

Australian Church Women Incorporated
22nd National Conference
21-25 September 2009
Heritage Hotel Narrabundah ACT

Faith in the Future

The guest speaker for the conference was Corazon Tabing-Reyes from the Philippines. Cora has succeeded Esther Byu as Secretary of the International Committee for Fellowship of the Least Coin. Her opening address retold the FLC story and indicated that we may soon have resources other than printed material that can be used to help spread the message of FLC.

Opening worship included Holy Communion with opportunity for conference participants to receive the elements, or a blessing if they did not wish to partake. The Remembrance Service named nine women from five state units. A candle was lit in memory of each as a symbol of them and their contributions to Australian Church Women. Those remembered from New South Wales were Marjorie Baker, Joan Curtin and Keasi Kupu.

Morning and evening devotions led by state and territory units developed the Conference theme of 'Faith in the Future'.

In some respects this has been the most challenging of the ACW National Conferences I have attended. Before the event there was correspondence from the South Australian Unit (who provides the National Executive 2009-2011) that challenged the legality of the incorporation that the 2007-2009 had put in place. Incorporation of a national body requires that the Public Officer should be a resident of the Australian Capital Territory, and it seemed logical to me that the ACT National Executive should carry out this task. However, the ACW Constitution was not adhered to, nor were the State Units consulted directly to keep them in the picture, and the ACT National Executive apologised for this neglect.

In a rather tense business session the incorporation of Australian Church Women was ratified following censure of the ACT National Executive for acting without regard for the Constitution. One of the outcomes of incorporation is that it necessitates the holding of an Annual General Meeting, though this need not be face to face, and could be by teleconference.

The Ecumenical Service was held at St Benedict's Catholic Church at which the Rev James Haire preached. His message of Christianity as counter-cultural from Roman times to the present day emphasised the constant transformation that is needed at all levels as the church tries to establish one organisation from great diversity.

Bible studies were led by Rev Vicky Cullen, an Anglican priest working in Canberra. Studies were on Luke's gospel – the gospel of the underdog – and called on us to see

Jesus as Man of God and Man of Prayer. We considered Jesus' ministry in Galilee, his journey to Jerusalem, the last week of his life and his walk to Emmaus.

Sessions of an informative nature came from a variety of organisations engaging young adults in ministry and service. Margaret and Ron Reeson told of a Uniting Church program called Young Ambassadors for Peace. In areas of strife, especially in Asia and the Pacific, efforts are made to bring protagonists together to enable them to see the 'enemy' as a fellow citizen and to recognise the value of the 'other'. It was certainly interesting to hear of this, but the session was rather longer than needed.

The Salvation Army in Melbourne works with the marginalised from its Bourke Street premises. We were informed and entertained by General Eva Burrows who demonstrated that much can be accomplished regardless of age. Capitalising on the current trend for students to take a gap year, the program utilises the dedication and skills of interns who train and take part in the outreach program.

"Irene's Place" is an endeavour of Canberra Baptist Church and the Mennonite Mission network that aspires to bring together young adults into a household dedicated to discipleship, service and peace. We were introduced to four young women from the USA, newly arrived in Australia, undertaking a year with Moriah Hurst, the community coordinator. This is a new venture in Canberra and the premises being used are within the Uniting Church property at Forrest.

Beyond the locality of the hotel we visited the Museum of Australia, chosen as an alternative to Floriade because of the weather. The museum covers a great range of Australiana and there is always something new, or something that could only be glossed over on a previous visit. And of course, there was a coffee shop with a view to Lake Burley Griffin that most of us enjoyed, not to mention the gift shop.

Government House at Yarralumla is a delight. The gardens are beautiful and the house welcoming. The courtesy of the staff, the daintiness of the food on offer in splendid surroundings with lovely flower arrangements cannot fail to impress. The Governor General addressed the gathered conference participants before spending time speaking with small groups. Our return bus trip to the hotel gave us an opportunity to see many of the embassies in the National Capital where spring is reminding all of new life.

We were well catered for with comfortable accommodation and delicious food. The Conference dinner was an enjoyable occasion in the transformed meeting room. Singing by a cappella group *Lady's Mantle* presented a range of songs to entertain, and it was a good choice for the occasion.

Reports from National Conveners, State and Territory Units, Denominational and Associated Groups were interesting. Motions relating to social issues action were in the fields of Aboriginal life expectancy, safe surrender of newborns, the alcohol content of drinks marketed particularly to young females, and support for the Millennium goal of reducing the death rate of women in childbirth.

The matters for discussion put forward by NSW Unit brought some good discussion, though not necessarily motions. With regard to Special Days orders of service it was agreed that there was scope for changes, and indeed the representative from World Day of Prayer was happy to hear some of the ideas promulgated. There was certainly support for an ideas page giving suggestions for alternate worship styles to which the service might lend itself.

The cost of the conference in Canberra did not diminish numbers, though there were people who probably would have attended had the cost been less. Ideas floated included more basic breakfasts and lunches, and possibly the need to reduce the number of days over which the conference is held.

Addressing the vexed question of Public Liability Insurance was one which others were glad to hear. It was agreed that the new National Executive take steps to investigate what is needed and in consultation with state and territory units to take out the necessary insurance. The cost would be shared taking into account the difference in numbers in the various ACW Units.

The Website Report generated discussion regarding the need for a new Web Host as the original one was no longer in business. A new Host would need to implement a more user friendly software system and keep costs/charges at a minimum. All agreed that there was a need to be able to keep the Website secure, user friendly and updated regularly. This would need to be done with consultation between Brenda Dickinson (Web Master), SA National Executive and taking into account input from the ACT Public Officer, Helen Raymond.

One of the special aspects of National Conference is just that – it is national. Meeting people from other states after a two year absence is exciting. The time of fellowship and renewing friendships is unmatched. We give thanks to God for the ACT women who took on the organisation of this event, and pray that he will guide the South Australian women who have responsibility for the next.