.' It was well received in the churches, and may prove to be a stimulus to greater things in the future.

The shape of things in global mission is changing. A large number of 'sending' agencies, both denominational and non-denominational, continue to be deeply engaged in mission overseas, often in very challenging and hostile environments. While there are fewer long-term 'career' missionaries, there are more and more people going on 'short-term missions' of up to twelve months. For some it leads to long-term work overseas. For many it creates a passion for effective mission 'at home'. No doubt for others it is a good and worthwhile holiday and not much more. Alongside all that, Australia has become a 'receiving' country for missionaries from other cultures, and we should take advantage of that.

Given the multicultural society we live in, it's still pretty hard to find much in the way of strong intentional multicultural congregations. It seems a pity that the chance to demonstrate the inclusiveness of the church universal goes begging, with all the enrichment that could mean for the church, and the statement it could make to the community.

Amongst many evangelicals at least, there's a yearning for a deeper spirituality based less on activism and more on reflection; utilising the arts and beauty and silence; finding a place for meditation on Scripture, not just the intellectual apprehension of truth. Centres for the exploration of such themes, spiritual retreats and other ministries have sprung up. Many have discovered Catholic traditions of worship and contemplation and found them helpful. People in stressful ministry, including clergy, need a spirituality that will sustain them for the long term. Many have dropped out, burned out.

The Indigenous church

The fact that Aboriginal Australians are arguably the most evangelised, most disadvantaged and most neglected people in the nation constitutes an enormous challenge to the church's credibility, past present and future. Despite the mistakes of Christian missions, and some indefensible attitudes and actions by Christian people which remain a blot on our history, the church generally took a far more humane approach to the Indigenous people in the 'mission' era than the secular world, and outstanding individuals stood out gloriously as their friends and advocates.

That the Christian faith remains so strong among our Indigenous people today is a tribute, amongst other things, to the depth of their faith and their capacity to forgive. Still, Indigenous pastors and theologians are barely heard of in the wider church. Yet they have studied the scriptures assiduously and articulate a theology that has been carefully contextualised in their own culture. They have much to teach the rest of us. The work of innumerable Indigenous Christians in welfare work, prison visiting and pastoral care (including conducting all too many funerals), is almost entirely unpaid and unknown. Yet it is a glowing testimony to the power of the gospel.

The recent formation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian Alliance is a hopeful sign. Established with the support of Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal Christians, it is a landmark collaboration. It is to be hoped that it is the beginning of a new era in which Indigenous people find a united voice into the rest of the church, and into the public arena in which the problems of remote Aboriginal communities in particular have been so prominently, so justifiably and yet so selectively and sensationally aired in recent times.

By every social indicator you can think of the Aboriginal people of this nation are severely disadvantaged. If God is especially concerned about the poor and hates the worship of those who ignore the plight of the oppressed, the situation of Indigenous Australians – those closest to us - must surely become a higher priority for the rest of the church as a matter of urgency.

This is an opportunity for the church to lead. Patronising and simplistic solutions flow from well-meaning but poorly informed politicians and bureaucrats, and sometimes from Christians as well. But the church could and should lead the way by respecting, listening to,

empowering and resourcing Indigenous Christian leaders, who are more than capable of coming up with strategies that will work to the advantage of their people.

In his 2006 synod address Bishop of Gippsland John McIntyre said:

‘It should come as no surprise in a country whose national anthem fails to recognise any spiritual aspiration, and merely rejoices in the material abundance and physical beauty of our wealthy land, that our response to what is essentially a spiritual issue is so vacuous. Our failure to respond to the indigenous peoples of Australia with appropriate acts of reconciliation such as acknowledgement of injustice, apology, repentance and restitution, is a spiritual failure about which the church cannot remain silent.

‘According to the ancient prophets, where there is no justice in the land, there is no healing for the land. The open wound on the soul of this country is our failure to redress the injustices perpetrated on its indigenous peoples, and our land will be healed only when there is true reconciliation with them. So-called "practical reconciliation" (the present government policy that rejects symbolic expressions of reconciliation and attempts instead to address the immediate disadvantage of Indigenous people) ‘not only falls far short of the demand for justice, it brings the word "reconciliation" into disrepute in the community, and leads to an understandable cynicism in the minds of many, especially and understandably the minds of our Indigenous sisters and brothers. If we in the church claim to be able to give a lead in matters of spirituality within the life of our nation, we must lead the way in ensuring true reconciliation.’

