



2013 AGM Report from the Chair of the Board

This year we have pursued the goal of becoming a research institute of the MCD University of Divinity. All indications are that this has been agreed and as I write we are expecting to hear that this had been officially confirmed.

As part of pursuing this goal we received feedback that while the ecumenical character of Yarra Institute was very clear the University would welcome the Institute working to involve other traditions represented in the University, in addition to Anglicans, Catholics and Uniting Church. In response Bruce Duncan and Stephen Ames visited all heads of colleges inviting a closer working relationship with the Institute as part of our becoming a research institute of the University. This initiative was very warmly welcomed, evoking a sense of a community of interest in social justice and the welcoming of the Institute as a focal point for this in the university.

To begin with we suggested three specific possibilities for a closer working relationship. One was for a college representative becoming a board member. The second was for one or more college representatives to participate in the the Advisory Council newly established by the board. The council would meet twice a year for an engaging conversation on some topic to do with social justice. No other business would be part of these meetings. The Board would also invite other people outside the university such as those leading researchers in the various church social welfare agencies. Thirdly, we invited participation in a forth coming conference, *Christian Social Thinking for Australia – Making a Difference?* All this was very well received. As a result Major Brad Halse from the Salvation Army has become a member of the Board; we had the first Advisory Council meeting in September with a representative from all the member colleges of the university and board members; and a very successful conference in November this year. Overall we are very pleased with the result of this initiative during 2013. It has clarified and lifted our profile in the University.

The conference *Christian Social Thinking for Australia – Making a Difference?* began with a key note address by Fr Frank Brennan on what he saw as the main issues confronting Australia and what response might be suggested by Christian social thinking. This was followed by presentations from Anglicans, Catholics, Baptists, Churches of Christ, Coptics, Salvation Army and the Uniting Church of Australia and a concluding reflection by Margaret Coffey from the ABC. (We were not able to arrange for someone from the Lutherans to participate. Nevertheless we hope to obtain a contribution from a Lutheran perspective.)

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The presentations will be published by the Institute in 2014. This will provide a ready introduction to the commonalities and differences between the various traditions of Christian social thinking with the University and where they think this could make a difference in Australia. Naturally, we will need to take stock of these 'soundings' for our own work and perhaps also with Social Policy Connections. As such it will also be a contribution to the emerging self-understanding of the university. It will also be relevant to pursuing the prospect of an interfaith conference in 2014 on the social thinking of the main religious traditions here in Melbourne.

The good work of Yarra Institute can continue as it is for some while, conditional firstly on finding occasional amounts of money to fund research and publications on particular topics. As it is we have a number of projects still in process towards publication in 2014. Secondly, the continuation of our work depends on the continuing vitalities of the ageing board membership, including the chair! Unless both these conditions change there will not be a long-term future for the institute. It is to these two matters that I believe we need to devote a considerable portion of our available energy and time in 2014.

We especially need money to fund an executive director and administrative support. (We have access to funding for PhD students, but so far not to students.) I think we need to engage possible wealthy donors. We have held off pursuing this until we had a track record we could 'show and tell'. We have that now with several publications and more to come, and of course our ATF publication on Globalisation, now with the publishers. My limited experience and the testimony of old hands in this task is that it is a slow process, even when it is persistently pursued. The board can get some helpful advice on this matter as we have in the past, but I see that somehow we will all need to be actively involved.

As one who is almost at his biblical quota I can say that the question of new and younger membership of the board could be satisfied by finding suitable forty or even fifty year old people! More generally I think we are faced with finding and engaging people from 'younger generations' who have a lively interest in justice, who are or might be attracted to a well presented vision of Christian social thinking, and how it can make a difference to Australia – when supported by appropriate research. To be engaging we need to invite people to suitable occasions, vehicles, media, on suitable issues, with the note of 'making a difference' very visible. One such occasion we have just established is the Advisory Council.



I can only take this reflection a little further with the following collage of observations. On the one hand I think that the place to look for such people is in the churches, the colleges of the University, the church schools, church agencies, and the many people who access the SPC website. On the other hand I don't have confidence about my sense of what matters of social justice engage the imaginations and aspirations of 'younger generations' – even the forty year olds! (If I am not mistaken these 'demographics' are not well represented at what we would all think were the very good SPC or Yarra Institute public events.) I think that for very understandable reasons, we have not explored what to do with the research we produce, post launch. If we found a way to do this it would enhance the note of 'making a difference'. I believe we would be helped if we identified Christian communities that very visibly embodied something of these interests.

Two final points. The SPC website obviously attracts a lot of people which leads me to wonder if we are making the most of this 'connection' and what other social media we should be exploring. Lastly, the recent conference evoked in me the need for a narrative about the key issues in Australia and how Christian social thinking and action could make a difference. The narrative would be engaging and frame our research interests.

Stephen Ames, Chair of the Board of the Yarra Institute

26 November 2013