



Media Release AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

## Helping churches navigate moral disagreement

From religious wars and doctrinal schisms to parish level conflict and personal animosity, conflict among Christian churches frequently damages communities of faith.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is trying to help churches argue in healthier ways – and maybe even learn to agree.

The Faith and Order Commission of the WCC has developed a new tool to help churches understand how arguments about moral issues arise and whether they are based on genuine differences in belief.

The tool has been released as part of a new study document *Churches and Moral Discernment: Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia*. The document argues that, instead of dividing churches, negotiating between continuity and change in response to moral challenges can be a way to build Christian fellowship or community (Koinonia).

Dr David Kirchoffer, from the Queensland Bioethics Centre at Australian Catholic University, is one of four Commissioners appointed by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity to represent the Roman Catholic Church on the Commission. He said there are frequent misunderstandings between churches that damage the unity of Christianity and its capacity to bear witness.

“We hope that understanding why churches disagree with one another and how they have resolved those disagreements over time will support church dialogue regarding moral disagreement and help resolve conflicts. Without that you have the potential for schisms, as we have seen so often in the past,” he said.

“Historical examples of change are particularly useful because they make it clear that change is possible,” he said.

“The Commission has studied changes in moral positions within various churches on a range of issues including slavery, killing in war, non-violent resistance, and inter-religious marriage.

“There are disagreements within the Church over time. Before 1965, the Roman Catholic Church didn’t believe in a right to religious freedom. Now it does. It’s hard to argue that the Church can’t change when you look at that change across time.” *Churches and Moral Discernment* is the result of a six-year project gathering information on how churches make moral decisions, developing historical case studies of how churches change their teaching, and creating the tool for understanding and discussing issues of moral conflict.

One aspect of the tool is helping churches understand when and how underlying theological issues might lead to conflict over moral questions. For example, conflict over whether a church should be involved in campaigning for social justice, has its roots in attitudes to salvation history.

Some Christians emphasise the immanence of salvation and the need to make the Reign of God present in the here and now by working for justice and peace. These people interpret working on contemporary social issues as necessary to religious life. Other Christians concentrate on transcendent salvation, which sees salvation occurring in the eschaton (end of days). These churches concentrate on evangelism to save souls for heaven in the future and may not believe it is the role of religion to become involved in politics or social justice.

“In fact, all churches believe in both transcendence and immanence of salvation. It’s really a matter of emphasis. If we can understand that we are all working towards the same goals, then we can dialogue over our differences,” Dr Kirchhoffer said.

“The Church as a whole has a conscience. It’s not just of bunch of different churches with different ideas.”

**Dr David Kirchhoffer is available for interview.**

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