

Report of the Committee for Gospel, Society and Culture.

The Committee for Gospel, Society and Culture (G,S&C) was formed at the last Assembly to replace the Church and Nation Committee. As well as a new name, the committee had new personnel, new regulations and new priorities. Much of the first year has been spent establishing our life as a committee and determining how we can best serve the Church and the Assembly. As we present our first Assembly report we are excited about the projects which are now under way and conscious that there is significantly more work to do before we are fully operational.

Meetings and membership

The committee has determined to meet four times a year, usually for a Friday evening and Saturday morning. This allows time at each meeting for the longer discussions the committee's role requires and also limits the amount of travel required for members outside the metropolitan area. This pattern of meetings has worked well. Unfortunately, the meeting planned for February had to be cancelled due to the personal circumstances of the Convener and this meeting had to be rescheduled to May. Hence this report comes in the Assembly Papers rather than the White Book.

We rejoiced at the birth of Xavier to Tracy and James Nodder in November 2102. Tracy has taken leave from the committee from November 2012 and hopes to return in November 2013.

The committee appreciated having the Moderator, Trevor Cheetham, at two of our meetings. Trevor offered valuable input to our discussion and it was useful to develop a connection with the Moderator. We hope this can continue in the coming year. We have appointed Alan Asher as an (honorary) consultant to the Committee. Alan has been an elder at New Life PC (ACT) and is the former Federal Ombudsman. He has a great deal of experience in dealing with government.

Three of our members are due for re-election at this Assembly and we strongly commend them to the Assembly for reappointment.

Dr Nalini Pather is a member of Randwick Presbyterian Church. She is a medical scientist with additional qualifications in University Learning & Teaching. She is currently a senior lecturer at UNSW. She has particular expertise in issues of bioethics, in the areas of stem cell research, IVF and end-of-life issues.

Dr Lewis Jones is also a member of Randwick Presbyterian Church. He has a PhD in Physics, is a graduate of Moore College and works for AFES leading Simeon Network, the ministry to Postgraduate students in Australian universities. He is interested in apologetics, especially dealing with the interaction of science and Christianity and he is often involved in presenting and defending the gospel in University contexts as well as training Christian students in these areas.

Mr Benjamin Shuhyta is a member of St Aidan's South Wagga Wagga. He is a journalist with more than 15 years experience in metro and regional newsrooms. He is currently Editor for the nightly local news bulletin for Prime Television in Wagga Wagga. He brings to the committee an extensive awareness of media issues and skills in communication.

The priorities of the committee

The regulations of the Committee direct it to support the Church "especially congregations and ministers" in the areas of apologetics and ethics. The Committee is seeking to keep this as a central goal and most of our activities this year have been directed to this. We have also made one submission to the NSW Parliament.

Communication

Website

Following the request of the 2012 Assembly, the committee has established a website (www.gsandc.org.au) which will provide a range of resources, links and news about our activities. The website will allow members of the Church to connect directly with the Committee and our work.

Pulse

Following the request of the 2012 Assembly, the Committee has contributed to each issue of Pulse. This has taken the form of the regular ethics column by the convener. We plan to contribute additional material for future editions.

Newsletter

From 2013/14 we plan to produce a quarterly newsletter highlighting the work of the committee and relevant issues. It will be distributed electronically and will be available on the website.

Resource Papers

The major project for the Committee has been to develop a series of Resource Papers which will be available from the website. These Papers focus on apologetic and ethical issues and offer a thoughtful, biblical approach which is relevant to the life and mission of the church, engaged with contemporary Australian culture and informed by careful research. The papers will help people to have an informed biblical view about the issue and relevant information about the situation in Australia. We envisage these could be distributed in a congregation and used to start discussion in Bible Study groups, seminars and at Session. Each paper will include suggestions of how churches can respond to the issue.

The Committee has prepared or is preparing papers on infertility and fertility treatments, the redefinition of marriage, sexualisation of children and refugees.

Training for congregations

Following the request of the 2012 Assembly, the committee is planning to provide training for congregations. *Christianity Everyday - training for thought, word, and deed* will help church members understand their culture, present the gospel, deal with challenge to the gospel and think about living and serving in the 'public square'. The training will usually involve an evening, half day or full day seminar. The Committee will work with a congregation or a Presbytery to provide training tailored to the local needs and interests. The cost of the training will be set to recover costs across the whole program (so all parts of the state will be charged the same amount, irrespective of the distance from Sydney).

The committee plans to survey ministers to find out some of the areas in which training would be appreciated.

A trial of *Christianity Everyday* will be held at Randwick Church, 1:30-4:30 pm, Sunday, 23 June.

Contact Lewis Jones (lewis.jones@simeonnetwork.org) to enquire about *Christianity Everyday* in your church or area.

Other projects

The committee is working on other projects. We hope to publish an e-book on ethics based on John McClean's ethics columns in the *Pulse*.

Researcher/writer

The committee is planning to employ a researcher/writer. Committee members are balancing many demands and could be more productive with some dedicated support. A dedicated researcher/writer will enhance the work of the committee.

If sufficient MDP funding is available to the committee, we intend to contract a researcher/writer for 144 hours/year. At present we have funds which came from the previous committee, and if there is not sufficient MDP funding we will simply use up those funds, which will mean that the researcher works significantly less hours.

NSW Council of Churches

Following the request of the 2012 Assembly, the committee has appointed five representatives to the NSW Council of Churches: Mr Wayne Richards, Mr Peter Graham, Rev. Chris Balzer, Mr Mick Quirk and Rev. Kamal Weerakoon.

