

# Churches of Christ National Identity

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CCTC

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# 1 Who are we?

What is interesting to note is that like the UK and New Zealand, Australia has not had the divisions which has marred the Stone–Campbell movement in the USA—which unfortunately still exist and have been exported around the globe. Therefore, while each local congregation is independent, unlike the “independent” and a cappella streams in the USA, we still do have some structure above the local level. However, I believe that the level of structure is less than that found in the Disciples. Of course there are other differences, but this is not about an analysis of us compared with our world family.

## 1.1 Structure

### 1.1.1 National

At a national level, we have National Council, which is formed of representatives from each autonomous state body.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, we have used the term “Conference” to describe a collection or association of our churches. However, WA, for instance, has deliberately moved to use the term “Association”, and even at this year’s Vic–Tas State Conference in May the question was raised about the use of the term for both the association and for its AGM.

There are a number of agencies which also operate as national entities. These were either intentionally established by the National Conference e.g. CCTC, OMB, FAB, or evolved independently and through other means came to be “adopted” by the national body e.g. The Australian Christian, National Literature Department. There are also other networks and committees, both formal and fairly loose-knit. One very formal one is the Defence Force Chaplains Committee, which we are required to have to allow us to engage in military chaplaincy (the forces will only interact with a national body) whereas the ecumenical network is very loosely organised. Currently, each is required to report to National Council and the National President and National Executive Officer are ex-officio on the agencies’ boards.

The National President is our nominated national head of church and is elected by the National Council. The current president is Richard Menteith, from NSW.

### 1.1.2 States

Each state is organised quite differently as each as developed fairly independently. For instance, Qld Conference is a legal entity via a letter patent, while Vic–Tas is about to incorporate under Victorian corporation legislation. Internally, the structures are also quite varied. Much change has happened in each state structure and many are quite different from that in place a decade ago. Also, there has been significant generational change in leadership at most levels in each state.

That said, each state is still essentially a cooperative association of autonomous churches.<sup>2</sup> Each state has some sort of committee or board which governs the structure. Typically this consists of elected members plus staff and/or agency personnel. The boards are answerable to the churches by means of the annual meeting, where churches send delegates. The number of delegates is usually based on some form of proportional representation.

Each state board governs using some variation of Carver’s policy governance model.<sup>3</sup> Day-to-day operations are handled by various staff members who are accountable to their senior paid officer (who has different titles in each state).

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<sup>1</sup>The independent state bodies are WA, SA–NT, Qld, NSW, ACT, Vic and Tas. Note that for the most part, operationally, Vic and Tas are a unit, however they are actually independent Conferences, whereas, with only one church. Darwin, NT is not a separate unit, but part of SA–NT—a single entity.

<sup>2</sup>For brevity’s sake I use the term congregation or church to include the mission organisations which some states have affiliated, such as UNOH and Parakaleo.

<sup>3</sup>I am referring to governance by policy, rather than by management here. I recognise, for instance, that Qld and to a lesser extent, WA, operate using practises developed by Paul Bourdon.

Table 1: Major National Agencies

Agency	Responsibility
ACCIM	Mission with indigenous Australians
CCTC	Theological education
National Media and Communications	Production of resources, building of national identity (both externally and among ourselves)
OMB	Mission with cultures in other nations

Table 2: Other Agencies and Networks

Entity	Responsibility
Defence Force Chaplains Committee	Recruitment and pastoral care of military chaplains
Historical Society	Preservation of historical information
Youth Vision	Development of youth leadership
CareWorks	Development of community-based social action
Preachers' Provident Fund	Management of long service leave for ministers

### 1.1.3 Agencies and Networks

The major agencies are CCTC, ACCIM, OMB and National Media and Communications. Each has a specific role see table 1.

Other agencies, networks and committees have a much narrower focus<sup>4</sup>. Some of these are listed in table 2.

Each agency is governed by its own Board (or equivalent). Some have their structure determined to a greater or lesser degree by the relevant legislation (e.g. Provident Fund, particularly when it was also handling superannuation).

One of the points of tension over the years has been the ability of the states and national structures to influence or control the operation of the agencies. As most are incorporated, they are independent legal entities, so such influence has usually been exercised by the appointment of board members. The major agencies have operated on the basis of representation, with members appointed by each Conference. A number are now moving to competency based boards. In reality, influence has usually been exerted through dialogue and relationships. For our national agencies, this has not always been an easy road. The breadth of theology and practise among our churches means it is challenging to please most, let alone everyone!

## 1.2 Theology

The very congregational autonomy which many churches in our Movement value is also a cause of tension. At both national and state levels we always are torn between unity and diversity. Let me say very clearly, that compared to many others we have done remarkably well.

History will clearly show that tensions have existed and differences in theology, culture or just plain intra-state rivalry have led to some unfortunate distances or division. In theological education this was seen in the establishing of Woolwich, NSW, and Kenmore, Qld colleges. In publishing it was seen in the conflict over the Joint Board of Christian Education materials.

However, those who have lived much of this history declare that now we see more cooperation and trust than ever before. True, we still have differences in belief and practise, but that has not enforced distance.

Overall, I would characterise us as evangelical. However, that ranges from almost fundamentalist in some places to much more liberal in others. That variety is expressed both within each

<sup>4</sup>The Provident Fund also used to be responsible for superannuation. However, that ceased in recent years with our becoming a principal sponsor of Christian Super.

of our states, with the country tending to be more conservative than metropolitan regions, and between states, with SA and Vic representing the more liberal end of the spectrum and WA, NSW and Qld the more conservative.<sup>5</sup> In all states, there has been a tendency toward a greater openness to matters originally the preserve of Pentecostal churches. Partly this will be due to the general influences of post-modernism allowing that spiritual/supernatural experiences are acceptable, or even to be actively sought. Partly it is also the influence of the charismatic movement which, while not necessarily a modern phenomenon, has had significant influence in the global Christian community, both west and south.

### 1.3 Influences over the last generation

By necessity, this is only a potted overview of some influences. The influences on church life will be as varied as the communities which spawn the fellowship.

#### 1.3.1 Christendom

As with most, if not all churches have been enmeshed in a culture which was born out of close engagement, or even identity with, the Church. One of the characteristics of this was that the Church has seen itself as having a special place or rights in the culture. Another aspect is that with people already familiar with much of the Christian narrative, it was fairly effective to evangelise by attraction—calling people to come and be a part of “us”.

#### 1.3.2 Modernism

Of great significance for the greater part of the twentieth century was modernism. In many ways Churches of Christ could be seen to be one of Christendom’s ultimate children of modernism. We assumed that our destiny was controllable, and that people could be won to the faith by rational engagement.<sup>6</sup>

A sad aspect of this was that many of our people assumed a superiority and self-righteousness which saw conversion as causing people to come out of “the denominations”, rather than as bringing people into a new relationship with Jesus.

In more recent decades our emphasis on unity has shifted from getting everyone to become like us, to meaningful dialogue and practical cooperation with others in the wider Church. It is often remarked that Churches of Christ are far more involved in all manner of ecumenical and inter-church activity than their numbers would suggest.

#### 1.3.3 1960s

The social upheavals of the 1960s along with the death of God phenomenon had huge impact on the Church. We were not exempt. In Australia its impact was not uniform. It was felt first in Victoria, with other states not experiencing the same effects until, sometimes years, later. Not only was there significant numerical decline but there was significant impact on leadership. Don Smith, who was director of department of home missions and evangelism for Victoria and Tasmania at the time comments that it was like “they all caught a cold from each another”, with leaders (including some ministers) abandoning their ministry, the church and often their faith.

#### 1.3.4 Church Growth Movement

One of the responses to the challenges of the 1960s was the church growth movement. It did serve to restore the focus and numerical strength of our churches. It was not a quick fix, though.

<sup>5</sup>I am using terms such as liberal and fundamentalist in their strict theological sense, not the often pejorative sense seen in the media and polemic writing.

<sup>6</sup>I am not denying there was a spiritual side to our forebears, they firmly believed in prayer and the ministry of the spirit, but that their world view was closely bound up with that of their society—as is ours.

Two key figures for Australian Churches of Christ were Donald McGavran (a Disciples of Christ missionary and minister) and Win Arn (founder of the Institute for American Church Growth).

There was evidence of some polarisation among our churches, some of which is evident even today. Some decried social action as the “social gospel”, whereas the “true” gospel was about converting people. Both extremes were parodies of McGavran’s work.<sup>7</sup> The influence of the church growth movement extended into the 1990s and even shapes attitudes and practise today, however it did have limitations which became apparent with the rise of post-modernism. It was culturally bound and attraction centred.

