

AUSTRALIAN CHURCH WOMEN

INTERNATIONAL CONSULTATION

Sydney - September, 1979

In association with Church Women United, U.S.A. and  
the Women's Committee of the National Council of  
Churches in New Zealand

At the National Committee Meeting of Australian Church Women, held in Perth in July, 1977, the incoming Working Committee was asked to investigate the possibility of arranging a Consultation with churchwomen from U.S.A. and New Zealand, and was given authority to act if the project was found to be feasible. Such a meeting had been envisaged more than ten years earlier by Australian and New Zealand representatives attending the Asian Church Women's Conference; now it was felt that their hopes might be realised.

Enquiries made from leaders of Church Women United, U.S.A., and the Women's Committee of the National Council of Churches in N.Z. elicited favourable replies and we were encouraged to proceed with our planning. In June 1978 the Working Committee of A.C.W. submitted an application for a grant from the Fellowship of the Least Coin to assist in meeting expenses, and this was agreed to by the Executive of A.C.W.C. at their meeting in Tokyo in October, 1978. The planning and preparation for the Consultation continued in Australia, New Zealand and U.S.A., and resulted in the meeting together of representatives from the three countries in Sydney in September, 1979.

Following their arrival on September 5, our overseas visitors were entertained at dinner by members of the Working Committee and the pleasant process of getting to know one another began. A full day's "briefing" by a panel of experts helped them to become aware of some aspects of Australian life in which they had indicated their interest - Church life in Australia, our multicultural society, racial, environmental and educational issues. A coach tour to Canberra, in which five members of the Working Committee and four interstate delegates to the National Committee Meeting participated with our thirty overseas friends, introduced them to the beauties of our countryside and of the national capital, and we all enjoyed the gracious hospitality of Canberra churchwomen.

A Service in Scots' Church, Sydney, on the afternoon of Sunday, September 9, provided an opportunity for many Sydney members of Australian Church Women and their friends to hear and meet with our visitors from overseas. The address on that occasion was given by Thelma Adair, Deputy Vice-President, National Church Women United, U.S.A.

On September 10, the National Committee Meeting of Australian Church Women began, at Caritas Christi Conference Centre, Wahroonga, and was attended by some sixty representatives of State Units and Federal denominational organisations and associated bodies. At the opening Worship Service, conducted by the National President, Win Dougherty, the address was given by Marelle Harrison, who spoke on the Theme of the Consultation - "The Family, its Faith and its Future". The presence of a choir of young children from the Prouille Convent School, Wahroonga, was a timely reminder that we were celebrating the International Year of the Child; their lovely singing delighted us all.

During the three special Consultation sessions, speakers from the participating countries directed our thinking again to the Theme.

Waltena Josie of South Carolina spoke on "A Faith for our Children", emphasising the belief that the family could survive in spite of pressures within society and the diverse alternatives striving to supplant it, if the values and attitudes of parents in the Christian context were evident in discussion and life style, within the home.

"Values for our Children" were enunciated by Pamela McKenzie, a member of the Women's Committee from New Zealand. The priorities on which these are

based must be sound if they are to contribute to the development of the children, the capacity to enjoy children, provide security, ensure giving however costly, and the result of the combination of all these goes beyond this world and enhances their reality.

Olwyn Jull, Australian Commonwealth President of the Mothers' Union took our Children into the Future. "The extended family of yesteryear has become the nuclear family of today. The issue of importance is the centrality and primacy of man in the world he is fashioning ... the view of families as being at the mercy of an 'age' is to say they are passive, pitiful and pathetic". The strengths of the family lie in its ability to provide for all needs, accept discipline and achieve self-mastery thus advancing towards maturity; to initiate and maintain relationships within the family thus preparing it to adapt to the wider world. Children need to belong; they are not possessed but trusted, loved and wanted. If they go into the future, with the assurance of being worthwhile persons, they will possess a self-esteem which will give confidence to their judgment and sense of responsibility thus ensuring an ability to be positive in that world of the future towards which they are advancing, capable of giving strong leadership and service.

The Bible Studies each morning were a contribution from Dorothy Barnard, of Missouri, Vice President for Cultivation, Church Women United, National, Bible teacher and Retreat Leader. These were distinguished by originality and vitality, participation and group discussion. The family of faith was seen as a community "where our sons and daughters prophesy, our youth see visions and our elders dream dreams".

And what part would you say balloons had in a Bible Study? Do they not soar and float, a delight of myriad colours, shapes and sizes, free and liberated, "the wind blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it..." Jn.2:8. They excite such happiness in a child, and as a child's gift in worship, symbolise joy and generosity, diversity and individuality of personality, the worth of giving and acceptance .. all part of participation in a service .. "Unless you come as little children you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven", Matt.18:3. Colours of balloons signify our uniqueness. "In our difference is blessing, from diversity we praise One Giver, One Lord, One Spirit, One Word known in many ways, hallowing our days, for the giver, for the gifts, Praise, Praise, Praise!"

So much has been left unsaid. A report can embody much that is tangible and concrete; it can try to transmit the wonderful enrichment each experiences when such a diverse group assemble and live a closely co-ordinated life together for five days - the stimulation, the vitality, the liberating exchange of views and sharing of faith revelations in openness and gratitude, but there still remains so much which is enshrined in the hearts and spirits of each individual which will never be divulged or reported, because it is so personal, so subtle, so transforming that it becomes a possession shared with God alone.

Such was our International Consultation - an historic occasion - and one which will live long in the memory of all those who were privileged to share in it.

Joan Curtin  
Doris Mitchell

Sydney, Australia  
September, 1979