

YARRA INSTITUTE FOR RELIGION & SOCIAL POLICY

Third Annual General Meeting, **7 December 2011** **Report by Stephen Ames, Chair of the Board**

The Yarra Institute is an independent ecumenical organisation established for:

1. Conducting research into the implications of Christian social thinking for the formulation of public policy in Australia.
2. Teaching Christian social thinking and its implications for public policy in Australia.

RESEARCH PROJECTS

In accord with the first reason YIRSP was established the board has pursued a number of research opportunities during the year:

- We accepted for publication Geoff Lacey's work, *Sufficient for the Day, Towards A Sustainable Culture*, a study of the significance of climate change issues (see below).
- Transforming Australia's detention policies about asylum seekers With funding from Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand, the Yarra Institute commissioned research on how to transform Australia's treatment of asylum seekers so that they avoid lengthy periods of detention, and to ensure adequate support for settlement in the community. The initial researchers were Dr Erin Wilson from RMIT, who has considerable expertise in this area, and Dr Tony Ward, an economist and director of Milbur Consulting, who has also done relevant project costing. Dr Ward's report, *Long-term health costs of extended mandatory detention of asylum seekers*, was launched in October 2011, and received extensive coverage, including two lengthy articles in the *Age*, on radio and in the religious press. Ms Caz Coleman was particularly effective on radio.

The project is being advised by Caz Coleman, until recently director of Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project and now a member of a government advisory committee, about what research would likely be most effective in influencing government policy and informing public opinion about better policies for asylum seekers. The costings are important in showing that screening of asylum seekers for health and security checks can be done much more cheaply, with much better outcomes for refugees and Australian tax payers.

- Most recently, in view of the Australian government moving to onshore processing of asylum seekers and releasing larger numbers into community detention, Caz Coleman has suggested revising the project to focus on stories of how asylum seekers have been received into the community, highlighting what works best. Dr Rowan Ireland and Bruce Duncan are supervising this project
- A now completed report by Dr. Joan Daw on 'Faith Education and Justice'. The report has required extensive editing to have it in a form for publication. Sr Helen Anderson has been generously helping with the data processing and editing.

- A research program on ‘Torture’ by Dr. Cal Ledsham. This has progressed well but has been delayed due to the work load of the author. We expect this to be published in 2012.
- Research on Refugee Resettlement Projects of Australian Christian churches with Dr Kirsty Sangster as researcher, was completed under guidance of Rowan Ireland and published online. .
- A book proposal from Therese D’Orsa on the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, combining both its history and an assessment of its significance then and now.
- Under the general editorship of Dr Peter Price, the Yarra Institute has also been preparing an issue of the ATF journal, *Interface*, for publication in early 2012 on globalisation, with chapters being written by Dr Paul Rule, Dr John Darcy May, Dr Robyn Reynolds, Dr Rowan Ireland, Dr Bruce Duncan, Dr Wes Campbell, Dr Therese D’Orsa, Brian Lawrence and myself.
- The Church’s role in East Timor. Drs Jim and Therese D’Orsa have been working with Bishop Hilton Deakin to write up his recollections of the involvement of the Catholic Church in East Timor’s struggles for independence. They are currently organising material, and are making this project a priority for the next few months..
- The development of Catholic social services in Victoria The Yarra Institute has also been in contact with Fr Kevin Mogg about his long involvement with the Catholic and other agencies involved with service delivery in Victoria. Fr Mogg will not be available for this project until he retires from his parish in early 2012. Anne Tuohey has been interviewing him already as part of her writing course.

TEACHING

This has not been the focus of board discussions. Therese D’Orsa and Jim D’Orsa have prepared a paper on the Institute’s teaching role. There is considerable scope for attracting higher degree and doctoral candidates in areas of religion and public policy. We have also recently been involved in a small way in the consultation with the government assessors about MCD becoming a specialist university.

APPOINTMENTS

We regret that Dr Wes Campbell has resigned from the Board for health reasons, but we are delighted that Dr John Bottomley, from the Uniting Church and Director of Creative Ministries Network, has joined us, bringing a solid research background.

Audra Kunciuonas, the Executive Officer of Social Policy Connections, needed to move on to new things. We were very appreciative of Audra’s support and work for YIRSP and wish her well. We welcome Susy Herlihy as SPC coordinator and who also acts as the secretary for YIRSP.

FUNDRAISING

Fundraising remains a significant obstacle to further development. The Director has been unable to devote time to fundraising, and our financial resources, though adequate for the moment, are limited. We need to work out new strategies for further fundraising in 2012, and to secure significant grants for important research projects. The Institute is greatly indebted to our financial supporters this year, particularly the Redemptorist Congregation, the Dominican Friars, the McLeod Family Trust and Drs Jim and Therese D’Orsa.

PUBLISHING

The board has published its first book under its own imprint 'Yarra Institute Press'. It was Geoff Lacey's, monograph, *Sufficient for the Day, Towards a Sustainable Culture*. The launch took place at Dymocks on Collins Street in the city on 15th September with ninety people attending. This was a great milestone for YIRSP and we look forward to more launches in 2012. That will require us to learn from this initial experience which itself was a 'learning curve' for all involved. Geoff was involved in a public discussion of his book at *ARENA*. and at the SPC AGM in November Geoff gave a talk responding to Cardinal Pell's views on climate change.

WEBSITE at www.yarrainstitute.org.au

The website has continued to develop under the expert work of Matthew Howard. The Board warmly thanks Matthew for his creativity, skill and dedication to YIRSP to enable us to have the widest possible impact through our website, helping us connect with other research organisations in Australia and overseas. For instance, through the website a research scholar from Scotland, Sally May, has applied to do a placement with us, and has experience in analysing settlement policies for refugees and asylum seekers.

2012

I again invite the Board to join me in reflecting on our functioning this year, and what we may learn about how well we worked together, how well we addressed matters before us and so to consider together the prospects for 2012. Of some interest may be the document 'Director's Limitations' given to us by John Bottomley. It may be time for us to look again at our governance structures.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of the Board for their time and energies and thoughtful contributions to the deliberations and work of the Institute. On behalf of the Board I would like to express our thanks to Mr. Joe Annetts for his administrative assistance and for his good will towards our work. I would also like to thank Peter Whiting for his diligence in managing our banking and accounts.

We are also most grateful to Yarra Theological Union for generously hosting our office and for the constant support of YTU staff and students, along with that from the Melbourne College of Divinity. As MCD moves into its new form as a specialised university, we hope to develop the Yarra Institute as a significant resource for the churches and their agencies in Australia.

Finally, on behalf of the board may I again very warmly thank our Director Dr Bruce Duncan for his tireless efforts, both his widely recognised depth of knowledge of Christian social teaching, for his teaching at YTU, for his initiatives with regard to possible research projects, likely researchers and for his effectiveness in raising money to help keep the Institute operating. Especially appreciated is his arranging the hospitality for the many events here at YIRSP. We celebrate with him the opportunity the new year brings for him to focus on his own writing.

Rev. Dr. Stephen Ames
Chair of the Board
Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy