

PRESENTATION ON ECUMENICAL AND INTERFAITH RELATIONS IN NSW

(11 DIOCESES INCLUDING CANBERRA/GOULBURN)

All Catholic Dioceses in NSW are members of the NSW Ecumenical Council and keep in touch with the work of the Council by attending meetings, and organising seminars and workshops at a Diocesan and Parish level. Keeping the lines of communication open between the churches is of paramount importance, stressing what we have in common, rather than what divides us. A brochure outlining the member churches and activities of the NSW Ecumenical Council is included with this presentation.

Catholic clergy and lay people are often invited to be present at local, state and federal government events. These occasions present a wonderful opportunity to begin dialogue with people of other faiths and can often be the beginning of fruitful ecumenical relations.

Because of the recent installation of new Bishops, in some Dioceses Ecumenical Commissions are in the process of being re-formed or are still to be established. In all Dioceses we are supported by communities who share the Good News with joy and love.

This presentation includes an overview of the collaborative work of the Catholic Dioceses of Broken Bay and Maitland-Newcastle with the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle and an outline of Ecumenical relations in the Bathurst Diocese.

CATHOLIC AND ANGLICAN RELATIONS.

The Three Commissions

First some background to what is known in Ecumenical circles in the Broken Bay, Central Coast and Newcastle regions as “The Three Commissions.”

The Maitland-Newcastle Catholic Diocesan Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission was established in 1995 by Bishop Leo Clarke and was ratified by Bishop Michael Malone following his installation as Bishop. The Diocese, of 50 Parishes, encompasses the NSW regions of Lake Macquarie and the Hunter and Manning Valleys. The Cathedral and Diocesan Centre are situated in Newcastle. The Broken Bay Catholic Diocesan Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission was established in 1997 by Bishop David Walker. This Diocese, of 39 Parishes encompasses the Northern Suburbs of Sydney and the Central Coast of NSW. The Cathedral is situated in St. Ives. The Ecumenical Commission of the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle was established in 1997 by Bishop Roger Herft. The Diocese of 64 Parishes covers the same area as the Maitland-Newcastle Catholic Diocese with the addition of the Central Coast region. Bishop Graeme Rutherford is the Assistant Bishop for the Central Coast.

In 1997 these three Commissions met together for the first time and have continued to do so twice yearly with the Bishops present. These meetings of the Three Commissions are a wonderful opportunity for members and their Bishops to share their joys and hopes for Ecumenism in their Dioceses.

Two Bishops Dialogue

One of the unique initiatives of the group is the presentation in various regions, of the Two Bishops Dialogue. Each year the Catholic and Anglican Bishops meet in areas of the Dioceses to discuss mutual and relevant topics of interest in the community. In Broken Bay and Central Coast the Commissions select the topics. In the Maitland-Newcastle and the Newcastle Dioceses the community are invited to submit written questions which they wish to be answered. There is always some time allocated for questions from the audience. Quite large crowds attend these events.

Other Initiatives

In all three Dioceses, Catholic and Anglican, some Parishes participate in shared Advent and Lenten Services and Study Groups. Joint Anglican/Catholic Parish Pastoral Council meetings have also been held in some Parishes. Members of the Three Commissions are encouraged to suggest this in their home Parishes.

In 2001 and again this year the Catholic and Anglican Clergy have participated in a combined meeting. Father Gerard Arbuckle was the keynote speaker at the meeting this year. The Head of the local Presbyterian Church was present, and also a local lawyer who spoke about privacy issues. Those attending see this as an occasion to renew friendships and to develop new friends. They are enthusiastic about continuing these meetings and have resolved to do so once a year.

In 2002 members of AUSTARC, Bishop Graeme Rutherford, Bishop David Walker and Father Richard Lennan were keynote speakers at forums in Newcastle, North Sydney and the Central Coast to discuss some aspects of ARCIC documents and their relevance to local communities. Plans are underway to present similar forums this year. A combined service was held in Singleton in June to celebrate Catholic/Anglican reconciliation. Since 1998 the Three Commissions have frequently celebrated Catholic/Anglican reconciliation, usually on the Feast of the Ugandan Martyrs.

While the above events are organised by The Three Commissions all are supported and encouraged by each individual Commission and in particular by our Bishops. The Ecumenical and Interfaith spirit is alive and well in the areas north of "the Bridge".

Two Bishops Trust

In 1998, Bishop Roger Herft (Anglican Diocese of Newcastle) and Bishop Michael Malone (Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle) with The Samaritans and the Saint Vincent de Paul Society established the Two Bishops Trust. The Trust aims to inspire and unite the whole community to find workable, just and creative solutions to unemployment in the Hunter region of NSW.

