

Christians for an Ethical Society

Annual Report 2013-2014

The context which led to the formation of Christians for an Ethical Society remains in need of as much urgent address as ever.

Firstly, there continues to be frustration that the public proclamation of the Gospel appears to remain inwardly focussed, consumed with institutional survival and membership. Perhaps this is inevitable because of appropriate attention in the public mind to the dreadful abuse of trust highlighted by the Royal Commission. However, it is also true that, prior to this adverse publicity, in the mind of the public, the Church appeared to be exclusively focussed on personal piety and private morality.

Secondly, there is continuing frustration that public discourse appears to be focused on what is secondary rather than what is primary, upon party political disputes rather than policy, upon that which is politically opportunistic rather than transformative, upon economic self-interest rather than that which builds social capital. This year has demonstrated considerable need for debate on Australia's refugee policy; its care for those in need, who appear to have been severely punished by the May budget; the apparent governmental retreat from environmental responsibility; and the real lack of public discourse about the kind of nation we hope to be, the values we would like to hold and the strategies that might deliver a fairer, more sustainable and hopeful future for children and grandchildren.

In this dual context, CES has a significant role to play in its endeavour to address pressing issues of our time. In doing so each forum endeavours to bring the light of the Gospel into sharp relief against the background of perceived injustice, intolerance, short sightedness and the misuse of institutional power. Our speakers have assisted us to both think and see differently, to imagine beyond what is to what could be.

We are conscious, however, that we might simply remain hosts to talk fests, where we engage those who are already convinced. It is increasingly important that we develop strategies that deliver practical outcomes. It is difficult to see how we can be very effective in this goal on our own. It is, therefore, important that we consider formal or semi-formal partnerships with others whose focus is more actively orientated. A good example is partnership with the Canberra-based refugee support network that has been quite effective in its advocacy and activism. Another obvious synergy can and should be with the social justice arm of the Catholic Church.

I am particularly keen that we consciously partner with the activities of our host venue, the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture. To this end, we should invite Professor Stephen Pickard to a formal position with us.

I am also keen that we adopt an overt relationship with The Beecroft Forum in Sydney, with a group in Brisbane under the leadership of a Uniting Church elder, Everaldo Compton, and perhaps a chapter, if we can find one, in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth.

Our patron for 2014 has been The Revd Professor James Haire. It has been an honour to have had him in this role. He started 2014 with a first class forum for us. I would like to record our gratitude to James and also our prayer that he will soon return to sufficient health as will enable a level of prodigious activity appropriate to one who is retired! Unfortunately, James suffered a serious health crisis soon after he delivered his paper to us, a crisis from which he is still in the process of recovering.

During the last 12 months we have held five forums. While some have received more attention than others, they have all been very worthwhile.

Our general themes for the 2013/14 year have been:

2013 Forum Series: "Political and economic conventional wisdom: As immoral as it is unintelligent";

2014 Forum Series: "Responsible Citizenship".

Under these general headings the forums have addressed the following issues and have been led by:

August 2013: "Being a Christian in a Secular Society *especially as a senior government advisor*", Ted Evans, former Secretary to the Treasury; chair Bishop George Browning;

November 2013: "The Good Life: a community affair", Hugh Mackay, psychologist and social researcher; chair Right Rev'd Stephen Pickard;

February 2014: "Overturning Tables, Knocking off Heads of State, and Other Ways of being Responsible Christian Citizens", The Reverend Professor James Haire, Theology and Religious Studies, Charles Sturt University; chair Bishop George Browning;

March 2014: "Ceding sovereignty in investment treaties: government of the people by foreign corporations", Professor Thomas Faunce, ANU College of Law and ANU College of Medicine, Biology and Environment; chair Russell Rollason, former Chief Executive of Australian Council for Overseas Aid;

May 2014: "Blinded by vision - overseas aid as shared learning", Paul Porteous, Director of Leadership Development and International Programs, ANZSOG Institute for Governance, University of Canberra; chair Professor Hilary Charlesworth, ANU College of Law;

We have a hard working executive who have met nine times during the year. Each member has taken some form of responsibility, for which I am very grateful.

We trust the in-coming executive will, through the sharing of their faith, imagination and passion, continue this vital work of Christian engagement with the big issues of our time, not simply reacting to that which is less than it should be but pro-actively contributing to what could be.

Bishop George Browning

4 August 2014