Schools

The church always has an ambivalent relationship to the world. The principle of being ‘in the world, but not of it’ requires thoughtful engagement. But there can be no doubt that the church, as ‘salt and light’, is supposed to make a difference by its presence.

The increasingly strident secularisation of society in recent decades has quite properly bothered the church. Schools are understandably perceived as a critical arena in which society’s values are inculcated, though their influence is easily exaggerated. Anyway the perception that government schools are an increasingly hostile environment for Christian values has seen a flight by parents/children and of course teachers to a multiplicity of new Reformed or theologically conservative Christian schools..

However understandable the desire to protect one’s children, the effect of this exodus has been a correspondingly large gap in the Christian presence in government schools. We’ll never know what the long-term effects of that have been. However the fact is now that parents without Christian convictions are increasingly seeking out Christian schools, because they represent more conservative values and a ‘safer’ environment.

Hopefully this may prove an opportunity to redress the balance somewhat, as more future leaders of the country are exposed to a Christian world-view at school. What a challenge to Christian schools to ensure that they do not become accessible only to the wealthy, or narrow and doctrinaire. Meanwhile many of the larger (Protestant at least) ‘church schools’ could do with some ‘re-consecration’ to the values of the Kingdom of God. It’s happened in places. The Catholic schools have probably always been more intentional about that.

By contrast remarkable opportunities have opened up in government schools for chaplaincy. Huge growth has occurred in Queensland, where chaplaincy is a joint project of local churches with Scripture Union having the oversight. The system differs from state to state, but the demand from schools grows, reflecting both the enormous pressures and demands on school staff, and the ‘welfare’ demands created by the personal stress in the lives of many students as a result of social breakdown and dysfunctional family settings.

There have been some great examples of proactive service to local schools by local church communities. These are real signs of hope, with much more that could be done.

Political engagement

The last federal election was conspicuous for the amount of attention paid to the Christian vote, or more particularly, to what was perceived as the 'religious right'. Christian involvement in political life is of course nothing new, but the possibility of the balance of power in the Senate being held by a Family First senator from a Pentecostal church provoked intense scrutiny.

The media was unwilling or unable to bother with finer distinctions and tended to describe the milieu that Family First had come from as the Australian equivalent of the American 'Religious Right'. The labels 'evangelical' and 'fundamentalist' were thrown around without any understanding of the differences, or whether they really applied. But the election of Senator Fielding made people sit up, and the much publicised attendance of politicians from both sides at Hillsong in Sydney reflected a new awareness amongst politicians that there was a Christian vote that needed to be wooed.

The context of growing conservative Christian involvement in the political process is much broader than Family First, and the establishment of the Australian Christian Lobby in the last few years, built on the strong profile and credibility of Brigadier Jim Wallace, is a key factor. ACL has built up deserved respect among federal and state parliamentarians, no doubt due in part to its careful building of relationships and a philosophical commitment to a bi-partisan approach. As a result of their work a new level of communication has opened up between government and the churches, from lobbying in Canberra to 'meet the candidates' meetings sponsored by local churches.

Of course there is a diversity of views when it comes to what a Christian position might be in relation to particular legislation. A key to whether the church will be able to build effectively on any new-found awareness of the Christian vote will be its ability to engender agreement and collaboration (speaking if not with one voice, then with as few conflicting voices as possible); and its ability to develop convincing policies and the necessary political nous, as well as discern the proper place for compromise on a case by case basis.

The purpose must be not to gain or retain power or privilege for the church, but a fair go for the people - to advocate for the justice which is implicit in the gospel of the Kingdom. It's an expression particularly of a concern for fair treatment for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the oppressed, the 'alien', the vulnerable. Children, the unborn, refugees, low paid workers, religious and other marginalised minorities, families, the environment - the list of concerns which are obvious candidates for a Christian voice to be heard is long.

Of course the mainline churches have a long and credible history of advocacy for the needs of the poor. At the same time the ever increasing privatisation of welfare and the enormous commitment of the churches to programs now heavily dependent on government funding carries the risk of succumbing to the dictates of political correctness in order to maintain funding and services. Another problem is the disconnection between the welfare-type ministries of the churches and the local congregation.