The Trust believes that every person is entitled to a life of dignity. By working collaboratively with other like-minded organisations and individuals, the Trust aims to relieve the distress of unemployed people and low fixed income earners by helping them to help themselves.

An Advisory Committee of Hunter people representing various sectors of the community assists the Trustees. Currently the Trust has three paid project officers in Windale, Muswellbrook and Cessnock (areas of high unemployment) and a Hunter-wide project development officer. Projects funded through the Trust are currently managed by the Samaritan Foundation.

Project Centres have been established through the generous assistance of the entire community and the financial support of local organisations and government. These Centres provide creative services and support programmes which seek to nurture self-empowerment and dignity in the minds, hearts and daily lives of people who are unemployed or on low fixed incomes. Key elements of the Trust are community building and development, individual skill development, one-to-one mentoring, business development and experiential learning.

The promotion and development of a cooperative community spirit is helping to draw the community together, giving them a sense of pride, hope and direction in life.

In the House of Representatives on June 3, 2003, Ms Jill Hall, Member for Shortland, spoke at length about the work of The Two Bishops Trust. She was requesting funding for a program targeting unemployed men and women between the age of 16 and 55. The program will establish partnerships between community, government and the private sector for local employment building construction developments.

Held annually in spring, the Festival of Sharing aims to raise awareness and funds for the work of the Two Bishops Trust. The Festival is an opportunity for parishes, schools, community and business houses to host awareness-raising and fundraising activities in support of the Two Bishops Trust.

The people of the Hunter Region are nationally renowned for their spirit of cooperation and generosity. The Two Bishops Trust calls on the whole community to unite to combat poverty and unemployment.

OTHER CHRISTIAN CHURCHES.

We are delighted to have Cardinal Edward Cassidy living in Newcastle since his retirement from the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome. In Newcastle on 13 May this year, Cardinal Cassidy and Pastor Michael Grosas of the Newcastle Hunter Lutheran Parish participated in a Dialogue on the Joint Declaration of Justification between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation.

Following the Canberra Assembly of the WCC in 1991, fourteen delegates who attended from the Hunter Region formed Action for Churches Together in Solidarity.

(ACTS) This gave stimulus to the previous ecumenical activity in the region that has been continuous since 1948 when a branch of WCC was established. The initial membership of ACTS embraced the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting churches and the Society of Friends. ACTS work is supported and endorsed by the Hunter Heads of Churches. The group has conducted the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity since 1993 and Heads of Churches participate in the Service. Greek Orthodox, Salvation Army, Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran, Church of Christ, Seventh Day Adventist and Assemblies of God are now active participants. ACTS members were instrumental in the formation of both Catholic and Anglican Ecumenical Commissions.

Articles about Australia appear regularly in the English Journal of the Association of Interchurch Families, thanks to a member of the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle Ecumenical Commission. She and her husband, a member of the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle Ecumenical Commission, have been attending meetings of the Association since 1998 in Geneva. They have also attended international meetings in Northern Ireland, Edmonton and hopefully will attend this year in Rome. In 1999 a branch of the Association was established in the Newcastle region of which the Catholic and Anglican Bishops and the head of the Presbytery of the UCA are patrons.

The Heads of Churches in Newcastle all meet on a regular basis to discuss relationships with each other and ways in which they may co-operate together in giving Christian witness in the life of the city and the Hunter Valley. One example of that level of co-operation is that the Heads of Churches are negotiating with the Newcastle City Council to erect a Christian symbol on a prominent part of The Foreshore in Newcastle as a tangible sign of the importance of the Christian Churches in the life of the city.

In keeping with the 1993 Directory for Ecumenism, in 1999 Bishop Michael Malone published guidelines for Sacramental Sharing in the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle entitled "Real Yet Imperfect" and a more comprehensive document "Guidelines for Sacramental Sharing." Those involved with the Interchurch Families Association assisted in these publications. "Blessed and Broken" published by Archbishop Bathersby in Brisbane was the first such document to be published followed in 1998 by the Rockhampton Diocese guidelines and "One Body Broken" by Bishop David Walker of the Broken Bay Diocese. The Maitland-Newcastle documents are available on www.mn.catholic.org.au.

THE BATHURST DIOCESE

The Catholic Diocese of Bathurst is made up of 21 parishes and covers the central mid-western part of the state of New South Wales, to the west of the Great Dividing Range of mountains. The Cathedral is situated in Bathurst, approximately 220 km west of Sydney, and itself lying in the southeast of the diocesan area. Bathurst is a rural diocese, with three main rural cities (Bathurst, Orange & Dubbo) of around 35,000 inhabitants each, several towns of 8-10 thousand inhabitants, and the remainder of the area containing many smaller towns and villages, down to only a few hundred people. The settlement is sparser in the north and west. The Catholic population would be around 36% of the total population of under 200,000.