### 1.3.5 Size and Diversity

With the aforementioned changes causing established people to leave and new people to belong, the nature of the local church fellowship began to change. For many years, we operated as one huge family. People knew everyone and many were related. If you read editions of *The Australian Christian* from, say, the 1950s, we are talking to others who know who is involved—they are family messages. One of the common laments heard in the offices of the “AC” over the last decade or so is that either they don’t now know all the people being talked about are, or that the articles and news lack that “in house” information.<sup>8</sup>

However, with a growth in numbers and its corresponding influx of new people, the desire for such information was greatly reduced. Our self-perception changed and we became a more loosely knit association of churches. Possibly feeding the increasing distance between churches and structures was the society importance on individualism, versus community, and on the independent, charismatic (in its pejorative sense) leader, who did not need the wider group either for identity or support.

### 1.3.6 IMT

In 1996, at the instigation of National Council an international summit on mission was organised at Stanwell Tops, NSW. This brought together three nations, UK, New Zealand and Australia to discuss the common challenge of mission to the West. These three nations chose to work together due to their common heritage and their avoidance of the divisions which marred the movement in the USA. (Essentially, it made for an easier starting point.)

Many suggest this was the catalyst for what has been a renewed emphasis on mission to our own culture at all levels of our movement. The International Missional Team grew out of this wider group. There is no doubt that much structural reform at state and national level has been done with the goal of aiding the mission of the local church. Part of this emphasis on mission has seen a renewed commitment to church planting and a willingness to experiment with new forms of church/mission.

### 1.3.7 Post-modernism

Unquestionably, one of the greatest influences over the last generation has be the cultural shift known as post-modernism. Much has been written on this already.

From our perspective, it is both boon and bane. It has proved a severe challenge to static Christendom models of church, who operate out of modernist and culturally captured assumptions of what it means to be church and in mission. However, it has also meant that many in the

<sup>7</sup>McGavran advocated a return to classical missions with its stress on evangelism and church planting. He believed that, “A chief and irreplaceable purpose of mission is church growth ... Service is good, but it must never be substituted for finding” the lost and organising them into communities of faith.

He also underscored using the social and behavioural sciences to identify the factors that facilitate and those that impede church growth. (<http://bible.acu.edu/GST/VanRheenenPaulNotes/NumberSix.htm>)

<sup>8</sup>A classic example was the “Church News” which often reported personal happenings. People often said they used this to “keep in touch”.

community are more willing to discuss spiritual issues, which provides fertile ground for conversation. With the recognition of the church being in mission to its own culture, many more innovative expressions of church have been formed. Obviously some will work better than others.

All of our structures are trying to grapple with their identity and mission in this age of rapid, discontinuous change. Some will retreat into virtual cloisters, withdrawing from engaging with the new world around them. Others are trying to chart the waters and navigate to a new harbour where the church is authentic in life and mission. The Future Directions process in Vic-Tas is one of these approaches, as is NSW's Time Now. While methods may be different, there is a common theme across the states of seeing the goal of the structures as resourcing the mission of the local church. This is also being seen in the emphasis of some agencies, for example, in the significant reshaping of OMB.

It is important to note that this shift (post-modernism) may also be viewed through the lens of modes of communication—as a move from broadcast to digital culture.<sup>9</sup> I find this approach has much value.

## 2 Conferences and Churches

As with all relationships, the closeness of the relationship between Conference and churches has waxed and waned over the years. One of the significant issues has been mentioned above, the move from family to network. When we were an extended family, our structures were important for their role in maintaining the closeness of relationships.

We did, however, also get much done together, such as our overseas and indigenous ministry. The meetings had much more of an adversarial nature, with strong disagreement not uncommon. In some instances the depth of feeling was so great that congregations withdrew from the “brotherhood”.<sup>10</sup>

Since then, we have moved from an integrated identity to becoming an association of history or decision. More and more churches join because they resonate with our goals and values. Across the spectrum of churches we are seen as permission givers and willing to live more easily with diversity.

