

2015 Report from the Chair of the Board

Relationship with the University of Divinity

In 2013 the Yarra Institute began a serious conversation with the University of Divinity about being transformed into the first research centre for the University, tentatively termed “The Centre for Religion and Social Policy of the University of Divinity.”

We experienced an unexpected setback when in early 2014 the Vice Chancellor (VC) Professor Peter Sherlock indicated that the University would not proceed to authorise YIRSP as an institute of the University. This was a decision of the Governance Council of the University. The issue was that the University’s Constitution only allowed for Colleges, and that Council having just settled many matters to do with the Constitution was not disposed to open up new issues that would involve a change in the Constitution.

However on 7 November 2014 Professor Sherlock invited Bruce Duncan and myself to meet the Governance Council on Monday 17 November at Graeme Blackman’s residence in the Westin Hotel to discuss if the Yarra Institute could be simply transformed into a centre of the University.

As we reported last year, the meeting with the Governance Council went very well; present were Graeme Blackman (Chancellor), Andrew Menzies (Deputy Chancellor), Peter Sherlock (Vice-Chancellor), Bill Uren sj (Council member) and Jeff Reaney (Director of Administration).

The Vice-Chancellor (VC) explained... that the purpose of such Centres would be to foster activities across the University's Colleges, to drive strategic goals of the University, and to build partnerships between the Colleges and staff of the University, existing partners in the churches and religious orders and with new institutions such as government, other universities, and faith-based agencies. Activities would be focussed on research and public engagement, but might in time also include supporting and helping coordinate the research training and teaching activities of Colleges. The Council would have majority control over or outright ownership of any such Centres, which would enable the University to raise funds for its Centres through its DGR status and require such Centres to use the University's name and logo in all their activities.

One concern we raised about a new Centre might be that it was promoting views not supported or endorsed by the University Council. The VC pointed out that provided such views were based on critical thought and research, the principle of academic freedom would apply; while the Council would not necessarily endorse the views expressed by a College, Centre, or individual member of the University, it would uphold the importance of academic freedom and open debate.

During 2015, Bruce Duncan and I have met a number of times with the VC preparing a proposal to go before the Governance Council of the University on 30 November. Bruce Duncan had notified the University that he would not be available as Director, and a new Director would need to be appointed.

Peter Sherlock wrote on 20 August responding to our drafts of the documents: Vision for the Centre; Aims of the new Centre; and the job description of the new director. The Board discussed the VC's comments and revised the drafts. Further discussions followed, and final versions of these documents, along with a list of YIRSP publications, were sent to the VC for the Governance Council meeting.

It was proposed that the new Centre would be fully under the control of the University, which would appoint a new Director and appoint or reappoint Board members.

- The University would assume financial responsibility for the Centre, and handle its accounting.
- The Centre would enjoy DGR status for donations, and would also help raise funds for its projects and running costs.
- The University would help fund a salary for the new part-time Director and help with some secretarial support.
- The Centre will need to enter a new agreement with YTU and/or other Colleges within the University.
- The YIRSP website would be retired and replaced within the University's website. The University's IT people would maintain and update the website.
- YIRSP would cease as an incorporated body, and its assets would be transferred to the new Centre. Its logo would be replaced.

On the 25 November the University Council approved the new Strategic Plan, including setting aside funding for the proposed Centre of around \$150,000 over three years, and gave in-principle approval to the establishment of the Centre for Religion and Social Policy. This followed a review of the documentation by the Governance and Nominations Committee.

The Council recognised the potential the Centre has, almost uniquely in the first crop of strategic goals, to promote the University's Vision. It did, however, have reservations about a number of aspects of the Centre and wanted to see further work done prior to actually establishing the Centre and allowing the funding to flow. It has therefore set out three further steps to be completed by 30 June 2016.

1. Ensure the Centre is embedded in one (or more) Colleges
2. Prepare a proposed committee in accordance with the draft constitution of the Centre.
3. Assemble the proposed committee and review and finalise a list of key performance Indicators.