The city of Bathurst is also the headquarters of an Anglican diocese, which also comprises the northern part of the Catholic diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes. The Uniting Church is well established, with small pockets of continuing Presbyterian churches, and a significant but waning Lutheran presence in several areas. There are many strong Baptist congregations throughout the area, as well as an ever-increasing number of Pentecostal and neo-evangelical churches, mostly in the larger towns and cities. The Salvation Army would be present and active in most of the medium to larger towns. There is also a small scattered Orthodox population, with a Greek Orthodox parish in Dubbo. Many of the smaller towns have only Catholic or Anglican clergy resident, and quite a few none at all. Distance and smallness of communities present difficulties for church life in much of the diocese, not to mention in Ecumenical endeavours.

The whole diocesan area has a significant Aboriginal population, up to almost 25% in some areas. Bathurst, Orange and Dubbo all have University campuses, albeit small. Agriculture and light industry (with some mining) would provide the mainstay of most of the local area. The larger towns have a growing multi-faith population: Bathurst has a mosque, and there are small but significant Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Baha'i populations in many of the centres.

Much of the ecumenical activity present is of the 'grass-roots' variety, occurring locally and involving co-operation between churches on a community level. Such areas of working together are often pragmatic, such as providing religious instruction in local schools, civic religious services to mark festivals such as Easter or Christmas, pastoral care in hospitals or Nursing Homes for the Aged, or in times of tragedy or civic need, etc. It would be true to say that many of the mainstream churches are in numerical decline throughout the region (as is the entire region, as many of the young people move to the coast to find work or pursue further study); a few Pentecostal or similar churches would defy this trend. Nevertheless most ecumenical activity involves largely the member churches of the NCCA, although smaller evangelical and Pentecostal churches are often quite involved in local Ministers' Associations and the like.

The Catholic Diocese of Bathurst has had a small Ecumenical Commission since around 1995, though it has only begun to function on a wider footing in the last twelve months. This year it has encouraged the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity through promotion via the Catholic parishes, to mark the 50th year since the death of its founder, Fr Paul Couturier.

There are several ecumenical events of late that merit mention. The first is in the area of Aboriginal Reconciliation. In the wake of a Reconciliation Walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge several years ago, many of the towns and cities in the Bathurst diocese have held similar Walks in recent years in support of Reconciliation and the local Aboriginal community. These have been spearheaded by Social Justice and Reconciliation Groups formed ecumenically by the local churches, in conjunction with local Aboriginal groups.

Secondly, many communities in the Central West have formed ecumenical Refugee Support groups, given the current climate of Mandatory Detention of refugees in

Australia. Several parishes have hosted or welcomed refugees from Africa, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iran or Iraq and elsewhere. In all cases this has been done ecumenically.

Thirdly, a joint Anglican-Catholic clergy day has been planned for October this year, to bring together for the first time the clergy of the Catholic and Anglican dioceses of Bathurst, (and of the northern section of Wilcannia-Forbes Catholic Diocese which overlaps the Anglican Diocese of Bathurst). While this is an initial meeting, there is a very good relationship between the respective bishops, and much is hoped from this encounter for the future.

Lastly, just before the outbreak of the recent Gulf War with Iraq, a Walk for Peace was organised from 8th – 16th February by a group of church members throughout the region. The Walk went from Dubbo to Sydney, in a faint echo of the famous “Coo-ee March” from Gilgandra to Sydney in 1915, which was to gather recruits for World War I. This time, it was rather to raise awareness of the possibility for peace in the world, timed to arrive in Sydney in time for a huge Walk Against War Rally in Hyde Park there.

A small group of individuals walked the whole distance, stopping overnight at many towns along the route, where there would be a gathering to reflect and pray for peace. Those who came were from many churches and from none: clergy, Aboriginal elders, housewives, professionals, refugees, politicians, Christians, even a few Muslims. The Walk had a significant impact throughout the Central West region, witnessing to the profound effect that a group of ordinary people united in faith can have.

The inland parts of NSW do not have either the large population of the coastal areas, or the strong regional coherence of the Hunter-Central Coast area. The inland is much more a ‘Diaspora’ situation for many of the smaller churches as well. Nevertheless the churches often still have a pivotal role in the small communities not always enjoyed elsewhere; and the ecumenical life of their common witness on a practical and prayerful level continues to bear fruit.