

CHRISTIANS FOR AN ETHICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL REPORT 2008-2009

This report covers activities of Christians for an Ethical Society from January 2008 to the present.

Introduction

Late in 2007, the national organization, Centre for an Ethical Society, ceased to exist due to insufficient financial support for its ongoing work, despite having reasonable success in the short time of its operation. The organizing committee of the local chapter of that organization considered that they had been successful in running public forums to address social justice issues. Furthermore, they believed that these forums were an important witness to the core Christian values underlying an ethical and socially just society. They therefore decided that, despite the demise of the national organization, they would continue with their work. The name "Centre for an Ethical Society" could not be retained. The acronym CES, however, was fairly well known in the region and so a decision was made to retain the acronym but change the words for which it stood. The name chosen for the new body in the ACT became Christians for an Ethical Society (CES).

The Organising Committee

There was no elected committee to organize either the Centre for an Ethical Society or the new Christians for an Ethical Society. Nevertheless, there has been a fairly small, but committed group of people undertaking day-to-day activities to enable the work of the CES to progress. In particular, thanks go to the Reverend Peter Walker who had held the Chair of the local Chapter of the Centre for an Ethical Society but who needed to resign from this position early in 2008. The view of the committee at the time was that they would prefer to retain a cleric as Chair. However, no cleric has been found who has sufficient time to fill the position and it is now considered unlikely that the role will be filled in this way. Father Michael Fallon MSC has graciously assisted the CES in the role of Ethical Advisor and local clergy have been most supportive in chairing our public forums. We thank Wesley Uniting Church for providing a venue for our monthly committee meetings. Whilst each member of the committee has put in considerable time and effort, particular mention should be made of the development and maintenance of the CES web site by Sepp Babler. This web site is an essential reference for the work of the CES, providing a wealth of information on social justice issues as well as recordings of forums.

Committee members during 2008-2009 were: Sepp Babler; Pat Brown; Peter Brown; Bill Bush, Robyn Coghlan; Jeremy Dawson; David Goss; Andrew Herscovitch; Heather McLaren; John Nevile; Werner Padarin; Brian Wraith.

Creating a new organization

During the first half of 2008, the committee devoted considerable attention to determining what the role of the CES should be and defining this in a draft charter. In addition, they prepared a constitution or set of basic guidelines about how the CES should be structured and should conduct its activities. Our particular thanks go to David Goss for leading us in this work during 2008 and to Brian Wraith who brought the work to conclusion this year to enable presentation for adoption at the AGM. It

was deemed important to retain close formal connections with the broader Christian community. CES was delighted to be accepted by the NSW Ecumenical Council as a Working Group, closely associated with its Social Justice Committee; and to become affiliated with the ACT Council of Churches.

Forums

The CES currently meets its goals of promoting social justice and furthering public education in ethics, current social issues and the Christian perspective on them through public forums. The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C) is an ideal venue for our forums and we have very much appreciated the support of the Reverend James Haire and his staff.

In 2008, the CES held six successful public forums.

- Professor Tony Vinson addressed “Prisons, Can They be Human, Even Rehabilitate?”
- The ACT Attorney General, Simon Corbell addressed “The New ACT Prison, What is Planned and What it Will Achieve” and Professor David Biles spoke on “How the ACT Compares: The Facts and Figures on Prisoners and Prisons in Australia”.
- Senator Gary Humphries and Justice Richard Refshauge addressed “The ACT Prison: A De Facto Mental Institution”.
- Father Michael Fallon addressed “Jesus and Social Inclusion” and Terry McCarthy addressed “By 2020 Can the Myth of Australian Egalitarianism Be Converted into a Reality?”
- Invited candidates of major and minor parties addressed: “The ACT Elections Addressing Social Justice”.
- Senator The Hon Ursula Stephens and Kasy Chambers, Executive Director of Anglicare addressed “Social Inclusion”.

In 2009, the theme of social inclusion is being continued. Six forums are being planned. The first forum for 2009 was held in February and the second in May:

- The Right Reverend Greg Thompson, Bishop of the Northern Territory addressed “White Man’s Dreaming: The Northern Territory Intervention”.
- David Crosbie, CEO of Mental Health Council of Australia and Kat Szukalska, Coordinator of Litmus Program in Canberra and Goulburn and of CyclopsACT & Youth in the City addressed “Access to Mental Health Care: There are People to Help You Out But Not Many to Stop You Falling In.”

Wherever possible, the CES provides at its forums, contact details and information about local support groups that work in the area highlighted by the forum, e.g. prisoner support, The Healing Journey. It is hoped that CES supporters and members who, consequent to the forums, wish to become involved in that particular field of endeavour, might do so through these support groups.

Other Activities

Non-forum activities undertaken by the CES is limited by the size and energy of its organizing committee. Pat Brown, part of the committee, has been working closely with Bishop Pat Power of Catholics for Social Justice (CSJ) and Lyndal Ryan, Union Representative, to secure improved conditions for cleaners employed by the ACT Government. With Pat’s encouragement, the CES has provided written support for

the cleaners and encouraged CES members and supporters to contribute to a petition to the government. The ACT Government has now agreed to implement Standardised Contract Provisions for all cleaners employed by the ACT Government. CES members and supporters are encouraged to actively contribute to further work to extend acceptance of the Standardised Contract Provisions by Christian church employers.

Membership and Supporters

While membership of the CES remains small (32), there are 231 people on our supporter mailing list. Average attendance at forums is 40 to 50 people although several forums have had double that number.

Funds

Income is provided through membership fees (\$ 360), donations (\$508) and entry donations to forums that are surplus to the cost of the venue. Entry to forums is free but a donation of \$5 is requested. Total funds as at 30 April 2009 are: \$1015.07.

Outgoings have included the cost of Australia Post mail box (\$95 p.a.); internet web hosting (\$359.40 p.a.); domain name ((\$44.94 biennially) and ACC&C forum venue (\$200 per forum).

Heather McLaren
Interim Chair

19 May 2009