Does the client at a church-sponsored employment agency get treated with greater dignity? Is the voice of advocacy muted when there is a perceived risk of losing government funding? Does the average church member have any direct involvement in the community services conducted in the name of the church, and get enriched and educated and blessed in the process? To what extent are Christian ethics and the fruit of the Spirit noticed by clients in the church welfare sector?

In the public arena – whether it is national politics or feeding the hungry at a soup kitchen, the ordinary person should be able to see that the followers of Jesus are ‘on their side’, just as Jesus was.

Increased political involvement carries with it the challenge to develop credible policy positions. Hopefully a ‘Public Theology Network’ that has been meeting over the last year or so, linking a number of theological and ethical institutions and ‘think-tanks’, will reinforce the good work being done already by the participating bodies.

Faith in the workplace

There is an encouraging and growing interest in what is variously referred to by such terms as ‘Faith in the Workplace/Marketplace’, ‘The Church Scattered’ (as opposed to ‘gathered’), the ‘Sunday/Monday Connection’ and other terms. The central conviction is the obvious but neglected one that faith belongs in everyday life. The ‘workplace’ is seen not just as a place for Christian witness, but as a place where faith ‘belongs’, where biblical perspectives can be brought to bear on issues of management, business ethics and a host of other things.

Such thinking is not new, but what is new is the number of networks, books and training events focused on the idea. It has wide implications for church leaders, shifting the focus from what members can do ‘for the church’ to what they can do ‘as the church’ in their everyday occupations. This is not necessarily a welcome idea to those whose sense of fulfilment and success is tied up almost exclusively with what happens on church property. But let’s hope the movement multiplies.

The world in the church

Almost everything above has been about the church in the world. But the reality is that the world – that is, the way the world thinks - can get into the church as well. The ‘prosperity doctrine’ is an obvious example, at one end of the spectrum. But so is the rejection of central Christian beliefs by others who find them now too unscientific or out of touch with the culture.

Some of the shrinking parts of the church are tempted to adopt a worldly ‘failure mentality’ that comfortably denies any real expectation that God is alive and active and even making some demands. Some of the growing parts seem to have adopted a ‘success mentality’ and a leadership paradigm that sees the pastor as the Chief Executive Officer, content only with ‘measurable outcomes’ like numbers of people in church or dollars in the budget, or perhaps, to be fair, the number of people in small groups or discipleship classes.

The scandal of abuse in the church is an enormous disgrace. Whether it is sexual abuse or other abuses of power by the strong against the weak, so much damage has been done to people. Further, it brings the church into disrepute and makes it harder than ever for the average person to see the church as a place of goodness, safety and hope. It’s a rebuke when the world at large has to lead the church to deal properly with such things.

Perhaps the most crucial way in which we have absorbed the world into the church is in our independent, competitive stance towards each other. To quote a recent impassioned letter in *Zadok Perspectives* from a former missionary doctor, ‘The New Testament makes plea after plea for the church to act together... the church is the largest grassroots organisation in Australia – and we have the ability to bring social change... we need to act together.’

Hope at the margins

It seems that new initiatives and insights almost invariably occur at the margins, where ordinary people are face to face with the issues of life. On the fringes of the church there are innumerable small, brave, creative, risky, exhilarating, godly, hopeful things happening.

Community based expressions of church, experiments with media and technology, incarnational mission in a hundred forms – you name it. They are often initiated and led by highly motivated and extremely able young people who are often on the fringe of the church themselves.

What if the trend of world events and the progressive marginalisation of the church in Australia were to

- send us back to the scriptures in a new way;
- help us empathise with other marginalised groups;
- drive us to a new level of concern and prayer for the persecuted church world wide;
- shake us out of our affluent complacency to do and to seek justice, local and global;
- confront us with our spiritual poverty and open us up to spiritual revival;
- awaken our appreciation of our union in Christ and our love for each other;
- free us from captivity to our own traditions and the fear of nonconformity; and
- galvanise us for creative mission and evangelism?

Why not? It's all happening here and there.

A prayer to close: Lord, how do you see it? What are you saying to us?

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