The aim is that the new Centre for Religion and Social Policy will commence early in the second half of 2016. This will be a fine outcome of the work of the Yarra Institute over a long time, with the promise of an enduring contribution to the life and work of the University of Divinity. One task for the Board is to bring the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy to a fitting close in the first half of next year.

Projects and publications in 2015

The Yarra Institute has a number of research projects under way, with several significant ones completed during the year.

In April the Institute published a research project, *Working with Disaster: Clergy and Bushfires* by Dr Lisa Jacobson, on the impact on clergy, pastoral workers and others of the 2009 Victorian bushfires. The project stemmed from the initiative of our Board member, Revd John Bottomley and Creative Ministries Network, and was launched on 16 April by Craig Lapsley, Emergency Management Commissioner for Victoria. The report contains important findings about preparing for disasters like fire and flood, and managing secondary trauma for clergy pastoral workers, and makes recommendations about further training for church personnel in trauma counselling.

In collaboration with Creative Ministries, Whitley College and YIRSP, John Bottomley completed his project, “Towards a pastoral theology for widows’ workers compensation in Victoria”, which examined the longer term pastoral needs of widows and the difficulties many face with the workers’ compensation system.

Drs Jim and Therese D’Orsa have finished their memoir of Bishop Hilton Deakin, which is now under consideration with a publisher. This is an especially important work, dealing also with the Church’s involvement with the East Timor struggle. It sheds new light on the roles of Australian governments and church organisations during this tragic period. I would also congratulate Jim and Therese for their recent book, *Leading for Mission: Integrating Life, Culture and Faith in Catholic Education*.

Other projects still in process include

- The Morality of Torture, by Drs Cal Ledsham and Brian Johnstone;
- Memoirs of Fr Kevin Mogg on the impact of the Second Vatican Council and the development of Catholic social services in Victoria (seeking further funding).
- Refugee resettlement in Australia, by Dr Tony Ward and Ms Caz Coleman.
- Implications of the 1980s’ dispute over the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace by Therese D’Orsa.

Other activities

- With the Victorian Council of Churches, Pax Christi and others, we helped plan and organise the three-day conference on “Pope Francis & Prophetic Voices: reshaping the public sphere” on 16-18 September;
- YIRSP was also involved with the Anne Elvey’s conference “Ecological aspects of war: religious perspectives from Australia”, 28 September, at Trinity College Theological School.

The Yarra Institute had intended to follow its 2013 ecumenical conference on the Churches and Social Justice (published as *Social Justice and the Churches*) with a similar inter-faith conference in late 2015, but because of the work involved in the negotiations with the University about the reconstitution of the Institute, the Board deferred an inter-faith conference until 2016.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the members of the Board for excellent discussions at our meetings and their other efforts to forward the objectives of YIRSP. We have been working to establish YIRSP firmly within the MCD/University framework since we established it in 2008. Among our original members were Rowan Ireland, Paul Rule, Jim and Therese D’Orsa, Peter Price, Wes Campbell, Robyn Reynolds, Bruce Duncan and myself. More recently we were joined by John Bottomley, John D’Arcy May and Anne Elvey.

Especially I would like to thank **Major Brad Halse** for his excellent contributions to our Board before his appointment in August to London, and to welcome to the Board **Captain Genevieve Peterson**, maintaining our close collaboration with the Salvation Army.

Dr John Darcy May is finishing up this year after contributing to the Board for the last several years. We are very appreciative of the learning and experience which he has brought to the Board and wish him well for the future.

In September we also welcomed to our Board **Professor John McDowell**, research director at the University, providing a very important link for us with the University administration.

We have also appreciated having **Dr Ross Fishburn**, Dean of YTU, contribute to recent meetings as we discussed the proposals for the University of Divinity to establish the new Centre for Religion and Social Policy.

We also welcome **John Bottomley** back from his six months in Sri Lanka, and congratulate him for his book, *Hard Work never killed anyone*, launched in May by Senator Doug Cameron.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the warm help of our Director, Fr Bruce Duncan, in preparing this report and in so many other aspects of the work of Yarra Institute.

Rev Dr Stephen Ames

Chair of the Board for the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy