

Project Title: Strengthening National Alliances and the Local Church

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Project overview

This project is specific to New Zealand. It is about strengthening our national alliance and the local church.

Rather than focus on one particular goal, it refers to eight goal areas which constitute our major focus. In some cases these are SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound); work is underway, and the EA has a driving role. In other cases they are still in discussion, the goals are not yet specific, and the EA will have a more facilitative role.

Together they make up a broad strategy for seeing “God’s kingdom come, here on earth [in New Zealand] as it is in heaven”.

The driving force in all of these is the EA itself.

Our ability to perform this role is based on a number of factors including:

- Relationship with God and the activity of God’s Spirit
- Attitude of serving (towards the local church and broader Christian community)
- Ability to build relationships across a broad spectrum of the Church
- Identification of core issues and ability to think clearly and strategically about those issues
- Honest straightforward speaking
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A survey of priority issues was conducted with national church leaders in January 2010

The main church issues identified (in order of importance) were:

- mission/evangelism
- unity
- the need for better theology or Bible engagement
- rethinking church
- church growth or church health
- discipleship
- relationships/network

The main public issues identified were:

- social justice
- poverty and income inequality

This feedback has shaped our activities this year and is the basis of the goal areas discussed below.

All of the eight goal areas will be achieved only through the movement of God’s Spirit and a unity of purpose and action in the Church, facilitated in part through the activity of the EA. In each goal area a priority will be to engage with each of the pillars in society. In each of the goal areas, specific research will be undertaken as needed.

Scripture tells us that **“no-one knows where the Spirit will blow”**. In the same way, it is difficult to know which of the goal areas will be significant in terms of galvanising the Church to action. The Marsden 2014 initiative is one which offers a special window of opportunity – three years to prepare for the bicentenary of the Gospel in New Zealand.

As well as helping co-ordinate bi-centenary events, our own preparation for 2014 will involve mobilising and equipping the Church across the other major goal areas. Our key message for churches will be “If you can’t act on all of them, act on as many as you can. But the time to act is now”.

Background

I work as national leader of the evangelical alliance (EA) in New Zealand, and chairman of the South Pacific regional alliance. Although this project deals specifically with the situation in New Zealand, the principles discussed should be able to be easily applied to other national and regional alliances.

No matter how large a local church may be it can only be effective to a limited degree in representing the reality of God if it is not connected in a healthy relationship to other churches in their town/city and nation. This is because (a) there are issues that too large for any local church or denomination to address (no matter how large they are), (b) no church’s doctrine is so correct that they do not need to learn from others, and (c) mainly, because the oneness Jesus prayed for needs to have some practical and visible manifestation. (This is the idea behind the theology of the body - Romans 12, 1 Cor 12).

Ministers associations and denomination structures provide important relationships for local churches, but a national evangelical network or alliance is a vital part of building and manifesting the unity that Jesus prayed for (John 17:23), and creating a platform for successful public engagement.

Context

“The men of Issachar understood their times and knew what Israel should do” (1Chron 12:32)

Every national evangelical alliance (EA) exists within a context. The first task of EA leadership is to understand their times in order to know what they should do.

As a new EA founded in 2002, we needed to understand that we were established in a country with a history. The indigenous Maori people settled here 800 years ago worshipping nature gods, Europeans arrived with the Gospel 200 years ago and within 50 years around 90% of Maori converted to Christianity. 100 years ago over 90% of the population ticked “Christian” on the census form; today the figure is around 50%. We live today in what many describe as a post-Christian era, with a highly secular state, which is seen as the answer to all of life’s major issues.

We were established at a time when evangelical churches had been slowly (over the past 30 years) developing a sense of the need for better collaboration. This was partly to address radical liberalism within the church and partly to oppose government legislation which was regarded as “anti-

Christian”. Our National Council of Churches¹ group known as CCANZ was at the “radical liberal” end of the theological spectrum and evangelical leaders felt there was a need for something more “Biblically orthodox”. (The CCANZ closed down three years after we were formed in 2005).

“Understanding our times” entails an awareness of the level of individualism and parochialism which still influence many of our churches and denominations (particularly the larger ones), the extreme busyness which affects most church leaders, and most recently the economic recession which has impacted many church budgets and the way available funds are targeted.

Whether the issues which sparked this recent evangelical interest in collaboration were legitimate issues for Christian engagement or not, it is important to note in our present context that most of these issues have run their course. This reduces some of the urgency and motivation for evangelicals to invest time and resource into building an EA, and also means that the EA has to think deeply in order to “know what it should do”.

One final point to mention regarding “our times” is that as a result of a conference organised in 1997 by an informal evangelical network which largely gave birth to our present EA, many national church leaders met for the very first time. They realised there was clearly a need to meet and decided to organise their own 6-monthly meeting which has been going on now for 13 years. The group includes all major Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox denominational heads. The group meets mainly for fellowship and to update each other on events and issues within their churches. Although they very seldom comment on public issues, they do meet once each year with our Prime Minister. The national church leaders also interact directly with a number of effective interdenominational groups set up by the CCANZ such as the NZ Council of Christian Social Services and the Churches Education Commission.

All of the above makes for a difficult context for an EA to build a membership and identify a unique role in public engagement, which does not conflict or double up with national church leaders.

Getting started

The EA was established as a registered charity (September 2002) with an initial Board and began searching for a national director. I was appointed six months later (March 2003) and started work with a part-time assistant funded (for six months) through a government work scheme and no funds in the bank.

A number of specialist networks were in existence (eg prayer, disabilities, theology, missions, science and faith) which aligned with the EA in various ways.

The meetings of around 70 evangelical leaders which had led to the formation of the EA took place in 2001. In the two years between those meetings and the appointment of the national director, most of those leaders had moved on to other matters, and funding the new EA was not seen as a priority. (Some of the initial Board members said that the biggest mistake made was to not get a cheque from each of the leaders while everyone was together and motivation was high).

¹ The National Council of Churches morphed in the mid-1980s into a group named CCANZ (Conference of Churches Aotearoa New Zealand. Aotearoa is the Maori name for New Zealand. The two names are often used together.

The Board's advice when I started was to get some "runs on the board" to demonstrate the value of the EA, which would lead people to fund the EA. In hindsight this may not have been a good idea as people took our activity as a sign that we were functioning OK.

The EA's income each year has been sufficient to cover the office assistant, office expenses and equipment, and the national director's expenses. The national director's position (full-time) has needed to be totally self-funded with the exception of about two years when there was enough to pay the equivalent of one to two days per week). Surpluses that were achieved were invested into growth – most recently a business manager who could focus on fundraising, as the national director's time is fully occupied working with various sub-networks or public engagement issues.

First steps

The first tasks for an EA are the same as for any organisation:

- Develop or clarify a vision and mission statement
- Have a clear idea of who is the "primary customer"
- Have a clear idea of what are the customer's priority needs

For our EA the answers to these questions follow:

- Our vision is to see Christians in our country united around Biblical truth and effective in impacting our culture with the Gospel
- Our mission is to promote the unity and mission of the Church and reflect the common views held by the 500,000 evangelical, or Biblically orthodox, Christians in New Zealand (John 17 – *may they be brought to complete unity that the world will know...*)
- Our motto is Gather – Build – Speak
Gather Christians to share topics of interest and concern
Build networks to bring Christians together
Speak with and listen to the Church and the wider community throughout New Zealand

These statements were developed before we were aware of the significant resources available within the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) including their own mission summarised as **Platform – Identity – Voice**. These three headings (nouns) are a perfect match for the three terms (verbs) used in our motto.

- Who is the "primary customer"? We have several "customers" – evangelical Christians in general, leaders (pastors, ministers) of local churches, leaders of denominations, leaders of parachurch or interdenominational ministry groups, and other Christian individuals who want to see more unity and effective mission from the Church.

Many of these people or groups benefit from our work but do not necessarily see it as their responsibility to fund what we do. For this reason we have identified our "primary customer" as being individuals (mainly current or retired business people) who want to see

more unity and effectiveness (as described above) and who have resources to help us make that happen.

- What are the priority needs for these people? To see the Church be more effective in society, to see signs of collaboration and unity, and to see a “sensible” (intelligent, researched, non-strident, Biblical, respected) Christian position voiced into the wider Church and into the public sphere. Some of these people also have special areas of interest (eg values education in schools, caring for the environment, addressing crime and punishment issues, etc).

Team

From 2003 until 2008 the team consisted of a full-time national director and a part-time PA. With virtually no starting funds from those who had brought the EA into existence, the national director position was unpaid and the PA was only possible as a result of a government funded job-start programme (which lasted for one year).

Funds raised were expended in running a basic office function, travel costs for the national director, and after the first year to cover the PA. Although we were achieving the goal of “getting runs on the board” (making submissions on government legislation, speaking through Christian media, bringing people together to discuss topical issues, etc), this did result in a significant inflow of funds. Under-funding made it difficult to be efficient and really effective, which created a cycle which was/is difficult to break.

By 2008 we were in a position to employ a person to look after event management, administration, and fund-raising. Unfortunately, after 12 months the person had to leave because of family reasons. A new person was appointed in 2009 who has taken a year to get properly established in the role (largely due to the national director having major neck and back surgery). At the same time a businessman provided a full-time salary for a journalist to join the team. This means that the present team comprises:

- National Director (full-time)
- Business manager (full time)
- Journalist (full-time)
- Office assistant (20 hours per week)
- Volunteers include a treasurer, webmaster, media advisor, and other helpers for special occasions

Goals

We have a number of big goals over the next three years. They could all be summed up under the heading “to see God’s kingdom come here in New Zealand as it is in heaven”:

1. Organise and run Congress 2011
2. Plan and co-ordinate Marsden 2014
3. Turn the tide of secularism
4. Build or rebuild a marriage culture
5. Reduce the rates of abortion
6. City unity
7. Task forces
8. Promote a theology of holistic mission

Organise and run Congress 2011

Congress runs every 3 years and is the major gathering of top Christian leaders. Started by our predecessor in 1993, next year (21-24 Feb) will be the 6th Congress and will be attended by 200+ leaders.

March 08	(at Congress) announce dates of next Congress, book venue
Sep 2009	(at NCL meeting) remind leaders of dates, organise sound system and band
March 2010	(at NCL meeting) further reminder of dates, initial approach to speakers and authors
July 2010	Finalise programme, speakers, and budget, and topics/authors for the Congress book
Aug-Sep 2010	Send out formal invitations
Oct 2010 →	Process registrations, send out delegate packs, organise volunteer helpers
Feb 2011	Congress
March 2011	Review, finalise accounts

Plan and co-ordinate Marsden 2014

Samuel Marsden, a missionary from Church Missionary Society (CMS) in England preached the first gospel message in New Zealand (in Northland) on Christmas Day 1814. The bicentenary will therefore be in 2014. In addition to the major focus on Christmas Day (which will managed mainly by a group comprising CMS, the Anglican Church of New Zealand (CMS’s parent church), and a trust board, the whole year presents a wonderful opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Many evangelism and mission groups, including from the Anglican Church, approached us to help co-ordinate activities which will run throughout 2014.

Aug 2009	Met with organisers of the Christmas Day 2014 events, secured www.marsden2014.org website
Feb 2010	Agreed to request to co-ordinate 2014 activities, called meeting for July 2010
July 2010	Hosted meeting of core group, including several Maori Christians and four historians
Aug 2010	Meet Anglican Maori and Pakeha (European) Bishops to sort out protocol issues. <u>NB – this meeting took place yesterday</u> A national leadership group has been formed including myself and 4 Anglican Bishops. We are looking to add other national leaders.
Oct-Nov 2010	Meet with Northland Maori leaders to show respect and seek partnership <u>9 Nov – meeting of the new national leadership group</u>
By Dec 2011	<u>Research</u> - Organise six respected historians including at least two Maori to write accounts of the history (lengths ranging from 2-10 pages Publicise website, including histories, to all major denomination, city, and parachurch leaders Call interested parties to prayer and share their visions and plans through the website Highlight importance of 7 pillars Design logo and theme title for the year Develop budget / employ a person to lead the project
2012-2013	Distribute 10,000 postcards to Christians with logo, title, theme, and web address Look for possible synergies / See if one or more BIG ideas emerge or can be developed Determine a special event to mark the start of the year (possibly Christmas Day 2013) Organise a media and general communication strategy
Feb 2014	7 th Congress – present project status report to Congress and call for prayer and action for the remainder of the year
2015	Review, finalise and present accounts

Turn the tide of secularism

We begin by not holding to an idealised notion of history as we work to change the future. Christianity's "golden age" if any period can be described as such was never without its problems. Domination by a single religious group and the issues of sectarian rivalry have been and still are real problems for the government of societies. Having said that, secularism functions as a major competitor to Christianity and limits the salvific potential of the Gospel in New Zealand as with many Western societies. (cf Matt 13:58 "And [Jesus] did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith").

Specific goals:

	The specific goals for this initiative are currently being formulated but include ...
Ongoing	<u>Media</u> -Reactive - Respond to news stories where secular thinking is part of the problem and/or where Christian faith or worldview would make a difference
Ongoing	<u>Media</u> -Proactive - Build relationships with media so they will publish all the histories (of suitable length) which are developed for the bicentenary
Ongoing	Engage with Humans Rights Commission and the series of religious diversity documents they are producing to ensure the significance of Christianity in our society

	(past and present) is fairly recorded
2011	Get church leaders groups in the main centres to be aware of the ways secularism influences our lives – even in the church. (Promote <i>How Now Shall We Live</i>)
2011-2013	Work with education groups to get Intelligent Design resources into half of the secondary schools in New Zealand. (William Dembski “ <i>NZ is a winnable country</i> ”)
2011	Write to all Christian politicians prior to 2011 election to encourage and offer prayer. Develop a list of key election issues for Christians to raise with candidates. Speak in churches about the election and praying for those who govern.
2011	Encourage Christian leaders in all spheres (especially business and politics) to be more open about their faith. Locate or develop a concise resource to help public figures be more open (freely available via web, special printed copies sent to high-profile public figures)
2014	Use the opportunity of the Gospel bicentenary to ensure that every New Zealander has heard or seen a message about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Part of this could include a special resource created by story tellers and artists (attractive to kids) for families to share the Gospel with families in their streets and neighbourhood

Build or rebuild a marriage culture

New Zealand’s divorce rate is one of the highest in the western world (currently around 50%). The evidence though shows a strong correlation between long-lasting marriages and low incidence of negative social indicators. Although correlation does not necessarily equate to causality, logic and experience suggest that inspiring and equipping people to build strong marriages would go a long way to addressing many of these negative indicators.

Nov 2010	Organise a meeting of all the major groups Organise a small leadership group and prayer group
Jan-Apr 2011	Determine a 5-year strategy with specific 1-year goals
May 2011 ->	Implement

Reduce the rates of abortion

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of abortion in the western world (1 in 3 pregnancies ends in abortion - 18,000 per year). There are several “right to life” groups in New Zealand but their activities are fragmented and all the major political parties prefer either to avoid touching the issue or else liberalise the law even further. Recently we have been approached to help bring the pro-life groups together.

Nov 2010	Organise a meeting of all the major groups Organise a small leadership group and prayer group
Jan-Apr 2011	Determine a 5-year strategy with specific 1-year goals
May 2011 ->	Implement

City Unity

Unity among local churches in a city or town is a vital component of effective witness and collaborative mission. It also reduces the risks of competitiveness between churches (known as “sheep stealing”) and errors in doctrine and praxis. From the EA’s perspective, functional ministers groups can make communication of important national issues more effective.

Each year	Make at least 1 visit to each of the main 15 towns/cities to build relationships / highlight importance of 7 pillars
Every 2-3 months	Send a written communication with details of key issues and useful resources
Mid-2011	Ministers groups often work together to host “meet the candidates” evenings before elections. Send details of key election issues.
Apr-Jun 2011	Develop a template “unity document” for ministers groups to use/ amend/ adopt
Jul-Dec 2011	Get 6 cities/towns to adopt a version

Task forces

We currently network to different degrees with 14 specialist umbrella groups or sub-networks (e.g. disabilities, sports, arts, environment, business, evangelism, prayer, missions, conflict resolution, Micah Challenge, etc). Our goal is to (a) encourage these groups and help them increase their effectiveness and (b) help the interface between these groups and the Church and the community. At times, some of them have particular events (e.g. the sport network is preparing for a major outreach in Sept 2011 based on the Rugby World Cup which is being hosted in New Zealand).

Each year	Have at least 1 face-to-face meeting with each of the task force group leaders focused on their annual plans and how the relationship with the EA can be more profitable / highlight importance of 7 pillars
Every 2-3 months	Send a written communication with details of key issues and useful resources
Pre-Dec 2010	Design and print a reference card listing all of the major taskforce umbrella groups for ministers groups and local church ministers/pastors
2011	Communicate key news and event dates from taskforces on the EA website and in the monthly email to churches

Promote a theology of holistic mission

The Church exists to (a) be a community which manifests God and (b) to share the knowledge of God with those who don’t know Him. In both of these areas there will always be a need to grow in knowledge and practice. Sharing the knowledge of God involves the witness of our lives and service, the proclamation of the Gospel, and speaking out on public issues.

The Gospel involves words and deeds. Some churches are stronger in one than the other; some are weak in both; a small number could probably be described as strong in both. We see part of the EA’s role as encouraging and challenging churches to be all that God wants them to be.

The Word incarnate is also described as “filled with grace and truth” (John 1). Either one on its own can, and frequently does, undermine the work of the Gospel. Some issues are more likely than others to illicit extremist comment. We see the EA as having a role in modelling and encouraging churches to be likewise filled with grace and truth.

	Christian community, evangelism, and mission
Monthly	Include an encouraging story in each monthly email to churches which illustrates good theology and practice
Jun-Dec 2011	Develop and publish position papers on 3 or 4 strategic topics relating to Christian community, evangelism, and mission / / highlight importance of 7 pillars
Ongoing	Continue to draw attention to stories and position papers in successive monthly emails and visits to churches and ministers groups

	Public engagement
Aug 2010	Finish the WEA LI course on public engagement / highlight importance of 7 pillars
Feb 2011	Promote a New Zealand course on public engagement at Congress 2011
Jun-Sep 2011	Run WEA LI public engagement course (target 10 attendees)
Ongoing	Relate to influential Christians who communicate in the public domain in ways perceived as lacking in grace or truth, presenting alternate views
Jun-Dec 2011	Develop and publish position papers on 3 or 4 of the most controversial public issues (e.g. Islam, global warming, secularism, Maori-Pakeha biculturalism, a Kingdom perspective on the global recession)

Prayer

Obviously prayer is fundamental to everything we do as Christians. I had (and still have) prayer support through my local church as well as a number of intercessors who support the EA. Our national prayer co-ordinator died last year and we are still trying to find a suitable replacement.

Blockages for unifying the Church

As an EA we are interested in the unity that Jesus prayed for (John 17:23). We work for this particularly among evangelicals but also across the whole Church. Even among evangelicals, perhaps **particularly** among evangelicals, there are many challenges in achieving unity. (NB – for the sake of simplicity, I use the term “evangelical” throughout the following points to refer to Christians generally who hold to the inspiration and authority of scripture and salvation through Christ alone).

Some of the main blockages are:

- Evangelical leaders tend to be strong personality types, with strong personal visions. As such they can be cautious about working on what they see as other people’s issues or agendas

- Evangelical leaders are very busy people. The combination of passion to engage the culture and pressure caused (often) by the lack of structure offered by institutional tradition, means that issues can be more difficult and take more time to resolve than otherwise would be the case. This leads to a lack of patience with process and the work needed to engage with the complexities of many issues
- The number of people who actually carry a big vision for Christian unity is small. Many people's vision extends only to the areas they can control or manage
- The current level of resourcing is insufficient to do all that needs to be done
- The scripture which says "***In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit***" (***Judges 21:25***) could apply to modern evangelicalism. People want a Biblical voice on public issues – as long as they agree with it.

How are we working to overcome these blockages?

- All of the goals outlined above work to address these blockages
- Time spent building relationships with leaders at denomination, city, and taskforce levels, will hopefully increase levels of trust as we engage on their behalf with public issues
- Speaking with truth and grace over time will increase our profile and credibility with evangelical and other Christian leaders
- Likewise, position papers will increase levels of trust and confidence in the actions of the EA and at the same time unity will grow
- The funding issue is being addressed by (a) building membership (b) seeking supporters and donors (trusts and individuals) who share the EA vision, and (c) managing our activities wisely in the meantime

Blockages for reaching out to secularists

In addition to the answers from the previous question, the main point in dealing with non-Christians is to speak with "truth and grace". Demonising secularists and other non-Christians, including people from other religions (e.g. Muslims) may win an argument and make some people feel good, but ultimately will not attract them to Christ and the salvation He alone provides.