Larger churches can be and historically have been distant. In part this was due simply to their size—they didn't need the support of the structure as they had the resources to continue on their own. This distance sometimes led to suspicion and further estrangement. Now I see a changing trend. Churches like Whitford, WA, Wollongong, NSW, Careforce Mt Evelyn are moving closer, with a number now having extremely close links to the structure. In my quick analysis I see two significant factors:

1. The renewed emphasis on mission within the structures has brought the ethos of the larger churches and the structure closer together.
2. The larger church no longer sees itself as entirely self-sufficient. Increasing government regulation and the challenges of a rapidly changing culture have resulted in a re-thinking of these links.

However, it is all not as crass as pure pragmatism. There certainly are those in leadership in larger churches who see they have a role in contributing to the health of the whole of which they are a part.

While at one level the post-modern suspicion of denominations and power structures in general might weaken denominational loyalty, it doesn't seem to have resulted in weaker linkages between churches and Conferences. This may simply be that the challenges confronting the church from post-modernism are greater than the drive to suspicion of and independence from the structures.

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<sup>9</sup>Millar, Rex, “The Digital Dynamic: How Communications Media Shape Our World” in *The Futurist*, May–June 2005, pp 31–36.

<sup>10</sup>For example, Clayton and Lygon St, Melbourne, Vic, churches withdrawing over our participation in the WCC.

In our case, it may also be influenced by the flatness of our structures and the fact that the power ultimately lies with the churches, not the hierarchy.

In some cases, the relationship with Conference can be seen as association of convenience—reflecting the consumer culture in which we live. In this situation the relationship is valuable when we need something—a ministry appointment, help with internal conflict. However, this seems to be a reducing attitude as the structures in reality and in their communications more clearly articulate that their primary role is to assist the local churches in their ministry. The relationship is in my opinion increasingly seen as one of mutual benefit, with emphasis on working together to achieve the goal of mission.<sup>11</sup>

## 3 The Future

### 3.1 National Structure

Our national structure is currently in flux. The emphasis is on doing things at the most appropriate level, while maintaining the flattest structure practicable. Our national structure will essentially be a cooperative association of state conferences. National representation and “shop front”, structures which either have to or best work nationally, will all come under the auspices of Federal Council. Most other operational function will occur at state level. The national agencies are being decoupled and the independence of their Boards recognised. Rather than relating to the churches through the structures, their primary vector will be direct to the churches. This is a model based on high levels of trust. The glue is relationship.

Only time will tell if it will live up to expectations. However, I believe that in many ways, if you get the trust and relationships right, many structures are workable. Get the relationships wrong and no conceivable structure will save you.

### 3.2 Churches

Our churches are far from immune from the uncertainty which characterises our current situation. However, our congregational autonomy, our willingness to embrace diversity and our openness to experiment stand us in good stead. We do not have the answers, but we have been asking questions about the way forward and have been willing to adapt at all levels of our structure so that the mission of the local church may be energised. We are recognised as permission givers, as experimenters. We are recognised as having a commitment to mission to the West, even to the point of the NCCA asking us to consider leading an ecumenical national consultation on mission.

I would not be so proud as to suggest the form of the church in the future. In the short-term, however, it must be marked by:

- a willingness to adapt—this requires a willingness to experiment, and most especially a willingness to fail!
- flexible structure to allow swift response to changing need
- close understanding of the nature of the community to whom they are in mission
- commitment to whole of life evangelism—word and deed

Some of the recent interaction between the so-called emergent churches and the established church has been marked by suspicion, derision and distance. This is changing, as shown in the language of last year’s Forge conference in Melbourne. Instead of them and us, it is becoming “we”.

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<sup>11</sup>By necessity, this is a generalisation. There are areas where the relationship is marked by distance or suspicion. Sometimes, this is not just an expression of Conference versus churches, but may be an out working of other issues/prejudices. In one state, the distance is between the country and metropolitan churches, where the some parts of the country views the metropolitan as “liberal” and untrustworthy.

Some have suggested that the emergent church will display little or no structure, reflecting the tribalisation of post-modern culture. This is, I believe, short-sighted and ignores the realities of an increasingly regulated environment and the inexorable push of humanity's own gregarious nature. We inevitably seek out like-minded people. I suggest that the 600+ who attended the Forge conference in fact reflect this. The structures may be less rigid, but they will emerge—even in pre-modern society human interaction was marked by structure, anything from the (extended) family to the kingdom.

In my assessment, the challenges of post-modernism are forcing us to re-engage in mission with our culture and, indeed, our own roots. As we seek God's leading in this, it can only be a good thing.