NSW Parliament

Same-Sex Marriage

Toward the end of 2012 a cross party group in the Legislative Council initiated an inquiry into the possibility of Same-Sex Marriage Legislation in NSW by the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues. The proposal is for legislation along similar lines to that which was recently defeated in the Tasmanian parliament. G,S&C made a submission to the Standing Committee on behalf of the Church. The submission stated that the Presbyterian Church of Australia in New South Wales is opposed to the introduction of same sex marriage, whether in State or Federal law and that if any such measure is to be considered it should be done at a Federal level and not by the Parliament of NSW.

The Standing Committee is due to report on 26 July and will probably recommend in favour of legislating for SSM. Since the Premier has announced his support and will allow a conscience vote it is very likely that the Bill will pass in the Legislative Council and the significant political debate will occur in the Legislative Assembly.

Anti-discrimination Act

In January 2013 the Premier announced a plan to strengthen the NSW anti-discrimination Act. Christians were rightly concerned that this would result in a restriction of religious liberties. Following the announcement there has been no draft legislation provided and it is not clear that the government is pursuing the matter.

Euthanasia (Rights of the terminally ill) Bill

This bill was introduced into Legislative Council on May 9. It is largely based on the Northern Territory's Rights of the Terminally Ill Act which was overturned by the federal parliament in 1997. It was defeated in later May. It is likely that the legislation will be re-introduced in the Legislative Assembly at some time.

Freedom of Religion

Across the Western world there are significant incursions being made into traditional freedoms of religious expression. Christian views on Islam, abortion and homosexuality are viewed as discriminatory and vilifying. This is a trend which should be opposed, not only because of the difficulties it creates for the life and witness of the church, but also because it does not promote the

common good of society. We should, on principal, defend the freedom of all religious groups in our society.

In late 2012 the Federal Government introduced the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Bill 2012 with a far greater reach than the present legislation, with the potential for significant narrowing of religious freedom. After an inquiry and considerable public debate this legislation will not proceed. Attempts to introduce similar legislation in various states shows that it remains a live issue.

In 2012, in view of the growing pressure on freedom of religion, Freedom 4 Faith was formed. This is a new interdenominational body which will advocate for freedom of religion in Australia. Mr. David Palmer, current moderator of PCV is a board member and Dr Nick Aroney (PCCQ) and Dr. John McClean have been asked to join the campaign committee. The GAA will be asked to contribute \$10,000 p.a. to Freedom 4 Faith so that the PCA can continue to participate fully in the organisation. This seems a wise investment given the demands of the current social and political climate.

Learning from One Another

Learning from One Another, is an introduction to Islam which has been circulated to Australian schools. It does not represent Islam accurately and does not identify the differences between Christianity and Islam nor the reasons Christians have to be concerned about the rise of Islam. The committee encourages members of the Church to read the critique of the booklet by Noel Weekes in the recent *AP* (“Ludicrous Islam lite” *AP* Winter 2013, 15-16) and to use this information to raise concerns in their local schools if appropriate. A copy of the article is available in the Committee website.

Media

The Committee is yet to address strategies which will enable the Church to have a more effective presence in mainstream media, as requested by the Assembly in 2012.

Requests from the 2012 Assembly

The Assembly in 2012 directed the Committee to consider five issues. Our responses are described in the items above. For easy reference the Committee’s actions in relation to each item are summarised here.

- Effective apologetic responses to “New Atheism”

Sample sermons available on website and a Resource Paper planned for 2013/14

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- A biblical view of fertility treatments, including advice on pastoral guidance for couples unable to have children

Resource Paper available

- Australian refugee policies, including the difficulties access of Middle Eastern Christians to asylum

Resource Paper in preparation.

- threats to freedom of religious expression in Australia, including at the Federal level
Participation in *Freedom for Faith* will allow us to monitor this issue, have a co-ordinated response with other churches and alert members to appropriate actions

- the sexualisation of young people in advertising, media and culture

Resource Paper in preparation.

Issues for 2013/14

The committee hopes to pursue the following issues in 2013/14:

- Publish a resource paper on “New Atheism”;
- Advise the Assembly about the situation of Christians in the Middle East, including access to asylum in Australia and recommend appropriate action;
- Publish a Resource Paper on a gospel response to anti-vilification legislation;
- Publish a Resource Paper on the wise use of Information and Communications Technology;
- Publish a Resource Paper on faithful Christian witness in a multi-religious society.

John McClean
(Convener)

Joanna Barlow
(Secretary)

Deliverances

1. That the Assembly write to the General Assembly of Australia expressing its for full participation in Freedom for Faith.
2. That the Assembly commend to congregations and sessions the Gospel, Society and Culture Website as a source for resources in understanding and engaging the society and culture.
3. That the Assembly commend to congregations and sessions the Gospel, Society and Culture Resource Papers on *Marriage Matters* and *Facing Infertility*.
4. That the Assembly commend to Session and Presbyteries the training offered by the Gospel, Society and Culture Committee in *Christianity Everyday* and encourage them to host a training event.
5. That the Assembly draw to the attention of Sessions the critique of *Learning from One Another* by Noel Weeks (“Ludicrous Islam lite” *AP* Winter 2013, 15-16) which is available from the G,S&C website.
6. That the Assembly request the Committee for Gospel, Society and Culture to publish a resource paper on “New Atheism”.
7. That the Assembly request the Committee for Gospel, Society and Culture to advise the Assembly about the situation of Christians in the Middle East, including access to asylum in Australia and recommend appropriate action.
8. That the Assembly request the Committee for Gospel, Society and Culture to publish a Resource Paper on a gospel response to anti-vilification legislation.
9. That the Assembly request the Committee for Gospel, Society and Culture to publish a Resource Paper on the wise use of Information and Communications Technology.
10. That the Assembly request the Committee for Gospel, Society and Culture to publish a Resource Paper on faithful Christian witness in a multi-religious society.